

**Becoming-Geser, Becoming-
Buryat:
Oral Epic and the Politics of Navigating
Four Identity Crises.**

Jonathan Ratcliffe

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I testify that the following thesis is entirely my own work except where attribution to others is made.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Ratcliffe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

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Abstract.

In this thesis I look closely at the relationship between the Tibetan epic hero Geser and the Buryat Mongols of Southern Siberia over the past century. I concentrate upon on four important periods of Buryat identity crisis in which Geser and his oral epic traditions have been used by academic elites to attempt to remake who the Buryats are in the face of a rapidly changing world. These crises have taken place under very different political and ideological conditions. The first is the development of Buryat nationalism in the Russian Empire in the first decade of the 20th century. The second is the Stalinist Era drive to produce “national cultures” using heroic epic traditions in the 1940s-50s following the forced collectivisation of the Buryats. The third: the post-Soviet rediscovery of ethnic identity that swept the former USSR in the early 1990s. Lastly, I look at how Geser is being utilised today in the era of globalisation and the internet.

To understand how Geser was used as a symbol for navigating these four crises, I utilise Michel Foucault's term “*dispositif*” – an ideological apparatus that develops around the urgent need to deal with social crisis and conditions epistemology, but also permits a multiplicity of responses and subversions to such conditions. Through this lens I will show how Geser and the Buryats have been made and remade, the past has been selectively remembered and forgotten in order to live with cultural loss, and how epic narratives remain a body of symbols to which people can return again and again to ground a “deep time” of ethnic history and identity. Foremost, I emphasise that conceptions of identity remain a historical trail of ever changing and reworked symbols – an ever-unfinished and mutable *becoming-Buryat* colliding with a *becoming-Geser*.

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- Conventions-

In this thesis Cyrillic words have been transliterated with *y* to represent *ÿ* as well as the palletised vowel letters. Ie. *ye* = *e*, *ya* = *я* etc. *Y* is also used to represent the back vowel *ы*. ‘ and “ represent the soft and hard signs *ь* and *ъ* respectively. *Ö* and *ü* are used to transliterate the Mongolic front vowels *ө* and *ү*. *Č*, *ĵ* and *γ* are utilised to represent the “ch/ts”, “j/z” and uvular “g” in Old Mongol Script words. As to the abbreviation of frequently cited sources, *AG*= Manshuud Emegeev’s *Abay Geser Khübüün* epic cycle and *BÜ* = the newspaper *Buryaad Ünen*, *PB* = the newspaper *Pravda Buryatii*.

Introduction.

What is a crisis of identity? What is it to forget, become confused and need to reclaim who one is? At present there might appear to be a great many such crises going on in the world, some very small and personal, others very large indeed, as languages, cultures and the local undergo rapid mutation and global politics is caused to come to terms with all manner of unforeseen issues: demographic change and mass migration, rising distrust in political systems, the acceleration of new media and the threat of climate change. Perhaps there is always a crisis going on somewhere. Some are little “blips” soon forgotten, others are long ongoing shocks that overturn a people’s very assumptions about reality and precipitate the snowballing of all manner of other crises.

There are many ways to deal with crises of cultural identity. One way is using the symbols of oral epic narratives to ground a culture in a shared primordial mythic history. This thesis investigates the relationship between the Buryats, a Mongolic ethnicity who dwell predominantly in the Republic of Buryatia, Irkutsk and Zabaykal’skiy Kray in the Russian Federation, and the mythological Tibetan epic hero Geser (Tib. Ge-sar/Ke-sar).¹ The epic of Geser is called an *ül’ger* in Buryat, transliterated as *uliger* in Russian. *Ül’gernüüd* ([pl.]) are improvised heroic epics about heroes battling *mangadkhay* (monsters) and evil khans to win wives and property. They are sung by *ül’gershed* (reciters [pl.] – *ülgershen-* [sing.]), and are sometimes accompanied by traditional Mongolic musical instruments such as the *morin khuur* (horsehead fiddle).²

While the hero Geser’s heartland is the regions of Amdo and Khams in north-eastern Tibet (David-Neel 1933: 33; Stein 1959: 275-294; Karmay 1998: 465; Samuel 2002), he is widely attested as a religious figure and oral epic hero throughout Central Asia, from Pakistan

¹ In the past twenty years there has been a marked increase in interest by western scholars in the culture and history of the Buryats. Much of this rise is of course natural, due to how difficult it was during the Soviet Era (1917-1991) to gain access to materials and undertake fieldwork in the former USSR and Mongolia. Back in the 1970s-80s perhaps the only Western anthropologist with access to the Buryat Republic (BASSR) and its *kolkhozy* (collective farms) was Caroline Humphrey (1979, [1983] 1998). There is now scholarship on many fascinating topics such as the study of Soviet Era adaptation by Buryats of Russian language fiction and poetry (Soni 1997; Khosomoev 1997; Serebryakova 2007; Chakars 2009). Recently a growing stream of documentaries, articles and books has been appearing on popular subjects such as Buryat shamanism and Buddhism (ie. Humphrey 1999; Shimamura 2002, 2004; Bernstein 2013). The history and sociology of Buryat language media (Graber 2012), and the anthropology of post-Soviet urban and village life are also beginning to take off very rapidly (Panarin 1999; Humphrey 1999; Sweet and Cakars 2010; Ortiz-Echevarria 2010; Safonova and Sántha 2010; Murray 2012; Shmyt 2013; Gamba 2014; Yalaeva 2015).

² Tudenov (1958 cf. Sokoteov 1995) is the most commensurate study on the structure and stylistics of the Buryat *ül’ger*. I talk about these matters at length in the first three chapters of this thesis.

to Kalmykia, because of the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism and culture.³ Geser is a divine being who leaves heaven at his father's instruction and is born on earth to ameliorate the evils of the world. These evils are personified as monsters. In the manner of many epic heroes such as the Greek Heracles and Irish Cuchulainn, Geser quells enemies in his infancy and grows up at fantastical speed.⁴ He acquires wives, defeats all his neighbours and acts as a "culture hero" (Karmay 1998). This amelioration of evil makes Geser a figure highly compatible with Buddhism, though some have speculated that he may well even predate its existence in Tibet (Hummel 1998: vii-viii, 74-81). However, this soterical aspect has also made Geser a hero for more modern political aspirations such as communism and nationalism.

Much of course has been written on the intersection between epic and national identity before because of its use in creating nationalistic "imagined communities" during the 19th and 20th centuries. However, such studies are rarely longeval or consider how symbols are shaped by very different crises that have taken place under very different sets of ideological and political conditions.⁵ The case study of the Buryat Geser offers a unique opportunity to remedy this. During the past century when Russian Buryat culture has been affected by rapid social change, the symbol of Geser and his oral epic traditions have been used by academic elites to attempt to remake who the Buryats are in order to create a sense of collective history and aspirations. Each of these crises has taken place under four very different sets of ideological and political conditions – Romantic Nationalism in the Late Russian Empire (1900-1906),

³ Geser epics span across the Western regions of Tibet into neighbouring Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (Francke 1900-02, 1900-01, 1904-41; Lorimer 1931, 1935; Kaschewsky and Tsering 1972; Jettmar 1977, 1979; Sagaster 1985). They have been recorded in the deserts of Xinjiang, Gansu and Inner Mongolia (Setsenmunkh 2004: 11-16). In these regions there is also an impressive tradition of Geser romances in the Old Mongol script with its own complex history (Schmidt 1836-9; Damdinsüren 1957; Setsenmunkh 2004). Further west, tales of Geser have been found in the oral tales of the Tuvans (Kuular 1974) and among the Oirat manuscripts of the Kalmyks (Bergmann 1804: v. I. 249-361). Vestiges and traces of Geser's presence have been detected in the local culture heroes of the Altai Turks (Radloff 1829: 424-429), the Yugurs (Hermanns 1942: 81) and the Monguor (Richtsfield 2007). Thus, for epics concerning Geser to form a major part of the oral repertoire of twentieth century Siberian Buryat *ül'gershed* (reciters), so far from the hero's homeland, is in some ways not as strange as it might at first seem.

⁴ For detailed comparative mythological studies on the Geser tradition see Hummel (1998) and Heissig (1983, 2002).

⁵ The study of the political history of epic seems largely limited to discreet periods and thematic collections from multiple authors in which not even individual contributors ever develop a systemic political history of a particular epic. For example, see: Honko et al (1990) on the *Kalevala* and some other epics, Beissinger et al (1999) on epics in the contemporary world, and more recently the illuminating collection *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century* (Baycroft et al 2012). On the longeval political history of single epics see especially Omidsalar (2011) on the Iranian *Shah-Name*, in which much is said about the continuing legacy of orientalism in how the epic is understood today, but does not develop a sequential history of the epic's political uses. Van der Heide's (2015) work on the Kyrgyz *Manas* is the only work I am aware of that studies the ideological history of an epic from the former USSR in detail.

Stalinism (1940-1953), post-Soviet revival of national identity (1989-1995) and the globalisation of the information age (2008-?).

The relationship between the Buryats and Geser is a laboratory for studying twentieth century ideological transition and the (re)invention of traditions and identities in the face of radical change because of the range of ideological territory over which it extends. Much might be learned of value from this that could also be applied to other peoples of the former USSR who have lived through similar adverse conditions and even beyond the intersection of oral epic and identity-creation in general. By undertaking a longevous study of crisis in which certain symbols recur as a way of navigating cultural amnesia, what becomes visible is not merely that ideology radically affects how a people is conceived and remembered by elites and from below. So too do symbols like Geser evolve drastically themselves as part of this process – often through serendipitous, contingent and accidental conjunctions with other ideas.

In the first chapter of this thesis I look at how, at the dawn of the twentieth century (1900-1906), Russian culture and lifeways were increasingly encroaching upon the day to day existences of the previously remote Buryat peoples of Southern Siberia. One result of this was the rise of a Russian-educated “liminal” class of Buryat intellectuals who moved between both cultural spheres, attempting to square their cultural traditions with a rapidly changing world. During this short period the first collections of Buryat *ül’gerniüüd*, or oral epics, were made by Russian-educated folklorists and revolutionaries, most importantly Tseven Zhamtsarano. Strongly influenced by European Romantic Nationalism and Orientalism, Zhamtsarano mythologised the Buryat oral epic traditions surrounding Geser and his reciters, fearing that the traditions might be disappearing due to a Russian “influx of civilisation”.

The second crisis took place in the Stalinist Era when Geser was elevated to the position of “national epic” of the Buryats. This investigation is split into three chapters on the creation, fall and redemption of Geser as a national symbol between 1940 and 1953. By 1940 the effects of the Soviet collectivisation and modernisation of Buryat herders that had taken place in the 1930s were beginning to take their toll on the transmission of oral traditions and cultural memory between generations. So too had this been accompanied by the Stalinist Purges (1936-9), during which most of the Buryat intelligentsia who had built the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (BMASSR) in the 1920s-30s was killed or imprisoned – including Zhamtsarano – under the false presumption that they were attempting to secede from the USSR. In order to break up the BMASSR, Moscow also dismembered two parts from it to produce two Buryat autonomous *okrugs* (areas) – Ust’-Orda and Aginsk. Thus, all at once Buryat oral epic was becoming rare and a new culture and intelligentsia had to be created. A

crisis was forming. The Stalinist imperative was to produce “national cultures” that celebrated local language and culture, whilst at the same time being compatible with Soviet Marxism. In order to produce such cultures, the celebration of national oral epic narratives suddenly became of great importance throughout the USSR. Thus, in chapter 2, I trace the history of how Geser became the national epic of the BMASSR against the backdrop of the disappearance of his *ül’gernüüd* “in the wild”. The process by which Geser was chosen over other Buryat epics is a complex one. Experts declared that certain Geser epics might possess six hundred, even a thousand years’ worth of historical strata, illustrating a deep history for the evolution of Buryat culture. These arguments have left an enduring influence on the history of Geser’s importance for the Buryats ever since.

However, a much bigger crisis than simply the disappearance of Buryat oral epics and the need to invent a “national culture” soon developed. As I discuss in chapter 3 in the late 1940s plans for a jubilee to celebrate Geser as national epic came under fire. The hero was put on “trial” and deemed an evil symbol of the feudal past, as was the fate of many other epic heroes across the USSR that had also been elevated as part of the “national cultures” drive. Geser became anathema until an official ritualised redemption in 1953, which I look at in detail in chapter 4. Nonetheless, the efforts of scholars to elevate Geser to a national symbol in the early 1940s had resulted in the largest collection of Geser epics ever undertaken. This was extremely fortuitous, because soon after the oral traditions died out in many regions. In some cases, reciting them was actively discouraged in order to build a communist future liberated from the past. However, this “fixing” of the epics on paper meant that instead of an evolving oral tradition Geser became a “literary” object belonging to an educated elite preoccupied with history, philology and comparative mythology.

The third “crisis” concerns Geser’s rebirth: the *Geseriada* festival era of 1989-1995. During this period the crumbling of the USSR produced renewed interest in Geser and collective Buryat identity in some of the hardest years of the post-Soviet transition. In chapter 5 I look in detail at the ideals which caused a group of Buryat intellectuals to unanimously declare in June 1989 that the Buryat Geser epic was a thousand years’ old. This garnered government support and rapidly evolved beyond a few scholarly celebrations into a massive five-year series of festivals that took place not merely in the new post-Soviet Republic of Buryatia, but throughout all of “ethnic Buryatia” – Irkutsk, Aginsk, Ust’-Orda, Chita. One of the most fascinating phenomena from this era, which will be discussed in chapter 6, is how academics and politicians attempted to re-embed Geser in the landscape with Geser national parks, temples and statues and by connecting the hero’s mythic exploits with natural landmarks.

Geser was also adapted by the local and federal governments of Buryatia as a symbol of international friendship and openness – a necessary myth for reconnecting with the world following the end of nearly a century of Soviet isolationism.

The final period of crisis is that of “dispersal”, 2008-?. In 2006-7 the two Buryat autonomous regions, Aginsk and Ust’-Orda, voted to become parts of Irkutsk and Chita *oblast’* and were dissolved (Graber and Long 2009). Since then there have been recurrent fears that due to economic woes Buryatia, like Ust’-Orda and Aginsk, might be subsumed into another republic, a Baykal’skiy Kray (Baikal Territory), and whether this would retain any semblance of an “official” state of Buryat identity as the BMASSR/Republic of Buryatia has been imagined to represent since the 1920s. At the same time the state institutions which have (re)produced Buryat language and culture for most of the last century are now waning – especially the small elite field of Buryat geserology because scholars are not being replaced by a younger generation. However, as I show in chapter 7, through the internet, NGOs and local grassroots efforts such as the transnational Buryat folk-festival *Altargana*, a very different attitude towards preserving and (re)inventing Buryat identity is taking place in which Geser remains a frequent and very important symbol for diverse cultural and political interests.

In order to do justice to the four very different cultural crises in which Geser has been utilised by elites to (re)construct a shared Buryat identity – the imperial, the soviet, the post-soviet, globalisation – I base my thesis around French post-structuralist Michel Foucault’s concept of the “*dispositif*” (Fr. apparatus). Foucault (1980: 195) defines the *dispositif* as “a formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need.” This need becomes a “strategic function”. An example Foucault uses is early modern England and its vagrant populations during the rise of mercantilism. Mental asylums, prisons and the growth of medical discourses supporting them were the produce of a social crisis and attempts to manage it. A *dispositif* is nuanced and diverse – not simply some stolid top down mode of ideological control. It is, as Foucault (1980: 195) says: “an interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely.” Sometimes it masks a social practice that has been deliberately buried or silenced; at other times it is simply the program of an institution. It also is the network of relations that allow those within them to question them and pose solutions and alternatives.

A good model that utilises the concept of *dispositif* is supplied by Hui Yuk (2016) in his recent book *The Question Concerning Technology in China*. Hui Yuk is a philosopher of technology, who has used the dispositive concept to analyse Chinese “crises” in relation to colonialism and the effects of Western technology:

I take the liberty of reformulating the concept of episteme here: for me it is a *dispositif*, which in the face of modern technology may be invented on the basis of the traditional metaphysical categories in order to reintroduce a form of life and to reactivate a locality. Such reinventions can be observed, for example, following the social, political and economic crises that occurred in each epoch in China (and we can surely find examples in other cultures): the decline of the Zhou Dynasty, the introduction of Buddhism into China, the country's defeat in the opium wars etc. At these points we observe the reinvention of an *episteme*, which in turn conditions aesthetic, social and political life (Yuk Hui 2016: 31).

With the four crises in this thesis the key is the “reinvention” of *epistemes* – or structures of discourse and knowledge. The four *dispositifs* of imperial, soviet, post-soviet and globalised condition the limits and ways of thinking about Geser and the Buryats, but this does not mean that the thoughts and actions that took place under these “apparatuses” were not diverse and contradictory. I look closely at the multiplicity of relations and claims going on concerning the intersection between Geser and Buryat during our four *dispositifs* that brought on an identity crisis among the Buryats.

For example, Russian orientalist assumptions about the peoples under imperial rule that “we shall know them better than they know themselves” also helped birth Buryat nationalism. The need to produce a Soviet national culture and epic for the Buryats was based in both remythologising *and* rejecting the feudal past, which eventually led to conflict between scholars and with politicians over the value of Geser. At the ending of the USSR post-Soviet attempts to elevate Geser to the symbol of Pan-Buryat identity were simultaneously encouraged and hampered by the fact that the living Geser oral traditions were largely extinct and only existed in books. The Late Soviet Period had transformed their reciters into a “cult” of culture heroes, yet few of their epics had ever even been published (and still have not been).

Integrally, in this thesis I concentrate upon how Geser has evolved and continues to evolve *along with* Buryat identity, like two streams of symbols that interweave with one another from time to time in intense bursts. This is especially apt in relation to Geser because the hero is a shape-changer always turning into old men, children and animals to avoid capture and outwit his enemies. He is accredited in many Mongolic versions with possessing ten thousand different *qubilyan* (incarnations, forms). Instead of how Geser informs some essential experience of “being Buryat”, it would seem far closer to the truth to speak of an ongoing system of *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming*, to utilise the language of French

philosopher Gilles Deleuze ([1977] 2006: esp. p. 33). For instance, Deleuze speaks of Captain Ahab possessing a *whale-becoming* in the novel *Moby Dick*. This is not some imitation of the whale, but an “encounter in which each pushes the other” to be transformed. A *-becoming* does not set Geser or Buryat as the teleological end of some discreet process. *Geser-becoming* and *Buryat-becoming* are, as Deleuze would say, forms of “coding” - streams of growing symbols, vectors, flows of movement in history, that meet with other symbols in “short circuits” and meld with them without beginning or end. Deleuze calls this: “an encounter between two reigns, a short circuit, the picking up of a code where each is deterritorialized.” Parts of “Geser” and “Buryat” break off here and there and new ones appearing like the particles that make up tails of comets, one might say.

The great diversity of the streams of *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming* mean that the participants involved in them must attempt to control and manage these multiplicities in order to try to ground solid myths of Buryat history and identity. *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming* supply “nodes”, as Laclau and Mouffe (2000) would call them, around which people attempt to form hegemonic control of knowledge. Elites such as academics, and reciters and politicians too, attempt to render parts of these streams into *master signifiers* – centralised sources of legitimacy and authority within the chains of signification and communication. Laclau and Mouffe (ibid.114) claim that because of the very arbitrary and multiplicitous nature of signifiers (symbols and signs) and an excess of signifieds (what signs point to), contingency cannot help *but* emerge around “nodes”. It becomes a necessity to try to control them: “an effort of literalization which fixes the differences of a relational system. The necessity of the social is the necessity proper to purely relational identities.” What this should mean to us is that the node of Geser and Buryat *becomings* cannot help but betray contradictions and mutant additions. The Bed of Procrustes created and maintained by elites under the *dispositifs* - whether reciters, politicians or academics - cannot hold them in. They cannot be reduced to the dualism of “either/or,” where one element is forever prioritised over the other, but remain an ever-sprawling “and...and...”

1. The Buryats.

The Buryats themselves are just as much protean shape-changers as the hero Geser. Buryat identity is the product of a long series of divisions, consolidations and reinventions of liminal Mongolic peoples by political powers and cultural elites over the past four hundred years and attempts to co-exist with these conditions, escape them, and subvert them. Today the Buryats are a “divided” identity because they live in the border regions of the Russian Federation,

China and Mongolia.⁶ Escape from the Russian Civil War (1918-22) and from collectivisation under the first two Soviet Five Year Plans (1928-37) caused the migration of large numbers of Russian Buryats into Mongolia and China (Zaitseva 1993: 67-8; Forsyth 1994: 333f). The usual scholarly convention in Russia is to divide the Buryats up in accordance with their spoken dialects and tribal histories. These are the Ekhirit-Bulagat, Alar and Khongoodor on the western side of Baikal or Predbaikal' (Cisbaikalia). On the eastern side of the lake, or Zabaikal' (Transbaikalia) there are the Selenge and Khori Buryats (Burchina 1990: 6; Sinor et al 1997: 96; Bernstein 2013: 13).

However, in many ways because of their liminal position between the geopolitical spheres of Russia, China and Mongolia, the Buryats have always been “divided”. The fact is that because there was no written Pan-Buryat language prior to the Soviet drive to create one in the 1930s, with the exception of the few comments and records that were made by Russian colonisers and travellers (eg. Pallas 1766; Kovalevskiy 1829; Shchapov 1847; Bogdanov 1926), much of Buryat history prior to and even following the seventeenth century is thoroughly opaque. Many ethnic Buryat historians and folklorists such as Darima Burchina (1990: 8) trace the Buryats back to the Qori-Tümed and Baryūjin peoples mentioned in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (§8, 9, 109, 157, 177) and the *Jami' u't-Tawarikh* (World History) of Rashid Eddin (§80-2). Roberte Hamayon (2006: 24), conversely, endorses the idea that the Western Buryats fled from the Mongol Empire and were merely regarded as “*oi-yin irged*” (forest peoples), compared with the Eastern Buryats associated with the Qori-Tümed and Baryūjin.

Arguments have also been made to link aspects of Western Buryat culture back to the Quryqan people, who likely had a Turkic-speaking elite and dwelt in Cisbaikalia and on Ol'khon Island in Lake Baikal during the eighth century CE. The most important of these admittedly thin traces have been the cultivation of millet (Badmaev 2009: 106), and connections between hunting seasons and the rising of the Pleiades in early spring (Bazin 1974: 711-60 esp. 748-9; Hamayon 1990: 176-8). The ethnologist Bair Nanzatov (2016) has interpreted Chinese and mediaeval Turkic sources to indicate that the ethnonym Buryat derived from the Turkic words *buri* (wolf) and *barga* from a term for plunder.⁷ However, the

⁶ See Yuki (2002) for a solid collection on the “divided” nature of the contemporary Buryats.

⁷ A recent conference at the Australian National University I attended and presented a paper at title “Mongols at the Edges of Mongolia” involved some interesting conversations between Nanzatov and a number of others on the widely-found *barga* ethnonym in the Mongolic (and also Turkic worlds).

fact remains that what has shaped such people into the “Buryats”, as they are today, is the history of colonial division and consolidation.

Russian explorers, soldiers and settlers began to arrive in the regions around Lake Baikal from the first quarter of the seventeenth century. They are said to have first heard of the Buryats under the name *birat/pirat* from Turkic peoples dwelling between the Kan and Yenisey rivers in Western Siberia (Soni 2007: 53-4). The Russians called them all simply “*bratskie lyudi*” (lit. brotherly people) (Hamayon 2006: 24) Only in the nineteenth century would the term Buryat begin to appear in official documents and the first efforts made to produce written chronicles and genealogies by these people themselves. But what did they call themselves prior to this? Both the Turks and Russians appear to have been attempting to understand a foreign ethnonym, but there is no real evidence that all the Mongolic peoples around Baikal regarded one another as part of the same people or whether this only took place later under Russian influence.

Evidence that is often cited against this is the Buryat origin myth of the eponymous Buryaaday, the son of a shamaness called Asuykhan and a theriomorphic ancestor Bukha Noyon (Lord Bull). The brother of Buryaaday is Khoriday, and his sons Ekhirit and Bulagat – the Khori, Ekhirit and Bulagat Buryats. However, this myth first appears in the 1868 *Chronicle of the Seleginsky Buryats* written in the Old Mongol Script by the Selenge Buryat *taish* (titular prince) Jaltsan Lombo-Tserenov. The aim of the prince seems to have clearly been to elevate the then wholly oral Buryats through the model of Mongol chronicle writing.⁸ Indeed Bukha Noyon and Asuykhan are much older mythical figures,⁹ but Buryaaday and his sons may well simply be a necessary late invention of the author to explain the genealogy of all the “Buryat” peoples.¹⁰ To be Buryat may well simply mean to be a Mongol under Russian rule, as Russian colonial history from the moment of its inception had begun constructing.

⁸ On the first page of the Selenge Chronicle manuscript (Poppe 1936b: 3), one may note that Lombo-Tserenov is writing the history of a “loyal and faithful Cossack people” (*ünen itegeltü albatu qasaquud*) under Russian rule, who were once under the *alba* (aegis) of Chingis Khan, yet have merely *domoy* (oral stories) and remain thus far *bičig ygei* (without writing). The product is very obviously a fusion of elements of the written Mongolian chronicle tradition, in the spirit of the *Altan Tobci*, and elements of Buryat folklore.

⁹ Dugarnimaev (2000) and Nanzatov (2004) argue for a mediaeval “Tungus Substrate” in the Western Buryat languages and thus Buryat ethnogenesis. Indeed, Asuykhan, whom they connect to Evenki *asu*, meaning woman may well be much older than the 19th century, but then again this is very hard to prove. Bukha Noyon is also found among some of the Transbaikalian Buryats, such as in Zakamensk and Tunka, and even among those Buryats of Khövsgöl in Mongolia. He was regarded as a divine figure to whom shamanic *taylgan* (offerings) were given and was closely identified with the colour sky-blue (Bur. *khükhe*). He was also adapted to Buddhism in Zakamensk and Tunka as Rinchin Khan, a protective figure on a white horse (Pavlov 2010: 257-61). That Ekired and Bulagat are represented as twins in the myth is likely the produce of the 18th century unification of these two tribes along the Kuda River – after Russian colonisation - as I will discuss in detail in chapter one of this thesis.

¹⁰ Bair Nanzatov (2016: 99-106) believes that *buryaad* was already commonly in use around Baikal as an inclusive ethnonym prior to the arrival of the Russians and only in the 17th century lost its inclusive significance

By 1629, following the first “notable” contact between Buryats and Russians, a battle along the Angara river in modern Irkutsk Oblast’, the Russians began attempting to impose a tribute payable in furs on the Western Buryats (Bernstein 2013: 20-1). Russians also began to settle in Transbaikalia on the other side of Baikal by 1638 (Chakars 2008: 21; Bernstein 20). Although there was much resistance from certain Western Buryat groups, between 1641 and 1652 they were steadily conquered by Russian settlers (Soni 2007: 44-5). Taxation of the Western Buryats in furs was instituted in 1662, and in 1664 the Russians “officially” regarded them as subjugated and celebrated with officialising the building of the city of Irkutsk. However, the Buryats themselves did not recognise their subjugation in writing until 1818 (Rumyantsev 1962).

As soon as Russian colonists entered the regions around Baikal it became necessary to make a treaty with the other dominant power in the region – the Qing Dynasty. In 1689 the Treaty of Nerchinsk was signed in Beijing order to fix a border between them. No such treaty was made with the Buryats themselves at the time. The treaty simply made all Mongolic peoples on the Russian side Russian subjects *qua* “Buryats” (Bernstein 2013: 20-1). The Treaty of Khyakhta in 1727 ratified this. Some scholars such as Bernstein (*ibid.*) circumspectly point out that the term Buryat is very hard to define due to the great linguistic and cultural diversity between the Buryat tribes. It has little meaning beyond those Mongolic tribes who passed into Russian possession with these treaties. In 1702 a law was passed prohibiting Buryats to own or be sold firearms, even when performing military service as Cossack regiments (Cribb and Narangoa 2014: 69). Buryats were to use bows, spears and swords only. Following the Treaty of Khyakta, a charter was introduced in 1727, forbidding Buryats to change from one tribe to another, and fixed the authority of their tribal elders (Kudryavtsev 1940; Hamayon 2006: 16). Thus, in many ways Russian colonial and epistemic violence had begun the act of “making” the Buryats which continues down to the present.

Nonetheless, many Mongols became Russian subjects and “Buryats” of their own accord in the eighteenth century due to the fact that Russian taxation, paid in furs, was far

due to the emergence of new factional tribal unions such as Ekhirit and Bulagat. For this Nanzatov (*ibid.*) assumes that the myth of the eponymous ancestor Buryaday, his sons Ekhirit and Bulagat and his brother Khoriday illustrates a myth of shared identity laid out prior to Russian colonisation and preserved in oral tradition until it was written down in the 19th century. I am uncertain whether Nanzatov simply wants this to be the case for the sake of a shared pre-colonial Buryat identity, but it is more than a little convenient that it should be at the very moment that the Russians arrived that the term for a collective identity disappeared. While indeed one must admit the fact that the lack of written evidence hinders any firm answer, it is nigh on impossible to prove that the Buryaday myth already existed before colonisation. The suffix – *day/-dey* is a common archaic Mongolic tool for forming names, but this does not mean that the names could have not simply been invented by Lombo-Tserenov off the pattern of names in chronicles.

lower compared with the high *jasag* (tithe) imposed by the Khalkha Mongol rulers (Humphrey [1983] 1998: 27; Mikhaylov 1998; Shadaeva 1998). As noted previously, during the 1920s and 1930s when attempts to collectivise the Buryats were made as part of the first Five Year Plan, this process was in some ways curiously and very tragically reversed. Thus, Buryat history is one of being caught between powers and attempting to adjust in order to survive.

One of the most important influences exerted upon the division and identity of the Buryats, however, has not been Russian. It is the fact that during the first half of the seventeenth century Tibetan Buddhism also began to be established in the Transbaikalian region. Prior to this the “religion” of the Buryats was shamanic, local variants of what is often Tengerism – the worship of the Turco-Mongolian sky-god Tngri. However, in the Buryat pantheon, especially as it appears in the *ül’ger* epic tradition, there is not one but one hundred *tengeri* gods and a multitude of nature and ancestral spirits besides. The male Buryat shaman is called a *böö*, the female an *udgan*. Buryat shamanism, like Buddhism, was brutally persecuted in the Soviet Era. It was revived in the 1990s from the modicum of knowledge that had survived (see: Humphrey 1999).

The history of Buryat Buddhism begins in 1712 when it is recorded that some one hundred and fifty lamas arrived in the Transbaikalian region from the Khalkha Mongols (Bernstein 2013: 6). 1741 brought the Russian Empress Yelizaveta’s official recognition of Lamaism as a legitimate religion in the empire, though recent research has thrown doubt on whether the empress herself, who had just come to the throne ever made such a decree. In 1764 the office of Khanbo-Lama, or head of Buryat Buddhism was introduced – an office appointed not by the Tibetan Dalai Lama or the head of Mongolian Buddhism, the Jebtsundamba, but by the Russian Imperial government. This “*avtokefal’nost*” (autocephaly – self-rule) as it was called, seems to have been a Russian attempt to prevent Mongolian and Tibetan political influence over the Buryats than anything else (Galdanova, Gerasimova, and Dashiev 1983: 18-26; Bernstein 2013: 6).¹¹

Similarly, in 1853 the Russian government made a decree to attempt to limit the number of Buddhist lamas to two hundred and eighty-five and temples to thirty-four in its Buryat territories (*ibid.*).¹² Control of the Buryats as a liminal people at the very edges of the Russian

¹¹ This should be contrasted with the fact that Buryat Buddhist authorities appear to have gladly identified a number of Russian Tsars and later rulers, beginning with Pyotr I in 1703 and including the Empress Catherine in c. 1741 and most recently Russian president Dmitri Medvedev in 2009 as incarnations of the goddess *Sagaan Dara Ekhe* (The White Mother Tara) (Bernstein 2013: 6-7).

¹² This appears mostly to have been to encourage the spread of Orthodox Christianity and prevent Khalkha and Chinese influence. By the late nineteenth century, it is thought that at least a third of Cisbaikalian Buryats were under at least minimal influence from Russian Orthodoxy and had given up traditions such as

Empire, between the Khalkha Mongols, Qing Dynasty and Tibetan religious influence became paramount. Thus, although Buddhism was adopted from at least the early seventeenth century by the Khori Buryats in the Transbaikal and some of the Selenge Buryats, and then by the Barguzhin, Tunka and Alar Buryats in the nineteenth century, those dwelling around Irkutsk felt little influence from it until the early twentieth century because of Russian attempts to keep out its influence (Galdanova, Gerasimova and Dashiev 1983: 16; Bernstein 2013: 20). As will be shown in chapter one of this thesis, this latter category includes all the major oral reciters of Geser and the “lifeworlds” they lived in. These display very little knowledge of the Buddhist aspects that the story of Geser includes because of its Tibetan origins.

Some minor autonomy was handed to the Buryats with the introduction of the Speranskiy Charter in 1822. Between 1822 and 1824 this charter’s regulations instituted a series of “steppe dumas”, or tribal representative parliaments. However, these were dissolved, along with other customs of native autonomy across the Russian Empire when serfdom began to be universally abolished from 1861 and accelerated in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Bernstein 2013: 22). The reason for this coincidence was very much deliberate. The Tsar wanted Siberia colonised by Russian farmers. The Buryats were increasingly removed from their land by settlers and Russian culture began impinging on their previously remote, rural lifeworlds. This takes us up to the time where our exploration of “crisis” begins, in 1900 with the first serious interest in the Buryat Geser epics by folklorists. So too the first serious considerations of Buryat nationalism emerging among Russian-educated Buryats on both sides of Baikal.

Nonetheless, as this thesis traces, the “division” and reinvention of the Buryats would continue unabated throughout the twentieth century – especially during the Soviet Period. As the chapter summaries of this thesis have already introduced, these “crises” are the central subject of my thesis. Here I reiterate them in brief, simply to add to the context of the ethnogenesis that I have just given. During the first Russian Revolution of 1905-7, Russian-educated Buryats attempted to theorise a “Pan-Mongol” identity that would link Buryats on both sides of Baikal with the Khalkha Mongols of Mongolia and Tibetan Buddhism. As I discuss in chapter one of this thesis, however, this shared Mongol-Buddhist identity had little relevance for the Western Buryats, who had never been Buddhist. As the Russian Empire collapsed in the Russian Civil War (1918-1922), these elites such as Tseveen Zhamtsarano and

polygyny (Sinor et al 1997: 75). One might contrast this with the utterly unsuccessful Orthodox attempt to ban the consumption of horsemeat, which was regarded as the highest form of meat by the Western Buryats.

Bazar Baradin found themselves the leaders of a series of short-lived republics that retained some “Pan-Mongolist” aspirations, but now concentrated upon the idea of a Buryat-Mongol ethnostate with progressive policies towards education, modernisation and health. Because of little funding, remoteness and a low population very little was achieved. After the war the BMASSR (Buryat Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) was born in 1923 as part of the new USSR in which these same elites continued to play a major role. In the late 1920s the Five-Year Plans began – forcibly collectivising the Buryats. Many who did not comply were massacred. In the 1930s the wholesale persecution of Buddhism and shamanism also began. Once again, the Buryats, or Buryat-Mongols, were being remade and reshaped by colonial violence.

One of the most crucial problems, as has already been emphasised concerning Buryat history, was the fact that there was no written version of any Buryat language and those few who could read and write did so in Russian, Tibetan, or the Old Mongol Script and its language. Writing linked those Mongolic peoples around Baikal outwards with other dominant cultures, whether colonial or religious. Moreover, because Buryat meant those Mongolic peoples within Russian Siberian political space, the dialects of the Buryat languages were very different from one another. Selenge Buryat, for instance, is far closer to Khalkha Mongolian than the others. In the 1930s, however, Selenge Buryat was chosen as the official dialect for creating a written Buryat language under communism. Yet this was soon changed in 1939 because of Stalinist paranoia that this linguistic proximity would cause the Buryat-Mongols of the USSR to more closely associate their culture with Mongolia than with the USSR (Montgomery 2005: 238-53).

Moreover, during the Stalinist Purges (1936-9) the nearly the entire Buryat intelligentsia was liquidated because of the unfounded belief that they were attempting to secede and create a “Pan-Mongolist” state under the auspices of Japan. Because of this in 1937 the *aymags* (provinces) of Ust'-Orda and Aginsk were also severed from the BMASSR in order to break up the state in an act dubbed *raschlenie* (dismemberment), though some thinly populated land on the northern side of Baikal was added to make up for this in an act of symbolic consolation. In 1939 the Khori dialect of the Eastern Buryats was chosen as the official language of the BMASSR and remains so today. In 1958 the term Mongol was removed from the title of the BMASSR and it became merely the BASSR. Ust'-Orda and Aginsk survived until 2008, when, as noted earlier, they were amalgamated into Irkutsk and Chita (Sweet and Chakars 2010). The latter then became Zabaykal'skiy Kray (The Transbaikalian Territory). Some Buryatian political activists living in hope of a *negedel* (unification) of the

territory of the old BMASSR state since the collapse of the USSR were thus greatly disappointed by this. As one may see “division” or even “dismemberment” by other powers has occurred unabated during the 20th century for the Buryats.

Furthermore, unlike many other Soviet ethnicities, the Russian Buryats during the last century largely willingly abandoned their language and culture for Russian in the name of social mobility. In the 1920s the Stalinist project of *korenizatsia* (indigenisation) demanded the creation of local ethnic language media and literature. However, by the 1960s radio stations were beginning to face difficulties in finding enough fluent speakers to fill out mandatory programming quotas (Graber 2012). Nonetheless, the largely willing Russification of the Buryats that took place in the second half of the Soviet Period meant that by the 1980s the Buryats had achieved a prominent place as a “model ethnicity” in the USSR with a very strong presence in the arts and sciences (see: Bernstein 2013; Chakars 2014). However, by the time the USSR collapsed in 1991, the Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryat dialect, in which the majority of the famous reciters of Geser told their stories, was recognised by UNESCO as “nearly extinct” (Janhunen and Salminen 1993-9: “Buryat”). Recently, it was claimed that *all* of the Buryat languages might be extinct in twenty-five years (*Baikal ATV*, 29 August 2018).

2. Buryat Memory and the Need for Geser.

As one may see, the history of the formation of the Buryats and their attempts to adjust to and survive ongoing uprooting and crisis is a very complex and tragic one. The most important factor when approaching Buryat history is that of necessary “reinvention” because of the ongoing loss of Buryat cultural history and identity and the recurrent need to reconstruct it under different *dispositifs*. As has been emphasised – there was not a written Pan-Buryat language until the Soviet Era. Some could read and write Russian, others Tibetan or the Old Mongol script in varying degrees. For the most part knowledge was kept in the living repositories of *böö* (shamans), *ül'gershed* (epic storytellers) and the memorisation of ancestral lineages and tribal filiation. Little of this was written down, even in Russian, before the turn of the twentieth century. Much of the oral transmission paths between generations disappeared very rapidly during the Soviet Era and the push to forget the past to build a communist future.

Buryat cultural memory even today remains largely oral memory, though one must be careful not to over-romanticise this orality. In order to deal with rapid changes, trauma and cultural amnesia Buryat cultural memory has been continually obliged to reinvent personal and collective history. As Tatiana Safonova and István Sántha (2010) remark in their highly original comparative study on the modern Evenki and Ekhirit Buryats of Irkutsk:

For Buryats, to remember means to integrate your own experience into the legendary history. Historical knowledge about ancestors creates a filing-system or catalog, for people in the present to make sense of their experiences and stories. Thus, the greater the individual knowledge of ancestral history, the richer the repertoire of personal memories.

Safonova and Sántha (ibid. 9), take their lead from Caroline Humphrey's 1979 work "The uses of genealogy, a historical study of the nomadic and sedentarised Buryat". They go as far as to claim that "remembering [is] the essence of Buryat culture." In this they not only emphasise the power of remembering as a tool for integration of members into the Buryat culture, but also the power of forgetting for the same ends. Safonova and Sántha centre their attention especially upon newer post-Soviet "lifeways" amongst the Ekhirit Buryats such as hunting, which previously was not widely practised because the Ekhirit were a sedentarised herding and agricultural people for several centuries. The hunter forgets his responsibilities to his family and village go out into the alien *taiga* and concentrates upon the task at hand. So too does the Ekhirit shaman forget his or her surroundings in order to similarly concentrate upon what his or her ancestral spirits have to communicate about a client's illness. Moreover, this remembering and forgetting is "reversible". Safonova and Sántha (ibid) explain:

For Buryats, the guarantee of reversibility is stressed because they see the process as a movement between the two points of wholeness and emptiness. This binary logic leads to the fear that at some point the system will be unable to switch back (from remembering to forgetting and vice versa; or from involvement in the situation and self-control to loss of both).

This concept of reversibility strikes me as somewhat Heideggerian. Martin Heidegger has had a large influence twentieth century anthropology by bringing it back to questions of ontology-what it means for human beings to exist within the parameters of the cultures and times they are "thrown" into. Heidegger ([1927] 1962: §339) described forgetting and remembering as selective activities undertaken by a person aware of their existence (*Dasein*). In order to deal with the weight of "having-been" and the pressure of how one perceives oneself and is perceived by others, remembering can in fact be a form of forgetting. It can be the creation of a new way of thinking which might contain the trace of the old, but not in fact fully resemble it, because of personal and cultural anxieties imposed by awareness of history. Thus, to make up for the damage inflicted on the Buryat culture during the last century from collectivisation

to the hard years of the post-soviet transition in the 1990s, history is rewritten. The Ekhirit now have *always* been hunters.

But why does the existential anxiety of losing one's culture invite reinventing oneself all the way back to the beginning to claim that one has *always* done something? Legitimacy never comes from the present, it comes from connecting oneself with the myths of the past to utilise in the present, as political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1972: 119-0) once aptly pointed out. Often this past is not as ancient as it might seem from empirical historical evidence, but what is more important is that it seems to ground a people who find themselves uprooted in the world. People work with the material available to them, however meagre, to generate a deep, shared "essence" they believe reaches down to them in the present – a "deep time".

The term "deep time" originates in relation to eighteenth century geologist James Hutton's (1788: 304) perception of geological strata that "there is no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end". An eternal numinousness hangs over a phenomenon's relation to unfixed primordial time, a kind of holiness. And it is exactly for this reason that the epics of Geser have been utilised by Buryat elites in efforts to ground Buryat identities during eras of crisis. The appeal of Geser as a "deep time" is exemplified by Bair Dugarov (1998), the main instigator of the revival of Geser as a symbol of Buryat identity in the 1990s. In an influential essay on the *Geseriada* he utilises the term *glubina vekov* (the depth of centuries) to describe what Buryats were celebrating when they took part in the festivals at this time to honour the famous *gesershed* (Geser reciters). The Geser *ül'gernüüd* of the Western Buryats are the largest and most complete expressions of what remains of Buryat oral culture prior to the Soviet Era. During the Soviet Era although several hundred thousand lines of *ül'ger* were committed to paper, due to cultural loss and efforts to leave the Pre-Soviet world behind the transmission of the oral tradition and the skills involved to recite complex epics of tens of thousands of lines became *taharhan* (severed), as one Buryat folklorist tragically put it to me in Ulan-Ude in 2016. Thus, Geser became the "literary" property of the Buryat intelligentsia.

As Roberte Hamayon ([1996] 1998, 2002, 2004a, 2010) has frequently argued over the years, and is summed up in the title of one of her papers on Geser, the hero has indeed been something of an "emblème de minorité, substitut de souveraineté" (emblem of a minority, substitute for sovereignty). Beyond a few academics no one knows very much or is very interested in Geser at all among the Buryats. If one interpreted Hamayon's (esp. 2010) work on contemporary symbols of Buryat identity through the language of Rogers M. Smith's (2004a: 21ff) concept of "peoplehood", the Buryats would be a "weak and narrow" people. Interest in collective identity is "weak" and only concerns "narrow" subjects such as Geser,

Buryat language broadcasting and Pan-Mongol interest in Chingis Khan, Buddhism and the Old Mongolian Script. During the Soviet Era Geser certainly became the preserve of a small academic elite and remained so after the fall of the USSR and down to the present. Nonetheless, as will be discussed in chapter seven of this thesis, this is now changing thanks to phenomena such as the biennial international Buryat folk-festival *Altargana* that has been running since 2002. The *ül'ger* is coming back as a “living” tradition, even if this means reconstituting oral epic from written texts of old epics taken down by scholars a century ago. Geser is coming back to life. However, this would not have been possible without the “deep time” that academics have attached to the epic for Buryat identity over the past century.

Today one will not find a single Buryat scholar of Geser today who does not believe that at the bottom of Buryat versions of this imported Tibetan hero's epics there lurks far deeper layers going back (at least) a millennium. Geser himself is a latecomer – the epics themselves reveal the pre-history of Buryat culture prior to Buddhism, the Mongol Empire and even feudal forms of rulership altogether. Is this true? Is it really a thousand years old? The truth of this would be almost impossible to establish because almost nothing can be established about the people yet to be “Buryats”, who lived a thousand years ago. Nonetheless the history of the notion of the “millennial Geser” in itself has a long and curious history of development, which this thesis traces. Much of the process by which this decision came about, as will be shown, was almost accidental, simply the passing opinion of a couple of scholars in 1940 concerning the variant of *ül'gershen* Manshuud Emegeev, which had been put to paper by Tseven Zhamtsarano in 1906.

The millennial Geser was a *necessary* belief in order to make up for cultural amnesia, loss and rapid change. Thus, I will emphasise the phenomenological reality and validity of the belief in a *glubina vekov*, or “deep time” of Geser, even if it is quite possible to show that there is not a great deal of evidence for it. This is not only a matter of respecting Buryats and their culture, for both are in a somewhat precarious position. It is simply that one will not be able to understand the historical actions of people if one does not understand that they have acted *believing* the “millennial Geser” to be true, even if it is in a sense what might be called an “invented tradition”.

In the now classic volume, *The Invention of Tradition* ([1983] 2014) Terrence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm, among others, undertake an exploration of European cultural traditions that are far younger than one might think they are. For instance, although powerful cultural symbols such as the Highland tartans in Scotland may claim a great antiquity, some are in fact often the produce of the past two hundred years. This concept of “invented traditions” has

already been utilised in a limited form by Darima Amogolonova (2008a: esp. 14-7) in relation to Buryat cultural revival movements in the 1980s-90s. So too by Vsevolod Bashkuev (2013: esp. 112) in relation to the “selective memory” of the Buryats erasing from their history the syphilis epidemics they were plagued with during the 1920s. However, neither of these thinkers have looked in any detail at the history of Buryat epic and the figure of Geser, who, at most, garners a swift mention (Amogolonova 2008b: 107; Bashkuev 2013: 113). The term is a very useful one to pair with that of “deep time” and should be developed.

When compelled by an identity crisis what one is looking for is something stable on what Hobsbawm in *The Invention of Tradition* calls the “supply side” - material to knit into a tradition, a handing down from the past into the present. For Buryat intellectuals over the past century Geser has come to fill this need during all of our four crises. The hero is not an entirely unexpected choice of “material”. Geser as a “tradition” can adapt and be readapted to many different *dispositifs*. But are the Geser epics a “tradition” if they have to be (re)invented from time to time to make up for cultural loss? Since the late 1980s the term “tradition”, often connected with collective identity and the source materials it draws upon, has been increasingly problematized in the study of oral epics. Lauri Honko (1996: 19), perhaps the most prolific and influential scholar on the cultural aspects of the study of oral epics in the past thirty years, describes the connection between identity and “tradition” as something “cumulative”. He adds:

tradition would thus look like a store, only some parts of which are in use at any given time. The other parts are simply waiting to be activated, stored in the library of the human mind, always in danger of passing into oblivion because of the lack of use, lack of function.

Too often is it easy to assume that there is simply the same old “store” of material always there, even if this or that has been forgotten. Cultural memory is entropic and negentropic at once, the “and...and” of *-becoming*. A wonderful comparison made recently concerning the concept of “cultural memory” has been by Matthew C. Baldwin (2016) with the film *Memento*, about a man who suffers from constant memory loss and tattoos himself with messages that he is always trying to understand. What one “remembers” or thinks one has always known in one moment, one “remembers” in a totally different way the next. Human beings do not have “memory”, they just have a constant ritual of collecting and compiling

called “culture”.¹³ There is something more than a little terrifying about this possibility, but perhaps it might illustrate well the problems of “invented tradition” and “reversible memory” in relation to the (re)invention of the Buryats and Geser under the four *dispositifs*. When there has been a great deal of social upheaval in a society, eliminating or rendering irrelevant older traditions, a demand “on the supply side” precipitates the formation of new ones from old symbols: Geser, Buryat.

As with the history of the Buryats themselves, scholarship on the pre-history of the Buryat Geser is hampered by a lack of written sources prior to 1900, when the first chapter of this thesis begins with the recording of Manshuud Emegeev’s Geser cycles. It was not until the 1870s that anyone attempted to take down in writing any Buryat *ül’ger* (Neklyudov 1984: 24). On this one should note that the anarchist Peter Kropotkin made a journey to the Transbaikal in the 1860s as part of his lesser-known work as a geographer. During this he wrote: “none of the experts in the Mongolian language are engaged in collecting tales, which, perhaps, could provide material for solving certain issues regarding the dark destinies of the Central Asians”.¹⁴ Kropotkin understood the powerful link between the mythological and the political, but it would be a long time before anyone was to take this up for the Buryats.

It is also only around this same time in the last decades of the nineteenth century that interest in Buryat shamanism begins amongst Russian and the first Russian-educated Buryat scholars such as Dorzhi Banzarov ([1891] 1955) and later Mikhayl Khangalov (*ap.* Potanin 1893.II. 44-113). The Russian academic Grigory Potanin was a major patron of Banzarov, Khangalov and newfound interest in all things Buryat. Potanin had a great personal interest in developing a history of Asian Russia for Russian settlers, who felt themselves somewhat inadequate compared with European Russians (Znamenski 2011: 168-70). Indeed part of this was that during the nineteenth century many Russians, including dissidents like the failed revolutionaries the Decembrists, were exiled to the Buryat regions of Siberia, and it was commonly viewed as a backwater and prison (Vachnadze 1994: 55-59). One of the most curious features of this is the fact that the first three Buryat folktales ever published appeared in the 1854 (1991 reprint) work *Gusinoe Ozero* (Goose Lake) of exiled Decembrist N. A.

¹³ Baldwin (2016) writes: “We lack a functioning memory, and the memories of individuals are not directly accessible to the collective. While the memories of individuals are constantly passing away into oblivion...the collective has no organisation substrate for memory. Instead, in the struggle against oblivion, we (the plural is significant here) collect, compile, archive and record. This process of assembling could be termed “culture”. But in putting together its representation of the past, culture isn’t accessing “memory”. Nothing is being recalled. There is no such thing as cultural memory. Culture exists instead of memory.”

¹⁴ Quoted in Bair Dugarov (1990: 16).

Bestuzhev. These were taken down from the Selenge Buryat Tsyden Baklanovich (Dugarov 1990: 15-6).

But what of Geser? According to a theory outlined by Buryat Geser scholar Bair Dugarov (2013: 156-8), Geser came to the Western Buryats via the Khongoodor tribe, who are today regarded as a Buryat people.¹⁵ During the seventeenth century the Khongoodor were living further south of where they dwell today, Priangaria in Buryatia, within the sphere of influence of the Khalkha Altan Qayans.¹⁶ The possibility that the Khongoodor were connected with the Altan Qayans requires connecting the common Khongoodor ethnonym found in the province of Alar in Buryatia, “*khotogoito*” (Baldaev 1970: 216; Dugarov 2013: 156) with the name Qotoyoyid. The latter is the name for one of the major polities Russian chronicles mention as ruled over by the “Altan Kagan” (though he never used the title Qayan himself) - Sholoi Ubashi Qungtayiji (1567-1627) (Miyawaki, Bai Cuiqin and Kyzlasov 2003: 217; Dugarov 2013). This would not seem difficult to suggest. From there it was transmitted to the Khongoodor Buryats who moved into Priangaria and the “Khongoodor corridor” as it is sometimes termed, between Priangaria and north-western Mongolia, during the second half of the seventeenth century (Dugarov 2013: 156-7).

The key question is whether Geser came to the Buryats via the Khongoodor merely as oral tradition. Perhaps instead it was via Oirat script or old Mongolian script manuscripts which were recited and then converted into oral traditions and spread by word of mouth. The great Mongolist Tsendiyn Damdinsüren (1957: 132) long ago suggested that the Oirat manuscripts of Geser kept in Ulaan Ude came: “...iz *Dzhungarii ili knyazhestva altan-khanov Zapadnoy Mongolii*” (from Dzungaria or the state of the Altan Khans of Western Mongolia). Geser was most likely carried into the domain of the Altan Qayans through Buddhism from written sources of oral traditions taken down from the Ölets, a Western Mongolian people

¹⁵ In Chagdurov (1991: 73) there is a curious theory that because the Buryat reciter Manshuud Emegeev was from the Ashabagat Buryat tribe that somehow this tribe might be linked with the Ölöt Mongols, Zungars and South-Western Mongolia through the Ikinat/Ekhinit Buryats. As to how this is so and how and why such a people might have brought Geser to the Buryats is not explained. Dugarov’s theory remains the most developed and cogent currently.

¹⁶ Some scholars, most of them ethnically Buryat, have suggested a number of things about the origins and history of the Khongoodor. This includes the idea that they were originally Turks from southern Siberia who moved into Mongolia (Rumyantsev 1963). Another is that they were originally Mongols perhaps living in the Modern Mongolian province of Khovd at some point because of legends that they came from a homeland called *Altan Gadasa*, *Mungen Bukse* (Golden nail, silver buttocks), which seems somewhat similar to an area called Golden Hill and Silver Lake there (Dugarov 1993). However, as Stroganova (1999: 114-5) has pointed out, *Altan Gadasa* refers to the “golden nail” that attaches the star Polaris to the world mountain in Buryat mythology – it may be an entirely mythical origin story that cannot be squared with geography. In spite of this, no one seems to doubt the idea that they dwelt in Mongolia at some point, though similar ancestral legends of originating in Mongolia are also found amongst the Ashabagat, Sartul, Tabangut, Tsongol, Khurkhut, Sokhor and many other Buryat groups (Tsydendambaev 1972).

who dwelt in close proximity with Tibetans in Amdo, and who possess the longest and deepest connections of any Mongol people with the Geser tradition.¹⁷ It is important to note here that the Choros polity of Mongols, who headed the Oirat confederacy's Dörböd confederacy in the seventeenth century, were Ölets (Grousset 1970: 520; Taupier 2014: 31). It may well have been the Choros who diffused Geser to the other Western Mongols via oral traditions and manuscripts as Buddhism grew.

If one takes this theory seriously, it would seem that Geser was most likely introduced to the Western Buryats purely as an oral tradition through the Khongoodor. This is because there was little or no Buddhist influence among the Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryats on the West side of Baikal until the late nineteenth century. As for the Oirat script, nearly all the material written in this found among the Buryats comes from the Cisbaikal regions and the Khori Buryats, where Buddhism was strongly established from the late seventeenth century onwards. The Khori Buryats do indeed tell Geser epics, but these are usually only several hundred lines and unlike Western Buryat Geser epics do not mirror the episodes of the Mongol script Geser compendia very strongly at all (Poppe 1936: 37-38; Namzhilova 1988). Perhaps what recommends an *Ölets-Choros (Oirats)-Altan Qayans-Khongoodor-Western Buryats* transmission path for Geser is the fact that it is *only* among the Oirat Kalmyks and Western Buryats that oral heroic epics, especially Geser, contain formulaic references to the two lands of Altai and Khükhe, always referred to together, and the mythical realm of evil called *khonin khoto* (lit. sheep's stomach) (Dugarov 2013: 156-7).

Against this Khongoodor connection, one might claim the factor that no *specifically* Khongoodor version of Geser has ever been recorded. The only exception is the first Buryat Geser cycle ever taken down by Khangalov from the *ül'gershen* Petkhooba Tüshemilov in the 1890s, who was of Khongoodor stock, but who spoke the Ekhirit dialect of Buryat rather than the Khongoodor dialect (Potanin 1883: 251-6; Hamayon 2004: 295; Dugarov 2013: 157).

¹⁷ The language of the written Mongolian Geser corpus has long been considered to contain very strong elements from a western Mongolian dialect, though no one appears to have integrated all the evidence available. For instance, the two earliest Mongolian Geser texts in existence are two single episode versions of the Lubsay-a story from the seventeenth century, in which Geser is turned into a donkey. The punctuation and orthography in these is commonly agreed upon as being in keeping with that of the use of Uyghur writing amongst the Ölet Mongols of Amdo from this time (Damdinsüren 1957: 134-5; Kara 1970: 216; Heissig 1983: 22). Amdo is of course the heartland of the Geser tradition, and the Ölets may well, being in such close proximity to the Tibetans, have adopted the cycle into their own oral traditions. There is also the matter that the dialect of the *Nomči Qatun* Geser manuscript appears to have been heavily influenced by a western Mongolian dialect, which could be Ölet or Khoshuut (Setsenmunkh 2004: 237). Damdinsüren (1957: 56) also states that the language of the seven chapter 1716 Peking xylograph of Geser is close to that of the Ölets too. An oral Ölet version of Geser was recorded by Potanin in the late nineteenth century, though today Geser does not appear to be a living oral tradition amongst them, as it still is amongst the Mongolic peoples of Xinjiang and the Ordos. It would seem very much the case that the Ölets possess the longest and strongest connection of all the Mongolic peoples with the Geser tradition.

However, as so much of the oral Geser tradition has been lost, the least one might expect is that a fusion went on amongst these peoples through which the Buryat Geser may have been created. One should note the Russian records from the “steppe дума” of Zherdovka in September 1824, which officially and belatedly acknowledged the Ekhirit-Bulagat confederacy of tribes that had formed along the Kuda River late in the previous century.

These records detail that the Ekhirit-Bulagat confederation had already long included and subsumed portions of the Khongoodor (Danilova 2009: 56, 159-160). Records of the Bulagat at Kuda from the 1840s also suggest that the Khongoodor had long been synthesised into the ancestry of the Ekhirit-Bulagat tribes, where they appear as the descendants of the eponymous ancestor Bulagan (Bogdanov 1926: 92-4). Thus, although one might like to claim a very hypothetical seventeenth century inception of Geser from the Khongoodor, it might be far more likely that it was as late as some time during the eighteenth instead. This is even if our nineteenth century records are working with oral records of shared ancestors that might be swiftly recreated to legitimise new political alliances.

As to a definite dating for the presence of written Geser material amongst the Buryats, one should note that there are records of one Mongolian Geser manuscript kept at the Voznesenskiy Monastery Russian-Mongolian School in Irkutsk dating to the 1740s (Damdinsüren 1957: 132 n. 2; Khundaeva 1981: 125-6). Another clearly dates to 1825, which is also a product of the same school and was discovered by the scholar Rudnev at Barguzhin in Transbaikalia in 1911 (Lőrincz 1972:178-9). This school, the first of its kind, had been opened in 1726 in order to teach Russian Orthodox missionaries and local converts the written Mongolian language (Kuznetsov 1998, 2000). The traveller Ivan Kovalevskiy (1829: vol. II-III. 119, 147), during his 1828 journey to Irkutsk, met with a man called A. V. Igumnov, who showed him a number of books being transcribed by Buryat converts, most likely at Voznesenskiy Monastery. This included one on Geser.

Further, two of the copies of the Mongolian Geser manuscripts kept in Ulaan Üde contain dates on which they were copied: one in 1842 by the Buryat scholar Pavil Mironov and the other by an unknown transcriber in 1846 (Lőrincz 1972:178-9). Both of these link back to Voznesenskiy monastery as well (Damdinsüren 1957: 132). Thus Geser *did* exist in written form in the Cisbaikalian region and was not merely an oral creation in the region. However, there is no evidence to suggest that outside of this school and areas that were strongly Buddhist in Transbaikalia that the written Geser could have had much influence. These written texts may simply be a later irrelevance in the Cisbaikal compared to diffusion

by oral traditions from the Khongoodor. Perhaps they represented a second diffusion because interest in Geser was already present due to oral traditions.

What was the oral Geser *ül'ger* like in the nineteenth century? What was its social function? Scholars are reliant upon a few fragmented observations made by early collectors in the late nineteenth century. These fragments include the idea that *ül'ger* was only told in winter at night when the Pleiades had arisen (Zhamtsarano 1918: xvii), that they were told over nine days, and that when one was lost at night, when sick, or before going hunting or fishing, it was auspicious to hum Geser in particular (Khangalov *ap.* Potanin 1883: 320-2; Hatto 2000: 132-6). In the same way one of the most enduring and somewhat troublesome notions is that of Khangalov (*ap.* Potanin 1884: 260) that the epic of Geser had what Khangalov transliterates as *yohon khala* (Mod. Bur. *yühen halaa*), or nine branches. Khangalov neatly divides the longer epics he recorded into such a system of categorisation, and many scholars echoed such sentiments (Roerich 1942: 301; Braginskiy 1955: 28-9; Stein 1959: 77-8).

However, it is very hard to deduce whether most Geser cycles really do have nine discreet sections, even when reciters have claimed this. It does not in fact seem to be the case that there are nine standard stories or even nine divisions when stories are reconstituted differently on different tellings by the same *ül'gershen*. Rather it appears that this is simply a common belief, which does not in fact echo the content. Even Manshuud in the version of his Geser cycle taken down by Zhamtsarano begins with the mentioning of nine branches (Zhamtsarano 1930, Soktoev et al 1995 - AG. line 2), but no such division can be found or is mentioned again by the reciter.¹⁸

From these few details about the *ül'ger's* social context existent from Pre-Soviet times, Roberte Hamayon (1987, 1990a: 236-9, b, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004a,b, 2006: 32-7, 2014), has constructed a series of highly influential anthropological theories that embed the epic in cultural rituals relating to hunting practices.¹⁹ From her work on hunting rituals, mostly

¹⁸ In a similar manner to this, Jeremiah Curtin (1909: 127-9) records an interesting comment from Skretaryoff, one of the reciters of the two short versions of the story of the hero Geser he gives before the stories of Manshuud: "Gesir Bogdo had three sons and six grandsons before he came down from the sky. Of each of his nine descendants there were in the old time nine tales, in all eighty-one. They had to be told in groups of nine, and the relator could neither eat, drink, nor sleep while telling them, and when each group of nine was told an unseen person said, "Thou hast forgotten where thou placed thy Pfu!" This would seem simply a mythologisation of the past and qualitative decrease within the world. More than anything this exaggeration about the "old times" posits something which is manifestly impossibly difficult. Poppe (1940: 10) and Neklyudov's (1987: 205) beliefs that Manshuud endorsed such a view and did in fact have nine branches, they being Geser's descendants, which could encompass other tales too, simply seems to miss the point.

¹⁹ Moreover, Hamayon's evidence for her anthropological claims comes from the Soviet Era and her views on these matters do not seem to have changed since the 1980s (cf. 1987, 1990a, 2014). She does not

amongst other unnamed “Siberian peoples”, in which the hero personifies his quarry as a wife he is chasing and marrying, Hamayon (1987, 1996: 78-9; 2010b) argues that the procuring of wives by the heroes in the *ül’ger* is simply a metaphor for a hunter hunting game.

Hamayon (esp. 2006: 15-8) believes that the Western Buryats, especially the Ekhirit-Bulagat, were until Russian colonisation primarily a hunting people. For this reason, she proposes a paradox that although hunting peoples (merely in Siberia?) do not tell long oral epics, the Western Buryats certainly do. Hamayon (2006: 32-7) makes no suggestion as to why Ekhirit-Bulagat epic has developed as it has done into its ten to twenty thousand-line forms. All she gives is a loose theory about its content, concentrating nearly wholly on Manshuud Emegeev’s Geser variant, which she believes empowers the young hunter-hero rather than authority figures such as fathers in law, older brothers and the *tengeri* gods, who are often powerless, drunks or exist solely to try in vain to foil the hero.

Hamayon’s theory is inextricably reliant upon Zhamtsarano’s (1918: xiv) single observation that the *ül’ger* was often told when the Pleiades constellation had risen. This becomes the ritual basis for the recitation. She (1990: 176-8) utilises Bazin’s (1974: 711-60 esp. 748-9) work on an 8th c. CE Turkic rock inscription from Lake Baikal’s Ol’khon Island, that appears to be a lunar calendar. This inscription seems to illustrate a correlation between the mating season of hoofed game and the rising of the Pleiades in spring after their absence from the sky during winter.²⁰ It seems that for Hamayon hunting rituals and the Pleiades *must* precede and dictate the contents of the *ül’ger*.

suggest the possibility, in keeping with her own logic, that perhaps Western Buryat oral epic might even be the product of socio-economic changes in the past several hundred years, just as she treats certain shamanic groups like the wandering parties of shamanising *böölööshen* in her studies, which arose as a reaction to Russian colonisation (2006: 35ff). Yet, in keeping with soviet era millennial and archaic assumptions about the dating of Ekhirit-Bulagat epic, especially Manshuud’s epics which Hamayon uses as examples in her theories - more than those of any other reciter - Hamayon (1990: 202-15, 236-41; 2006: 28, 32-7, 46) must insist that Western Buryat oral epic, its themes, and its cultural context are ancient. This is in spite of the fact that she is more than willing to undercut this by suggesting that the Buryat epic and ancestor worship one might assemble from the late nineteenth to its vestiges in the mid twentieth century were the result of adaptations to “Russian statecraft” and the necessity to develop “enabling and restrictive principles” in social and religious organisation amongst the Ekhirit-Bulagat.

²⁰ Hamayon (1990: 167-8) notes that the Old Turkic word for the Pleiades *ülgär/ülkär*, as given by Mahmud al-Kashgari in his tenth century CE *Diwanü Lugat-it-Türk* (I. p. 95, III. p. 40), appears very close to the Buryat and Mongolic word *ül’ger*. She adds that the most likely root for *ülgär* is *ül* – “partager” [fr.] (to divide up), which she compares with a Buryat term for the Pleiades, *mesed*, related to a verb indicating cutting. The rationale behind this leap remains unexplained unless one looks to Bazin himself and the expansion of his thinking by Jean-Paul Roux (1979: 155-6). In order to get to *mesed*, Bazin (1974: 711-45) utilises the Türkic term *bičün* for cutting rock inscriptions, which does appear in the Ol’khon island rock inscription to mark the elevation of the Pleiades. To Roux this indicates them “cutting” the horizon. *Bičün* is of course also related to modern Khalkha Mongolian *bichikh* and Buryat *beshkhe*, meaning “to write”. Bazin then relates *bičün* to the Classical Mongolic term for Pleiades *mečit*, variants of which are also found among the Altay Turks. Roux (1979: 155-6) also relates the word to the origins for the Mongol term for monkey, *biči(n)*. As one of the twelve Chinese zodiacal animals, he views its origins as merely being a gloss made for an animal the Mongols and Türks had never seen. Lessing

Nonetheless, there is indeed some evidence for rituals on both sides of Baikal connecting the telling of *ül'ger* with hunting at the turn of the twentieth century, as Namzhilova (1997: 44-7) assembles in her book *Khorinskie Uligery* (Khoris Uligers). For instance, in the late 19th century Khangalov (1959: 28) recorded that the Nizheudinsk Buryats of north western Irkutsk *oblast'* “tell stories (*skazki*) at hunting time, because according to the beliefs of the Buryat hunters, taiga spirits (*tayozhonye dukhi*) and spirits of fate (*zayaany*) like to listen to stories and for this reason they send many animals to the hunters.” Zhamtsarano (1918: xxxiii) says that: “For hunters the *ül'ger* is a kind of powerful magic, a charm to attract game”. G. D. Sanzheev (1936a: 9-10) also tells us concerning the Buryats of the Oka region:

Upon arrival at the hunting ground, the Buryats performed some rituals, designed to please the spirits of animals and the forests, on which one or another outcome of the hunt depended. Then in the evening, before going to sleep, the singer spread out a white felt blanket untainted by a horse's sweat in the hut (*shalashe*). He placed on it branches of juniper, and a bowl of wine or milk, and stuck an arrow in it all night long, and until the first light of dawn the next morning he sang his epic. According to the Buryats, without this ceremony, the hunt could not be successful. The reason for the singing of *ül'gers* epics by the hunters consisted in the fact that this gives pleasure to the spirit - the owner of the taiga.

But the fact remains that Hamayon's thesis is simply far too ambitious in its transference of the content of the *ül'gerniüü*, the quest to acquire wives, to the hunt for game. No Buryat source ever brings these things together, even cryptically. The root of the problem is that Hamayon's conception of Ekhirit-Bulagat oral epic floats in an ahistorical monomythic haze expecting to find a ritual action as the basis for all myth. This was a common view in the analysis of mythology in the twentieth century most strongly connected with Jane Harrison and the “Cambridge Ritualists”. It requires, more often than not, the “reverse engineering” of myths to fit skerrick of perceived rituals, or even the necessary invention of rituals to fit myths.²¹ Indeed, beyond merely those few *ül'gershed* with whom scholars such as Matvey

(1995: 531 “*mecid*”) lists *mecid odu* as the Pleiades or a comet. *Mecid* can mean both “monkeys” and “galaxy”. All of this is terribly tangled. As there is no attested Turkic usage from any period of *ül'ger* or any word related to it for oral tales, it would seem that the theory seems very unlikely and reliant upon too long a chain of vague associations.

²¹ Csapo (2005: 158-61) presents a good overview of the “Cambridge Ritualist” position and even the fact that James Frazer, who is often held responsible for its genesis with his monumental but very inaccurate and now dated work *The Golden Bough*, did not agree that ritual must precede myth. It is also worth noting that Frazer and Harrison brought with them a nineteenth century European legacy about assumptions of universal evolving progress towards rationality, which views ritual as pre-rational and myth as the first rational attempts to understand it.

Khangalov and Tseveen Zhamtsarano spoke, one cannot really tell to what degree different Buryat tribes possessed similar beliefs about the social function of the *ül'ger* in pre-Soviet times. What remains of late 19th century cultural context to the performance of the *ül'ger* itself functions as material for a “deep time” and “invented tradition” used by scholars in search of an essential Buryat epic tradition and cultural history. Much more is said on such matters in the first two chapters of this thesis.

3. Epic and Identity.

However, there remains a thornier issue still to add to the methodological observations I have made about the Buryats, Geser and “dispositifs”, “-becoming”, “deep time”, “urgent need” and “invented traditions”. This is the question of “identity” itself. Identity is a term that is perhaps overused in contemporary history and anthropology, and very often seems to go opaquely undefined. Perhaps one should note Roger Byron’s definition (2002: 292 “Identity”). According to Byron, “identity” is best understood as “...the assumption of personal continuity with the past viewed through an individual’s available cognitive models and social paradigms for understanding time and collective categorisation” (ibid.). This “assumption” would seem to fit well with the problem of Buryat “reversible memory” – the need to invent and live a coherent “deep time” in order to avoid the anxiety of cultural loss.

Nonetheless, “identity” still remains troublesome. It often appears so bound up in Western post-industrial “lifestyle” and marketing ideologies, that thinkers like Marie Moran (2015) have quite cogently defended the idea that before the 1960s “identity” did not exist. We are simply talking about ourselves, and projecting it on the rest of history and other cultures. However, Moran never gets around to answering what existed *before* we all became obsessed with the word “identity”. How did people form groups, develop loyalties and think about themselves in relation to others? Nor is she kind enough to invent or rediscover alternative terms so that modern scholars might be able to talk about these concepts differently. The fact is that there does not seem to be a better term *available* than “identity”.

Thus, it would be best to clarify for this study a specific definition that is going to be most useful for it – one in which identity is tied to the precarious nature of shared culture and the possibility that it is *already* lost and must be regained and reinvented. This set of assumptions has a very long history bound up with oral epics as material on the “supply side”. The fact is that the European development of the conception of “culture” is inextricably bound up to the discovery of epic narratives as a prioritised source of “deep time”. The figure behind

this conjunction was Johann Gottfried Herder in the late eighteenth century – the father of “Romantic Nationalism”.

Herder’s ideas arose out of a sense of “crisis” under which the Germans felt themselves in the late eighteenth century, fearing that with no united nation they might lose their language and history to increasing French influence (Blackall 1958: 1-15). In response to this Herder (1891: vol. 8 433) created the concept of collective “culture” and venerated the poet as “...the *creator* of a people (*Volk*) around himself: he gives them a world to *see* and has their soul in his hand, to lead them to it”. As Raymond Williams ([1976] 1983: 89 “culture”) aptly pointed out in *Keywords*, the term “culture” underwent a “decisive change of use in Herder”. He reformulated culture from the idea of the cultivation of the self through learning. It became instead the idea of a plurality of distinct organic cultures in opposition to conceptions of Enlightenment progress and rationalism about a coming global “adulthood of man”. As Herder ([1783-91] 1966: XIII. 4) wrote on the word culture before reformulating it: “nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than its application to all nations and periods.” For Herder each culture was unique and specific, with its own history, and people were to become brothers and sisters able to peaceably appreciate such differences.

Herder’s romantic vision of folk culture was based around the idea that the more primordial a creative act was, the more authentic it remains, our “deep time”. Instrumental in this was Herder’s ([1783-91] 1966: esp. 472-3) affection for the Pan-Hellenic appeal of Homer in antiquity and the epic Scottish highland poem *Fingal* accredited to a 3rd century CE Gaelic poet called Ossian and published by James McPherson in 1761 (Berlin 1976: 145-216). These represented two extremes of the poetic genius, one from a lost culture in the bloom of youth and one from a desperate dying culture: “Ossian’s words resounded the dying words of an oppressed people”; Homer existed “in the radiance of the morning beam”. It is here I think where “deep time” and the poet truly begins in a modern sense, established from the start in anxiety, as something always-already lost, but just still somehow *capable* of being rediscovered at the last minute. There will be a great deal of such sentiments in this thesis.

Ironically, Ossian’s *Fingal*, widely believed to be a genuinely ancient work at the time, was really an “invented tradition”, composed from a few snatches of songs and old manuscripts McPherson had found and a great deal of his own invention. Knitting these snatches together, MacPherson fulfilled the emerging needs to develop a conscious Scottish cultural history and identity from what was available in the face of British colonialism. It was an act of explicit Romantic resistance to fulfil the collective desires for anglicised Scots under British rule. In some ways this is quite similar to Elias Lönnrot’s creation of the Karelian

Kalevala epic and transforming it into a literary entity with a unifying plot in the 1830s. The new centralisation of “living” epic poetry was contemporaneous with the new understanding of collective “culture” as always-already precarious or lost except for traces. Thus, the tradition needs from the very start to be “rediscovered” and “reclaimed”, which gives licence to its necessary (re)invention from available material “on the supply side”.

Herder’s ideas had a very powerful formative influence on subsequent European efforts to bond culture, history and popular political movements together into an “ethnic nationalism” (Harvilahti 1996: 38, 2014: 18-24). They influenced the Grimm Brothers’ collection of folktales and Carl Friedrich Wilhelm Jordan’s 1867 popular nationalistic reworking of the mediaeval German *Nibelungenlied* epic. Like Ossian before them and the *Kalevala* after them, many of these collections, epics and their “culture hero” poets were “invented traditions” created or inflated to legitimise ethnic self-consciousness and to imitate and outdo other peoples who had already caught on to the process. To be a nation meant having a poem which expressed a people’s history, and a famous reciter(s) to give forth what Jordan (1876: 56) called the “ripened fruit” of popular creativity.

Katie Trumpener (1997), working on the history and legacy of *Ossian* has utilised the term “bardic nationalism” for when a single poet or select group of them is chosen as the political “mouthpiece for a whole society”. Such Eurocentric “bardic nationalist” influences are very much apparent in relation to the political history of Buryat epic. Perhaps the most important *ül’gershen* (reciter) of the Buryat Geser epics, Manshuud Emegeev, has long been dubbed “the Homer of the Buryats” for the central role his “primordial” epics are seen to play in collective Buryat culture (Lőrincz 1983: 245; Dugarov 2009: 71). The widely-spread epic narratives of Geser have themselves also been called the “Iliad of Central Asia” (Levi intro *ap. David-Neel* [1931] 1933: vii; Damdinsüren 1957: 5). This is because Herder’s ideas were avidly applied to other cultures outside of Europe by scholars. These were then later by the colonised cultures themselves attempting to imitate European modernity through nationalist self-determination narratives in attempts to recover from colonialism (Leerssen 2012, 2013).

In comparison, David Hopkin (2012) brings to light a very different stream of folkloric nationalism to that of Herder’s “ethnic nationalism” - that of a “civic nationalism” attempting to overcome class and ethnic divisions. Hopkin sites this as beginning with the plan to create a new “popular culture” during the French Revolution and discusses the influence of such ideas in the 19th century in relation to a number of “national epics”. However, he does not deal with the influence of such ideas in Russia and the USSR. Rather, as will be shown in the first chapter of this thesis, the Late Imperial *dispositif* appears strongly influenced by Herder’s ideas.

However, the Soviet Era *dispositif* of “national cultures”, which I explore in chapters two, three and four, with its impetus of uniting a people against class and ethnic differences under a single epic narrative may well have indirectly struck upon a kind of revolutionary “civic nationalism” through the Lenin and Stalin’s conceptions of Marxist culture. The Soviet Union in its policy of *korenizatsia* (indigenisation), wherein each of the republics was to produce its own Marxist national culture centred around the belief that a people *needed* a “national epic” that demonstrated mass cultural “proletarian” values embedded in a “deep time”. The epic hero *is* the people; his monstrous *mangadkhay* enemies with a hundred heads are merely a calque for feudal oppressors. Epic illustrates the eternal Marxian struggle between classes, inherent in the thoughts of all peoples. Much more will be said on these Eurocentric sentiments in these coming chapters. However, for now it is simply necessary to realise that the question of epic heroes and “identity” in relation to the Buryats, as with other peoples, has been deeply influenced by European ideas about poet culture heroes and notions of shared, essential primordial culture.

In a very different manner, as I discuss in chapter six of this thesis, the difference between the aspirations of the Buryat poet Bair Dugarov in the 1990s to use Geser to kindle the idea of an “ethnic Buryatia” that reached across borders through shared symbol of the deep time of Geser might well seem an “ethnic nationalism” (albeit a fairly weak one) in comparison with the local Buryatian and Russian federal government’s use of Geser as a “civic” symbol of intercultural friendship. However, to reduce the history of Geser and the Buryats to a dualistic play of “ethnic” vs “civic”, while perhaps useful as a hermeneutic tool for initially unpacking some curious dissonances within the *dispositifs*, does not do justice to the complexity of the four very different *dispositifs* this thesis contends with.

To this I would add one more thing - an important observation made by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk ([2009] 2017: 188-9) in relation to the concept of identity. In *You Must Change Your Life* Sloterdijk begins his discussion with the image of the ancient Stoic philosophical notion of a person having to chisel away a statue inside themselves, to cultivate and remake their person. It is a never-ending process and one of discipline. He contrasts this with the contemporary preoccupation with identity in anthropology and sociology, which he represents as a park of pre-made, inherited statues that tempt a dangerous “right to laziness”. Although Sloterdijk does not discuss how Herder transformed culture from active cultivation and creation in the present to something simply inherited from a “deep time” past, I think that he might be showing us the way towards something valuable.

To think of Buryat culture as something static, past, literary or simply inherited does a disservice to those of the present busy trying to remake, adapt and save what they can *from the past*. This is especially the case regarding the young Buryat *ül'gershed*, who are attempting to “cultivate” what remains of Buryat Geser epics and other traditions, reconstituting them into “living” improvised oral epic traditions using the only material available - old scholarly publications of oral epics taken down nearly a century ago. This is the sort of act which should be celebrated and will be throughout this thesis: the ongoing positive “cultivation” of *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming*.

DISPOSITIF 1: 1900-1906, The Late Russian Empire, The crisis of the “Influx of Civilisation”

*“At the door of the reverend lama
A bright candle has been lit.
Of the nine branches of “Geser”
Tell the first! Ai-dun, zai-io!
The time has come to open the box,
Take from it the ten arrows
And tell of the head
Of the thirteen khans!
The time has come to open the chest,
Take from it the twenty arrows
And tell of the head
Of the twenty-three khans! Ai-dun, zei...!”*

- Ye. O. Khundaeva (2017) translation of lines 1-13 of Manshuud’s *Abay Geser* taken down by Tseveen Zhamtsarano in 1906.

Chapter 1. The Rhapsode and the Revolutionary.

In this chapter I look at the role in identity formation that Buryat epic played for an emerging elite of Buryat orientalists in the Late Russian Empire. At the dawn of the twentieth century the lifeworlds of the Buryats on both sides of Baikal were undergoing cultural crisis brought on by rapid social upheaval. The “steppe дума” system had been abolished in 1890 in efforts to end feudalism and break down the power of the elites of the *inorodtsy* (ethnic minorities). The last decade of the nineteenth century thus brought massive migrations of newly manumitted Russian settlers to the regions. However, this increasing proximity to Russian culture also produced a younger generation of elite Russian-educated Buryats influenced by Romantic Nationalism and Marxism, who began to call for efforts to reinstate and revitalise the “steppe дума” system and even outright political revolution. So too did they begin to develop interest in Buryat folklore and cultural traditions from the position of orientalism.

The most active of these figures was Tseveen (Tsyben) Zhamtsaranovich Zhamtsarano (1880-1942) - nationalist, educator, folklorist, moderniser, communist revolutionary, and one of the most important political figures in early twentieth century Buryat and Mongolian history. Zhamtsarano dreamed of bringing together the disparate Buryat peoples on both sides of Baikal under a single shared cultural and political identity - one that was “Pan-Mongol” and connected with Mongolia and Tibetan Buddhism rather than one that was simply “Pan-Buryat”. Zhamtsarano’s ideas faced a great deal of difficulty. The far more Russified, Christianised and often still shamanic Western Buryats had little knowledge of Buddhism and did not want to. At the turn of the twentieth century Western Buryat conceptions of culture and identity were defined through ancestral interrelation with others and loyalty to relatives - not with a grand overall recognition of Buryat identity that included all Mongolic peoples on both sides of Baikal.

This familial symbolism would continue to exist throughout the twentieth century and down to the present, reshaped and adjusted through the crises and *dispositifs* that the Buryats have faced. As late as 1998, pioneering anthropologist Caroline Humphrey could reaffirm that what she had learned during her fieldwork among the Western Buryats in the early 1980s held true – that kinship terminology continued to be the way in which Buryats related to one another, by dwelling in and reproducing a social network of “fathers”, “sisters” and “brothers”

(Humphrey 1998: 412). This was even if under communism such a way of looking at the world, with indulgence for children and veneration of the elderly “m[ight] exist in opposition to actual practises of Soviet society (not necessarily to the ideology)” in looking at collective work and the stages of life very differently. She (ibid) writes:

I would suggest in brief that the continued vitality of the Buryat kinship terminology, even if we leave aside kin-based activities of a regular in such as *tailgans* and *tsagaalgan*, demonstrate that cognitively the Buryat concept of “father” is one which reaches back through time, and thus this must influence the Buryat development of personal identity...the conceptual map of the kinship terminology, which is produced by every Ego, and which constitutes the Ego-centred topology of the ideal patrilineal system, is still the means by which the Buryats define their initial social place in the world...it cannot be for nothing that it continues to exist.

It would only be to Russian-educated Buryat intellectuals like Zhamtsarano at the turn of last century that a conception of the Buryats as collective “culture” would make sense, gained from Russian orientalist and imperialistic understandings of ruling and studying them as a single minority ethnicity. Thereafter the Soviets would similarly attempt to integrate the Buryats as a monolithic “nationality” into a collectivised, modern way of life: a union of communist ethnicities with their own state and “national” culture beneath the mother language and culture of Russia.

This is the backdrop against which in this chapter I will read Zhamtsarano’s simultaneous efforts as an orientalist between 1903 and 1906 to transcribe Buryat folklore while he was engaged in political activism among the Western Buryats. Zhamtsarano (1918: xiv) feared that Buryat culture was rapidly disappearing due to a Russian “*naplyv tsivilizatsii*” (influx of civilisation). And indeed, Orthodox Christianity and Russian language, goods and culture were making their presences felt even in the small, remote world of Buryat epics. The most important of these engagements was with Manshuud Emegeev - the most famous of the Buryat Geser reciters. Between 1900 and 1906 Manshuud Emegeev recited two very different tripartite Geser-cycles that were preserved on paper for posterity. Zhamtsarano visited Manshuud to write down his tales in 1905 and 1906, was not was not the first to transcribe Geser from him. The first was an American named Jeremiah Curtin (1835-1906) in 1900.

However, Curtin would have almost no influence on the political history of the Buryat Geser. His work was not even known of in the USSR until the 1960s and no Buryat folklorist that I am aware of has ever actually read it firsthand.¹ Curtin offers a very different characterisation of Manshuud to Zhamtsarano, but it is still very much within the eurocentric, orientalist *dispositif* of the Late Imperial “influx” that prioritised concepts such as an essentialist, universal “folklore” over the social function that the *ül’gershen*’s stories may have provided within Buryat culture itself. Manshuud is often regarded today by Buryat scholars and reciters as the greatest of their *ül’gershed*, as the “Homer of the Buryats”. However, it was Zhamtsarano who began this Eurocentric legitimation of the Buryat epic, largely because he had been educated by and was writing for an audience of Russian orientalists. To Zhamtsarano (1918: xiii-iv) Manshuud is a Homeric “rhapsode”, a figure possessed by poetic creativity. He exemplifies the best of Buryat culture that was rapidly disappearing. Thus, the Late Imperial *dispositif* was one in which increasing Russian influence precipitated new ways of imagining politics, cultural symbols and identity, but at the same time produced new problems that would continue to evolve under later *dispositifs*.

1. Manshuud’s Lifeworld.

But who *was* Manshuud? By placing him in the context of the Late Imperial “influx of civilisation” Manshuud functions as a case study for rural Western Buryats of the time and their understanding of identity through kinship and encroaching Russian culture. Relatively little is known about his early years. Rannoy Sherkhunaev (1993: 7), from his archival work on records from the Kuda “steppe duma”, argues that Manshuud was born in 1850. This would seem to fit closely the description of a “*novorozhdennym*” (newborn) mentioned as the third son of an Emegei Bushkhanov Ashabagat and Irzhin Itigitova, detailed on January 17th 1851 (NAB f.1 op 1 d 534 l 250). Manshuud’s father seems to have passed away in 1854, when his son would have been only four years old. School for Manshuud would have been simply his father’s and

¹ Largely the problem has been the rarity of English among Buryat Geser scholars. For instance, Khomonov (1991: 18-20) in his article “Zhermey Kurtyen o Manshude” simply lists the names for Manshuud’s tales in Curtin (1909) and does not go into any detail. Instead it keeps to an overview of Curtin’s travels. Perhaps the information it contains came from an intermediary source. Khamiruev and Semyonov (2005: 12) simply seem to repeat the list of these tales from Khomonov, but add nothing further – though admittedly this work is just a short pamphlet on famous *ül’gershed* of Ust’-Ordynsk. In 2016 when I spoke with an interviewed Geserologist and poet Bair Dugarov he knew of the text it seemed uncertain whether he had ever read it. Yelizaveta Khundaeva, who speaks and writes English well, never seems to have mentioned it.

later his uncles' and others' *ül'gernüüd*. As to the prehistory of his version of Geser and his ability as an *ül'gershen* all that has been recorded is that he learned his skills from his father and “*drugikh pevtsov*” (other singers) (Zhamtsarano 1918: xxii; Khomonov 1961-4 vol. I. 227). These may also have been relatives. Sadly, no materials have been preserved from any of these *ül'gershed* to contextualise how “original” Manshuud was as a reciter.

Manshuud told Zhamtsarano (ibid.) that he had begun working as a manual labourer for a local *shülenge* (village head) in Kukunut from the age of twelve and began reciting *ül'ger* publicly at the age of twenty. This would have been c.1870 if he was born in 1850. If Manshuud started reciting in 1870, this would mean that he would have been performing for some thirty years when he met with the folklorists Curtin and Zhamtsarano in 1900 and 1905 respectively. It is little wonder that his skills seemed so impressive to both folklorists, though it is indeterminable how often these were utilised.

As Sherkhunaev's (1993: 14, 28) archival research also shows, Manshuud appears to have married an Ekhirit woman called Shokhoi Shoskhonova in 1880, when she was twenty-seven and he thirty. She and Manshuud had at least one son, Balyu Manshudov, born in 1888/9. Balyu appears to have had four children who died in infancy, though he himself lived until May 1945 (Sharakhshinova 1950; Sherkhunaeva 1993: 29). However, he does not seem to have taken up the art of the *ül'ger* from his father. Instead, so the folklorist N. O. Sharakhshinova (1991: 13-4) tells us, it was a nephew of Manshuud called Khartu Khabadaev who did. Nonetheless by 1969, when she met with him, Khartu had largely forgotten them. Only one *ül'ger*, which had never been published, *Nasha Khüykher Khübüün* (The Boy Daring Hawk), was recorded from him. Sharakhshinova (ibid.) also notes that though Khartu had six children in 1969, none of them became interested in *ül'ger*. Folklorists who went to meet Khartu later also found that that he had “forgotten everything” (*vsyo zabyt*). At least part of this was due to Soviet efforts to discourage the tradition. Even in 1989, when she wrote her study on Manshuud, not published until 1991, Sharakhshinova could record that “these days [Khartu] does not tell *ül'gers* as he fears being arrested by authorities for the crime of performing old, long-forgotten legends and tales.” If Manshuud's epics had not been committed to paper it seems very much likely that they would have been completely lost to history.

Some more information about Manshuud has been reassembled through Balyu's wife Maadagan Mantakovna Manshutova (1897/9- 1986) and later Galina Khatueva Khabadaeva (b.

1949), a granddaughter of one of Manshuud's brothers. (Sherkhunaev 1993: 28). These descriptions were given to the Buryat folklorist Sharakshinova (1950: 134-7; 1969: 3-5 cf. 1991: 9-14), who, in the late 1940s, interested in what the famous *ül'gershen* had been like, visited Manshuud's relatives, the Emegeya Khungerova branch of the Ashabagad Buryats. Sharakshinova found that many older people still recalled Manshuud fondly as a talented and hardworking man of great physical strength - one who in spite of his poverty, never complained and always reciprocated when asked to do something. His abilities at mowing, reaping and ploughing were especially idolised. Some accredited him with the ability to cut a whole *desyatina* (1.09 hectares/2.7 acres) of wheat with a scythe in four or five days. This was a feat very few could compete with, though it is a trope not uncommonly attributed to ancestors by Buryats.²

However, nothing at the time appears to have been said at all of Manshuud's storytelling abilities by his descendants and relatives. The question remains as to whether the local people were more interested in his other feats, or in the late 1940s now considered, and Sharakshinova perhaps likewise, the communist proletarian working mentality more fit to speak of when singing someone's praises. In the same way, although it is unknown whether Manshuud ever went further that Ust'-Orda in his entire lifetime, Sherkhunaev (1993: 20) emphasises Manshuud's curiosity about the wider world and that there was no cultural "vacuum" between Kukunut and Irkutsk. As with the scholar's (ibid. 12, 14, 20-1) statements that Manshuud only believed in his shamanic deities for economic reasons, understood collectivist "aesthetics", and knew that *ül'ger* was all about building a better future, there is no real evidence for this. It simply seems to be Soviet Era assumptions about the necessary qualities a "culture-hero" like Manshuud had to possess.³

² Z. A. Serebryakova (2007) notes in her study of twentieth century Buryat novels that in A. Angarkhaev's *Vechnyi Tsvet*: "In the family of his friend Sharalday, they remember their ancestors – hereditary peasants, one of whom was known for his industry: he was able to mow down *dessiatina* (Russian unit of land measure equal to 2.7 acres) of corn within one night and no one could keep pace with him."

³ One instead might note this footnote Jeremiah Curtin (1909: 147 n. 1) supplies in regard to Manshuud's beliefs about Geser: "The story of Gesir Bogdo is the father of the world of stories. It is not as beautiful as some, but it is the greatest of all, and is true." Clearly Manshuud considered the adventures of Geser to be of great importance, but as to why they are the "father of the world of stories" and truer than others, which would likely have to include cosmogonic myths about the origins of the gods, ancestors and the world, remains unanswered. Manshuud's Geser is never claimed an ancestor, nor does Manshuud ever connect him with anything one might consider a "history" that influences the present. In comparison the Geser stories that Curtin (ibid. 126-9) gathered from others such as Skretaryoff before he met Manshuud, while very short and having little in common with other Geser cycles, actively integrate the hero into the ancestry of the local Buryats and into natural phenomena such as earthquakes.

In order to contextualise the world Manshuud lived in it is necessary to look closely at the social system of the Kukunut Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryats at the turn of last century. Manshuud's ancestry stemming back nine generations is recorded by Zhamtsarano (1918: xxii; Khomonov 1961-4 vol. I. 227). It is interesting to contrast this with one of the few other written records of ancestry amongst the Kuda Buryats. In 1926 Buryat academic and associate of Zhamtsarano, M.N. Bogdanov (1926: 92-6) published a series of records from 1847 describing the ancestry of the Buryats of the Bulagat people. These records were transcriptions of oral recitations of ancestors. This was how Western Buryats at the time defined themselves in relation to different groups. Both Bogdanov and Manshuud were actually not too distant relatives according to this schema, though it is very unlikely they would have known one another.⁴ The Bulagat had formed a confederacy along the Kuda River with some of the Ekhirit and Khongoodor during the eighteenth century, giving rise to the need to integrate them into ancestral lineages. This is reflected in the origin myth mentioned in the introduction of the Ekhirit and Bulagat personified as twins, descended from of a theriomorphic ancestor called Bukha Noyon Baabay (Grandfather Lord Bull) (Poppe 1936b: 3; Gungarov 1990: 28-34). Bukha Noyon in a similar myth also appears as the father of the eponymous progenitor of the Khongoodor, Khan Khongoodor, and myths of a primordial “*zegete aba*” (great hunt) in which the Khongoodor and Bulagat collectively engaged, to the exclusion of other peoples (Pavlov 2010: 257-8).⁵

The Ekhirit-Bulagat confederacy was acknowledged in September 1824 by the Russian authorities in Irkutsk as the Kudinsk *aymag*, with its “steppe duma” between the Kuda and Mürün rivers at a place called Zherdovka (Danilova 2009: 56, 159-60). By the 1880s Zherdovka had become a proper regional centre with some fourteen shops. But as of January

⁴ Because Bogdanov and Manshuud were both Kuda Bulagat Buryats they shared the same semi-mythical Bulagat ancestors of the eponymous Bulagan and his son Tunguluk. Thereafter they divide from one another. Bogdanov is a descendant of Sagaan, Tunguluk's elder son, and his people the Abaganat. The Khongoodor, mentioned in the introduction as the likely introducers of Geser to the Western Buryats, were also integrated by this time as descendants of Sagaan. Manshuud on the other hand was a descendant of Ashabagai. Ashabagai was Tunguluk's second son. This lineage system implied the seniority of the Abaganat, as amongst the Kuda Buryats of the nineteenth century ancestry and kinship relations appear to have very much denoted one's status and the social structure.

⁵ Pavlov (2010: 258) aptly recognises that Gerasimov's (1969: 122) theory that the Khongoodor borrowed Bukha Noyon in a one-way exchange is very limited. She suggests that the figure represents a history of interaction between the two groups and the need to “fix” their interrelations through myth. While Pavlov seems interested in pushing such interactions back as far as theorising about the Middle Ages, this is a little tenuous. I think asking “whose” Bukha Noyon is “originally” is not a useful idea. He is an evolving symbol of social interrelation.

17th 1890, the “steppe duma” system was dissolved as a result of Tsar Nikolay II’s efforts to loosen Buryat control over the land for Russian colonisation. Zherdovka became three council districts: Kudinsk, Ordynsk and Abaganatskaya (ibid.) The Kuda confederacy’s economy was based around the expectation that animals, pasture land, grain, and resources would be shared by relatives, with deference towards the judgement of elders (Sinor et al 1997: 75-6). This social system was called the *kholbon*. Issues concerning the *kholbon* would be discussed at a council or *khural*, just like the *khural* of shamanic Tengeri gods in Manshuud’s Geser epics (Curtin 1909: 135, 239-0; cf. AG. 143-389).

The nineteenth century Russian traveller among the Western Buryats, A. P. Shchapov (1874: 128f) notes that their encampments and villages (for some were semi-nomadic) were called a *khoton*, and the pastoral region and network of kin relations within this was called an *ulus*. An *ulus* could contain anywhere between perhaps nine and seventy tents or houses because it was based on laws of extended kinship. Kukunut *ulus*, Manshuud’s village, would have worked on this system. Several *ulus/khoton* would be considered an *aymag*, though there is much overlap between these three terms. Possessing the same ancestry to the fifth generation brought one into the sphere of an *ulus*. If one was within this it was expected that one would pay the *kalym*, or bride price, for younger members to get married. To Schapov (ibid) the Kuda Buryats, Manshuud’s people, stood out from other Western Buryat confederations in that their camps and villages, which were largely semi-permanent, tended to be set up in a circular formation around the house of the local head, or *shülenge*.

The man, for whom Manshuud laboured most of his life, from his teenage years until his death, would have been the local Kukunut *shülenge* (or several generations thereof) and also a relative. Manshuud’s nephew Khartu Khabadaev gives us a name for one of these men: “my uncle Manshuud worked for hire for local kulaks, for a long time he worked for the kulak Barnakov Semyon” (Sharakshinova 1991: 13). Very little seems to have been recorded about this Semyon Barnakov, but there is no doubt that Manshuud was very much at the bottom of the feudal order. It is hard to determine if Manshuud’s storytelling abilities were ever able to elevate him from his poverty and into the favour of others. Curtin and Zhamtsarano as outsiders were to pay him for his efforts, but it may well have been that Manshuud was simply expected to fulfil the obligation of *ül’gershen*, just as, in one case Zhamtsarano (2011: 234) describes him being called upon for a religious ceremony simply because to the people of Kukunut he

was the “best singer.” In the colourful words of A. I. Ulanov (1953: 74) used to describe Manshuud, he was a *skazitel’-bednyak* (storyteller-pauper) – but there is little information available as to how the former quality influenced the latter.

The highest level of this social kin-system during the majority of Manshuud’s lifetime was the “steppe duma”, established as with others of its kind under the Russian imperial decree in 1824.⁶ Manshuud’s village of Kukunut was measured as some twenty-five *versts* (27.5 km) from the Kuda “steppe duma”, and a hundred *versts* (110km) from Irkutsk (Tulokhonov 1995: 163). As Robert W. Montgomery (2016: 6-7) notes, one of the most negative results of the ending of the “steppe duma” system was that after 1896 any Buryat holding of more than fifteen *desyatinas* (40 acres) was handed over to Russian migrants. In December 1906 Zhamtsarano (2011: 236) in his travelling diary notes that *all* the Buryats were experiencing “*zemlenyy krizis*” (land crisis), and that this was especially bad among the Alar Buryats, who were being forcibly dispossessed by the Russian government with no compensation in order for the Tran-Siberian Railroad to be built. Around June 1905 this had already led to protests, Zhamtsarano tells us (*ibid*: 160, 6th June). To these the local Russian landowner G. Shemakhov had simply replied that the Buryats must “merge (*slit*) with the Russians, the state is Russian. Everything must become Russian.”

Even Manshuud was being affected by this “influx of civilisation”, as Zhamtsarano called it. Manshuud does not seem to have spoken Russian, but Zhamtsarano’s manuscript of his Geser recital is full of “buryatised” Russian loanwords, which largely express day to day items.⁷ Another curious example is this: Sherkhunaev’s (1993: 14, NARB f.1 op. 1, d. 2656, p. 20) archival work on documents from Kukunut *ulus* which uncovered the strong possibility that Manshuud and his wife Shokhoi were baptised into Orthodox Christianity as Mikhayl Vasil’ev and Tat’yana Leont’eva in 1886. This seems to have been due to the syncretic and nature of

⁶ The ruler of the Kuda confederation was called a *zaisang* in the nineteenth century if his position was not inherited, and *taisha* if it was. However, it is hard to deduce if this office had any function other than an administrative one or even if it predated Russian settlement (Sinor et al 1997: 75-6).

⁷ Damdinsüren (1957: 142) gives a helpful list of these, though there are a number of others: *booshkho-bochka* (line 1398 “shoes”), *barabaan- baraban* (line: 3731 “drums”), *soboora - sobora* (line: 1778 “church, temple”), *kheniie - knigu* (line: 4107 “book”), *shumbaana - chemodan* (line: 4,224 “suitcase, trunk”), *urbaakha - rubakha* (line: 4713 “shirt”), *doroobo – zdrov’ye* (line: 7573 “health”), *soldaad -soldat* (line: 7980 “soldier”), *podvaal- podval* (line: 10046 “basement”). Ulanov (1953: 86) claims that there were a mere forty Russian words in Manshuud’s eleven thousand-word *Abay Geser*, which he takes to be an indicator of the lack of Russian cultural influence on the reciter. Indeed, these terms are largely for household items and there is almost no evidence of Russian “culture” being appended to them in the story.

Western Buryat shamanism and culture in general. Accepting Christianity simply meant greater protection from maleficent forces, not the conscious disowning of native shamanic beliefs. As Robert W. Montgomery (2016: 9) notes, often turn of the century Buryats hired themselves out as labourers for years and married late because the *kalym* (bride price) was so high. Some even eloped and had themselves baptised and married by the Orthodox Church in order to get around this. However, it is unclear whether this applied to Manshuud, even though, as mentioned, he and his wife were baptised and he spent his whole adult life as a labourer.⁸ With this the limit is reached on what might be reassembled of Manshuud's life and the world he dwelt in. One must now look to how he is represented by the two folklorists, Curtin and Zhamtsarano, and of course they represented the unique nature of Manshuud's Geser cycles.

2. A Wise Man of Ancient Lore.

In 1900, in a journey across Southern Siberia, American folklorist, diplomat, translator and linguistic savant Jeremiah Curtin stopped at the small regional centre of Ust'-Orda. Curtin was already famous in American and European academic circles for his publications on Amerindian and Celtic mythology. By the time he arrived in Siberia he had long been dubbed "the foremost collector of Irish oral literature" (Nutt 1895: v). The transcription of the myths of the Buryat Mongols was the major reason that had brought Curtin to Southern Siberia, emphatically believing it to be the "birthplace of the Mongol race".⁹ He was extremely keen to take down as many myths and stories as possible. These would appear in Curtin's book *A Journey to Southern Siberia*, published in 1909, a year after his death.

⁸ Manshuud does not seem to have had any discernible knowledge of Christianity, at least as far as his epics show. In the same way he most likely had no knowledge of Buddhism, because it was almost non-existent among rural Western Buryats at this time. When a name like Maidar (the bodhisattva Maitreya) appears in Manshuud's *ül'ger*, it is only in relation to a repeated compliment concerning the power of the written word: "*Maidari shara kheniin*" (the yellow book of Maitreya) (Zhamtsarano 1930-1 AG. 9585, 10200 13077-9, 14404-7, 15723, 19374-6; *Yerensey* 4770-83, 6500. *Khara Bukhyn* 301, 2035). This is probably the result of simply the diffusion of the motif through rote learning of the *ül'ger*. At some point a Western Buryat storyteller probably knew who Maitreya was, but it seems doubtful if Manshuud himself or anyone who taught him to recite did.

⁹ Curtin also wrote a book on the Mongol Empire called *The Mongols* (1908), which for its time includes quite a rich array of European, Russian and Persian sources. Curtin does not name any sources but appears to have utilised Paladius' (1866) epitomised Russian translation of *Yüan-ch'ao pi-shih* (*The Secret History of the Mongols*) entitled *Starinnoye Mongol'skoye Skazaniye o Chingiskhanye*. For example, Curtin (1908: 4-7) gives perhaps the first English version of the ancestry attributed to Temüjin/Chingis, from Börte Cino (the blue wolf), as is detailed in *The Secret History*.

Nearly all of the stories that Curtin took down during his stay in Ust'-Orda between late August and early September 1900 were from a single reciter. This figure, a "wise man in ancient lore," so Curtin (1909: contents p. ix; index p. 314) romantically announces, was called "Manshut". This "Manshut" was Manshuud Emegeev, but Curtin never gives a full name for him. Curtin (p. 39) tells us that Manshuud told him three stories: one about the hero Geser, or *Gesir Bogdo* (pp. 134-163), his brother *The Iron Hero* (pp. 164-177), and son *Ashir Bogdo* (pp. 178-185).¹⁰ However, the "greatly disappointed" Curtin (p. 39) was not satisfied with recording just these three tales from Manshuud and was "doubtful about his return, for he was a restless man and seemed to dislike anything that required concentrated attention." Needing to return to Irkutsk by early September, Curtin took it upon himself to track down Manshuud once again and record as much as he possibly could from him. On Curtin's birthday, the 6th of September, he decided to send for Manshuud. When informed that the man was ill, Curtin did not want to give up so easily on his quest. Unluckily Curtin's birthday also happened to coincide with a Buryat feast day, which made it very difficult to gain any assistance from the men he had hired or his informants, as "...nearly all the men in the village were intoxicated" (p. 86). Curtin (p. 87) thus "set out to bring in Manshut, dead or alive."

In Manshuud's village, Kukunut, Curtin (1909: 87-9) also found it even more difficult to acquire any assistance for similar festive reasons. His tone of irritated disgust towards the Buryats and their festivities becomes positively macabre. He speaks of Manshuud's mother as a "weird witch-like creature", of "stolid, stupid women" and one particular Buryat as "terribly repulsive, ragged and dirty beyond description". These somewhat ironically seem to echo the descriptions of the houses and family members of the *mangadkhay* - the monstrous ogre enemies of heroes in Buryat epic. Finally, Manshuud is found, "ragged and dirty", and, with great annoyance, the folklorist simply commands the Buryat labourer to do his bidding. Manshuud obeys, "not hesitating for a moment".

¹⁰ Traditionally Geser does not have children, or if he does, they die young. Manshuud appears to have no awareness of this and has simply adapted Geser to Buryat epic's families of intergenerational heroic exploits. In Tibet those who count themselves as Geser's descendants do so via his adoptive brother (David Neel [1931] 1933). In the 1716 Mongolian xylograph (1965: 52) Geser's wife Roγmo γoo is told by the goddess Ary-a Alamkari that due to eating at a wedding she is to be deprived of all future children. In the Ladakhi version of Geser taken down by Franke (1901-1941: 248) Geser has a child by Bamza 'Bum-skyid (Mongolian: Tūmenjiryalan), which she later kills in anger. In Damdinsüren's 1986 (5-r *būleg*, §23) modern Mongolian translation that is a melange of a number of texts, Geser's brother Jasa Çiker and his soldier Nančun give their sons Layičav and Rayičav to Roγmo to adopt. This appears to have been taken from the end of the Sharayiγol Khans chapter in the Mongolian *Cay-a* Geser ms.

As repellent as he seemed to find the Buryats, over the next four days Curtin (ibid. p. 89) had Manshuud tell him the rest of his stories. These included two very different versions of the story of the hero *Burul dai Bogdo* (pp. 186-195, 196-200) a short Russian folktale called *Sharau* (pp. 201-205), which seems unrelated to the rest of the epics and their content. The other epics were: *Hunkuvai and the Horse with the Round Head* (pp. 206-22); *Varhan Tulai Hubun* (pp. 222- 231); *Altin Shagay* (pp. 232-246); *Yerente Khaan and his Son Sogto* (pp. 247-270); *Alamaldjin and his Twin Sister Hanhai* (pp. 271-291) and *The Twin Boys Altin Shagay and Mungen Shagay* (pp. 292-300).

Excepting *Sharau*, all of these stories take place in the same “narrative universe”. Characters, monsters, gods, Herculean challenges for heroes seeking wives set by prospective fathers in law, and the same geography are recycled as a series of tropes and poetic formulas, or “multiforms” (see: Honko and Honko 1998). Manshuud bolts together and reconstitutes these differently through improvisation each time he tells a story. Here is not the place for a full thematic analysis of Manshuud’s epics. Yet, one of the recurrent assessments of Manshuud is that this epic “lifeworld” is “primordial” – Geser is merely a later layer placed over the top of the social world Manshuud is describing in his stories. The fact that Manshuud’s Geser has a son Oshor Bogdo who continues the cycle is particularly unique. From Tibet to Mongolia Geser is traditionally childless.¹¹ Manshuud’s epics dwell upon on small families of heroes and *mangadkhay* monsters feuding with each other, rather than battles between khans and armies, as is generally the case in rest of Buryat and Khalkha Mongolian Geser epics. Manshuud, so it is often imagined, is the preserver of a “deep time” from before the Buryats were feudal. Curtin certainly viewed Manshuud as a keeper of “ancient lore” and the Buryats as the “origins” of the Mongols, but it would only be Buryat academia under Soviet auspices that would attempt to historicise Manshuud’s epics through the lens of Marxist conceptions of linear, progressive social development.

Because of its “small world” of warring families, Manshuud’s Geser seems so *different* from others that Tsendiyn Damdinsüren (1957: 145-6) in his influential study on Geser, *Korni Geseriady* (The Roots of the Geseriad), once went so far as to say of it: “The name of the main

¹¹ Apart from Manshuud’s versions, Geser never has children in Mongolian and Tibetan versions, of if he does they die prematurely as children and an adopted heir has to be acquired. See: Schmidt ([1836] 1965: I. 52, V. 136); Rinchen 1960a: XIII. 385 – mislabelled as p. 285); Franke (1904-1941: 248); David-Neel ([1931] 1933: 36). In Tibet being a “descendant” of Geser means being a descendant of his brother: Samuel (2002: 184; 2005: 176).

hero, “Geser”, is the only thing this version holds in common with the Mongolo-Tibetan epic of Geser. If one were to give a different name to the main hero of the Ekhirit version, it would in no way at all come to mind that this was a *Geseriad*.” Damdinsüren is very much exaggerating the differences in Manshuud’s Geser because of pre-conceived assumptions about an “essential” version of the epic. There certainly are very clear parallels and borrowings from the Mongolian Geser traditions in Manshuud’s *ül’gernüüd*: the monsters Galkha Nurman and Yobsogoldoy and the plots surrounding them clearly stem from the Mongol script episodes on the monsters Angdulam and Lubsaya.¹² However, what is most interesting is that Manshuud also seems to have subsumed *parts* of Geser into his overall repertoire of epic motifs and multiforms. If one looks beyond Manshuud’s Geser cycle, to his holistic repertoire - the shared, overlapping cosmos of geography, monsters and challenges in which just about all of the characters in all of his tales dwell - *elements* of the Mongol Geser are in fact abundant.¹³ To claim, then, that Manshuud did not “know” Geser well because his versions are so different from an imagined essential, *unchanging* Geser misses the point of the ongoing evolution of *Geser-becoming* and *Buryat-becoming*.

In fact, to reverse this, Manshuud’s epics are hardly unique from a structuralist perspective on Mongolian folklore. His Geser cycles and other tales fit very closely with Rinchindorji’s (2001) structural study of Turco-Mongolian epics, centring around (A) marriage

¹² The monster Yobsogoldoy transforms Geser into a horse (AG. 6180-6823; cf. Curtin 1909: 159-63). This has its basis in the Mongolian cycle’s Lubsaya, who turns the hero into a donkey (e.g. Rinchen 1960c: 437-479).

¹³ In relation to the Mongol Geser and Manshuud’s versions, one should note the motif of the act of the killing of a monstrous, indomitable infant in a furnace, which is found in both versions of his Geser (Curtin 1909: 143; AG. 3545-3655, 20795-20835), as well as throughout Manshuud’s other stories taken down by Curtin (1909: 192, 227, 254-5). This has its origins in the Angdulam/Nandulam episode of the Mongolian Geser cycle, which in Manshuud’s Geser appears under the name of Galkha Nurman (Curtin 1909: 142-3; AG. 2760-3711). The motif has seemingly been applied by Manshuud to other tales. One should also note Geser’s defeat of monstrous rats, crows and men who come to attack him in his infancy (Curtin 1909: 135-7; AG. 330-1040), which is held in common with the Mongolian Geser (eg. Schmidt 1836: 25-7). One of the most interesting features of Manshuud’s tales is that while Geser’s scheming uncle of Tibetan and Mongolian tradition, Čotong, does not appear in either version of Manshuud’s Geser, he does appear as the evil uncle Zotan in one of the stories that Curtin (1909: 271-2) took down. Zotan/Zutan also appears in the tales of other Buryat reciters, sometimes as a pair of archetypal evil uncles called Khara and Sagaan Zutan, or Black and White Zutan (Shoolbraid 1974: 33). In one case he appears as a helpful figure who follows the hero on his travels (Poppe 1980 trans. *Khaa-Oshor Khübüün* 885ff). For Manshuud, as with other reciters, the name Čotong/Zutan has become untangled from the Geser cycle, as has Galkha Nurman (Angdulam) who appears in another of Curtin’s (ibid. 237,241) stories as simply a father of one of the heroes’ brides instead of in his usual capacity as a monster in the Geser cycle (ibid. 142-4; cf. AG. 3340-3655). In his study of Ekhirit-Bulagat epics D. D. Gomboin (1990: 20) also notes the wholesale insertion of the Gal Nurman episode from Geser into the story *Gunkhabay Mergen*. This shows that elements of Geser could become material belonging to the “narrative universe” of Manshuud and other reciters, from which improvised stories could be produced.

quests by heroes and (B) battles with monsters (*mangadkay/mangas*) and other heroes over property (including women). These two core plots can be combined in tandem and complex plots, producing an almost endless structure of stacked episodes as generations of heroes go out to win wives from fathers in law, fight monsters and recover one's possessions. Rinchindorji (ibid 389), one should note, refers to Manshuud's Geser epics in particular as typical "chain-type" epics, perhaps not too dissimilar from even the Kyrgyz *Manas*. Such oral epics can continue indefinitely because they are simply composed of a very large number of linked (A) and (B).¹⁴

Much of Curtin's appendices concern trying to collapse Manshuud's stories into universal archetypes with other stories, which Curtin, as a folklorist and avid collector, knew from European and Amerindian cultures (pp. 303ff). The only terms for the processes of Buryat storytelling that Curtin (1909: 303) ever addresses are those of "folklore", which he takes to be a solely English invention with no equivalent in any other language for the product of popular creativity, and the Russian "*narodnoe tvorchestvo*", which he views as describing the *process* of popular creativity but not that which is produced by it. It is as though from this sort of anglocentric perspective that English has some unique objective quality to talk about the world which the cultures themselves under scrutiny do not.

As noted, Curtin thought much of Manshuud's stories, but very little of the man himself and the Buryats. At the end of taking down his stories, Curtin (p. 89-0) declares: "I rejoiced when I had on paper all that Manshut could tell me, for he was so unkempt as to be exceedingly

¹⁴ The central matter is that Curtin (1909), in comparison with later thinkers, does not seem to have noticed much of the recurrent structures and motifs in Manshuud's stories at all even though they are extremely obvious. In Curtin's (1909) collection, and so too Zhamtsarano's recordings the same plots and motifs are used again and again. The enemies of heroes are mercilessly nailed to trees (Curtin 219, 231, 254, 280, 299; cf. Zhamtsarano 1930-1 *Abay Geser* 7175-94, 10210-340, 21270-300). The hero or his enemies are put in barrels and thrown in the sea (Curtin 1909: 163, 143, 173 251 cf. AG.7410-5, Zhamtsarano 1914 *Yerenisey* 1970-5). To prove themselves to a potential father in law or defeat a monster hero are charged to catch a yellow dog (Curtin 1909: 244, 254. 267-8, 294 AG. 17900-18010 cf. *Yer.* 7780f, *Khara Bukhyn* 1972: 900, 2791-7, 3794). A giant yellow dog that aids this hero also appears in the Buryat tale *Unyshen Khubun/Sirota i zhyoltaya sobaka* (Gomboev 1890: 51-6). Heissig (2002) has compared this figure of the yellow dog in Manshuud's tales to similar motifs in the *Kalevala*. Another recurrent bride-quest is acquiring feathers from the legendary Herdik/Kherdeg (Garuda bird) (Curtin 1909: 149, 282-5; AG. 5150-5300, 19450-20524; cf. *Yer.* 8260f, *KB* 2035-40). They fight monsters that are invulnerable unless their external *hünihü* (soul) hidden in an object is found and destroyed (Curtin 1909: 159-62, 170-6, 211-3, 226, 275 AG. 7825, 11050-13210, 16345-17650, *KB* 2040-2105). Like Odysseus sometimes heroes disguise themselves as old men in order to wait their time to strike against the other suitors (Curtin 1909: 170-6, 224-5, 263-7, 273-4, 283; cf. AG. 11050-13020, 16345- 17650). These motifs rotate throughout most of Manshuud's stories, creating the plots. Thus, it is rather odd indeed that Curtin has nothing to say of this very obvious "chain" structure of epic "multiforms".

repulsive. I recompensed him well for his time, and his knowledge of ancient tales, and he went away satisfied.” And with that the partnership between Manshuud and Curtin was over. Even when he had first met Manshuud, Curtin (p. 39) had facetiously decided that the only way to lure the man to tell more stories would be by giving him tobacco: “[he] was a great lover of the pipe and smoked continually...talking seemed to interrupt his smoking.” Curtin (*ibid*) viewed Manshuud, moreover, as allergic to anything that required “concentrated attention”. This would appear a rather ironic and dishonest characterisation of a man who was able to spend whole days telling stories.

This curious paradox of intense interest in the tales of the Buryats and their pejoration as backwards is part and parcel with the orientalist *dispositif* of the time, which combined eurocentric ideals of progress with that of profound romanticism towards “primitive” cultures. Much more will be seen of this below in relation to Zhamtsarano and his teachers. This is most strongly epitomised in Curtin’s (1909: 91) reflections after his return to Irkutsk to attend the opera after collecting folktales among the rural Buryats. What he sees is “the striking results of some centuries of social evolution” from the “wild, free fancy” of the Buryats to “material facts”. Yet, at the same time he compares the brave heroes of Manshuud’s stories fighting *mangadkhay* to “the no less valiant men of the present who, struggling with the evil forces of indifference and ignorance, are bringing to Siberia the prosperity that country so well deserves to call her own.” Manshuud’s primaeval world is placed within the bounds of a linear narrative of noble culture heroes struggling towards “progress” and “fact”, which would later find parallels in Soviet Era attempts to understand a hidden progressive, populist core at the heart of Geser.

Curtin’s *Journey to Southern Siberia* appeared in 1909, as has been noted, a year after his death in 1908. 1908 was coincidentally the same year Manshuud passed away. *A Journey* appears to have been totally unknown in the Soviet world until the 1960s (Sharakhshinova 1969: 37-8, 139; Neklyudov 1984: 211; cf. Stein 1959: 77). Today barely anyone even remembers Curtin at all. If he is known for *anything* it is perhaps for translating the popular Polish novel *Quo Vadis* into English. G.D.R. Philips (1942: 44) and G. M. H. Shoolbraid (1974: 39, 69) make mention of *A Journey* in the few English language works on Buryat epic. But even here it is only in a fleeting manner compared with Russian and German sources. Hudgins (1997: 150-6, 2003: 128-9) and Murray (2012: 130 n. 6) have more recently mentioned him and his

Journey in relation to certain customs among the Western Buryat culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet nothing is said about Manshuud or Buryat oral epic at all in these latter works. In fact, if it had only been Curtin who had recorded Manshuud’s epics, then the reciter may well have come to mean very little indeed. He would have simply been a dishevelled man from the end of the Russian Empire who told a few “folktales” hardly anyone has ever read except a few folklorists.



Fig. 1. The only existing image of Manshuud Emegeev, taken by Curtin (1909: 89), though one will find it regularly reused and touched up by “photo illustrators” such as V. T. Novikov (ie. Tulokonov et al. 1991: 11, Tulokonov et al. 1995: 449).

3. Zhamtsarano and the Orientalists.

Curtin could never have known that Manshuud Emegeev was to become one of the most important figures in the history of the Buryats for the “deep time” his Geser was and still is seen

to provide. All of that is due to our second folklorist, Tseveen (Tsyben) Zhamtsarano. Today Zhamtsarano is generally less well-known for his pioneering contributions to the study of Mongolic epic narratives than he is for his involvement in educational, nationalistic and revolutionary enterprises among the Buryats and Khalkha Mongols during the first two decades of the twentieth century. As Vera Tolz (2015-7: 727) aptly summarises concerning Zhamtsarano's unique position between Russian and Buryat identities:

At the time of his birth, in 1880, the industrialization of Russia was intensifying, leading to rapid urbanization and population displacement. The period witnessed four revolutions – the first Russian revolution in 1905; two revolutions in 1917 and Stalin's so-called "Great Break" of the late 1920s–early 1930s, – as well as the First World War and the Russian Civil War. These processes and events were hugely traumatic for many, yet they also offered unexpected opportunities to those who had the ability to use them. It was a period of both discrimination and the unprecedented empowering of non-Russian minorities, including their increased access to education and, in the 1920s, to institutions of political power.

This may seem to closely echo the liminality of Andrey Mikhaylov, the unsung hero of the scholarly history of the Buryat Geser. As well as being Curtin's contact for Manshuud, he was also Zhamtsarano's. Mikhaylov dwelt in a liminal world between rural Western Buryat culture and Russian high society in Irkutsk, epitomised by his constant refusal to be converted to Christianity (Curtin 1909: 40). When Curtin and Zhamtsarano needed a local guide to find storytellers for them, Andrey Mikhaylov recommended Manshuud to both. Along with his son Vasiliy Mikhaylov, Curtin (1909: 20-1) met Andrei in Irkutsk through a friend of a friend who managed the Irkutsk Museum. The Mikhaylovs appear to have known Manshuud personally, and not merely by reputation (Sherkhunaev 1993: 20, 31). Andrey Mikhaylov also accompanied Zhamtsarano (1918: xii) on his expeditions to record epics from Manshuud and others between 1903 and 1906. He played a key role in interpreting obscure Ekhirit-Bulagat words that Zhamtsarano, a Khori Buryat, was not familiar with. Without Mikhaylov as middle man Manshuud's works may well have been lost to posterity altogether.

Mikhaylov was not an academic, however. He was simply a local man who moved between the Buryat and Russian worlds. Being a Buryat highly educated in the Russian school-

system placed Zhamtsarano within a small elite, an intermediary zone between academics and orientalists and their subject matter – peoples like the Buryats. Tolz (2015-7: 229), building upon the ideas of Gerasimov et al (2005) and Glebov et al (2013: 128-33) concerning the non-binary nature of the “imperial situations” historical actors are often thrown into, emphasises that: “an inevitably heterogeneous imperial context influences can flow not only from the dominant centre, but also from the imperial or colonial periphery, and that it is often impossible for actors to belong unequivocally “to only one particular social hierarchy or group”. Zhamtsarano was neither quite Buryat nor Russian – he existed in a unique position within the Late Imperial orientalist *dispositif* – the best place to try to construct understandings of a *Buryat-becoming* to deal with the perceived “influx of civilisation”. Tolz (ibid) draws the reader’s attention to Zhamtsarano *Avtobiografiya i Spisok Trudov* (autobiography and list of works) in which he recounts how in 1896, at sixteen years old, he was sent to St. Petersburg to attend a lyceum for baptised Buryats. However, because he refused to convert from Buddhism to Orthodox Christianity he was soon expelled and sent back home the next year. Perhaps in a way, though obviously problematised by their different social statutes, this echoes the similarly liminal attitude towards Christianity that one finds in Manshuud and his wife’s own baptism and marriage and Andrei Mikhaylov’s ongoing refusal to convert.

In 1891 Zhamstarano came back to Saint Petersburg, this time as a student at its university, and a very valuable one at that. Russian orientalism had fallen in love with Buddhism but had relatively little access to the cultures of the Mongolic peoples and others because of the language barrier. Zhamtsarano could provide this access (in return, one might say, in Tolz’s words: for “access to education and...institutions of political power”). Ironically, what these thinkers were most keenly interested in and what they wanted Buryat-speakers for was the study of Buddhist “*zhivaya ustnaya traditsiya*” (living oral tradition) (Tolz 2011: 117). In comparison there seems to have been relatively little interest in “living” Mongolic epic narratives at the time.

But what sort of people was Zhamtsarano working for? Were they genuinely concerned about possible disappearance of native folklore and traditions? Vera Tolz (2011: 105) perspicaciously observes that two of the most important Orientalists of the day Fyodor Shcherbatskoy and Sergey Ol’denburg “...saw in collaboration with these Buriats the opportunity to support the integration of minorities into the Pan-Russian state-framed

community, by helping these Buriats become scholars in their own right, while facilitating the development of academic Buddhist Studies.” Craig Brandist (2015) in his work on Russian Orientalism at the turn of the twentieth century views Vasiliy Bartol’d, Sergey Ol’denburg and others to have based a great deal of their approach to Eastern cultures within the Russian Empire as a deliberate rejection of the prevalent belief at the time of the superiority of Indo-European studies over Asian studies. In order to ground this, they attached notions of benefit to governance of the Russian Empire to their approaches. Brandist (2015: 13) tells us:

In undermining Eurocentric stereotypes of the East and celebrating the past greatness of the cultures of Central Asia, Bartol’d argued ‘the peoples of the east will believe in the superiority of our culture all the more when they are convinced we know them better than they know themselves’ [Bartol’d 1963a (1900): 610]. In this way, Russian Orientalists could contribute to the ‘peaceful convergence of the peoples of the east with Russia’ [Bartol’d 1963a (1900): 610]. The Rozenites, Marr included, were particularly critical of Tsarist nationality policy which, they held, was unenlightened and based on the prejudices of missionary orientalists. It was also counter-productive since it was precisely through fostering a sense of local cultural identity that a Pan-Russian civic space could be created.

Curtin, as has already been seen, possessed a number of biases similar to this notion of Bartol’d’s of “know[ing] them better than they know themselves” and the interplay between European superiority and Romanticised preferencing of Asian cultures. Nonetheless, Curtin is of course far more contemptuous of the Buryats and their perceived backwardness than any of Russian Orientalists ever are.

Yet, if one looks closely at Brandist’s theory, it seems as if something paradoxical is taking place. Encouraging local cultural identity creates a “Pan-Russian civic space”. The product is a cohesive Russia of many cultures, ruled over by the Russian mother culture, and to get there all must pass under the lens of Russian academia. *Buryat-becoming* takes in Russian symbols and assumptions, and in turn *Russian-becoming* is infected by Buryat aspects. Thus, while Zhamtsarano’s experience is very different from that of Curtin’s, he does also echo similar Eurocentric biases very strongly, albeit in an inverted sense. A sort of “Occidentalism” begins to emerge, or the need to view Buryat culture through the lens of shared “nationality”.

The Buryats can be a people with their own culture, but only if Russian academia decides on the hegemonic methodology by which it is viewed. Zhamtsarano, wrapped up in the liminal “imperial situation” under the orientalist *dispositif* thought that he indeed did know the Buryats “better than they knew themselves”.

Ol'denburg and others exerted a massive influence on the young Zhamtsarano during his early years as a collector of Buryat traditions, and later when he was creating and managing educational programs in Mongolia between 1912 and 1930. Between 1912 and 1918, Zhamtsarano would be responsible for the establishment of the Mongolian Academy of Science in Kūriye (now: Ulaanbaatar) and public education in Mongolia. He was also put in charge of writing the platform in Khyakhta for the Mongolian Communist Revolution of 1921 (Rupen 1956: 132; Yusopova 2011: 203ff). However, Ol'denburg and Bartol'd did very little to assist with this in spite of Zhamtsarano's constant writing to them for help (Yusopova 2011). It was during his period as an educator in Mongolia, between 1912 and 1930, that Zhamtsarano published a great deal of his 1903-6 transcriptions of Buryat *ül'ger* in six volumes under the title *Obraztsy Narodnoy Slovesnosti Mongol'skikh Plemen* (Samples from the Folk Literature of the Mongolian Peoples). Throughout this whole period Zhamtsarano continued to be involved in Buryat reform movements such as educational efforts in Mongolia patronised by the Tsarist regime and scholars such as Ol'denburg in St. Petersburg from 1911 to 1917, the Buryat organisation *Burnatskom* in 1917, and the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party from 1920 to 1930. More will be said on this in the next chapter.

Nonetheless, in the first decade of the century the young Zhamtsarano seems to have easily appealed to what Ol'denburg and others *wanted* to believe about the Buryats and the “Pan-Russian civic space” they dreamed of. As Vera Tolz (2011: 121-2) explains, the main beliefs that these orientalists held were that the Irkutsk Buryats had a strong affection for Buddhism (when they did not) and that by educating people like Zhamtsarano they were helping to create a Buryat intelligentsia that would be able to make the transition from disorganised *inorodtsy* (minorities) towards national culture. To Zhamstarano, such a culture had to be Buddhist and possess a modern written language with a Latin alphabet. When elites in Irkutsk asked too many questions about the progress of this ideal in the hinterland around Irkutsk, Zhamtsarano simply called his Buryat detractors police spies, and thinkers like Ol'denburg and Shternberg accepted this without question.

In 1905 a wave of peasant rebellions and mutinies swept across the Russian Empire after the loss of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). The outcome of this First Russian Revolution (1905-7) was the establishment of a State Duma and constitution in 1906, but many minorities desired much more and began to develop conscious revolutionary and nationalist aspirations for the first time. Educated Buryat elites in Chita in Transbaikalia, and also some in Irkutsk in solidarity, attempted to give voice to nationalism and modernisation to deal with this crisis of the “steppe dumas”, but very little was agreed between them on this (Yegunov 1963, 1970; Basaev 2015 pt 1). As Rupen (1959: 162 cf. Soni 2007: 54-5) has aptly written:

Politically active Irkutsk Buryats tended more to take an active part in *Russian* political parties; [while] the Transbaikal Buryats stressed to a greater extent *Mongolian* self-consciousness and formed Mongolian political groups and associations. The strongest and most active Mongolian nationalists were Transbaikal Buryats.

Those in the latter category included Zhamtsarano as well as fellow Western-educated Buryats Bazar Baradin, Mikhayl N. Bogdanov and Elbegdorzhо Rinchino. They all began to develop their own ideas about the future direction of the Buryats. Zhamtsarano (1906, 1907) and Bogdanov (1907) utilised the journal *Sibirskie voprosy* (Siberian Questions) to outline a series of proposed reforms to Buddhism and Buryat political representation. Some very interesting observations concerning the differences between Zhamtsarano and Bogdanov’s visions of the future for the Buryats are explored by I. N. Shagdurova (2010: 227-9). For Zhamtsarano the question of Buryat culture and its self-preservation always begins with Buddhism. Zhamtsarano (1907: 8, 20-21) declares that “Buddhism in the eyes of the people is a refuge for the national spirit, but Orthodoxy - a symbol of Russification and violence.” Bogdanov found this more than a little wrong-headed, at very least because the Western Buryats did not have a strong tradition of Buddhism and largely remained shamanic. However, Bogdanov’s interest was not that of preserving Western Buryat culture, rather almost the opposite. He was a Marxist, long before Zhamtsarano ever attempted to adapt his own ideas to such thinking. Bogdanov (1907: 9, 43) declares:

It is necessary to understand that we do not live in the Middle Ages, when every small national group was able to live within its own cell totally isolated from the outside world, but in the 20th

c., when the process of capitalist development is destroying almost all differences of nationality, which cannot even be protected by the Chinese steppes.

Zhamtsarano (1907: 10, 18) countered that there are things that motivate a people aside from capitalism – religion and artistic spirit. Bogdanov seems to have found this naïve, and, in an article titled *Pessimizm na Buryatskoy Pochve* (Pessimism on Buryat Soil) announced that within a hundred years the Buryats and other small nationalities would be crushed by global capitalism. Something had to be done in order to adapt to this situation. Perhaps this “pessimism”, a hundred years on, might well seem a little prophetic, even darkly ironic. The Buryats would have to pass through the great upheavals and cultural amnesia of communism only to arrive in the post-soviet period in a world of rapid globalisation that has only brought the increased disappearance of language and traditions.

But what was Zhamtsarano to do with cultural pessimism like this? Zhamtsarano (1907: 8, 16) retorts with his first recorded mention of the concept of “Pan-Mongolism” – that the Irkutsk Buryats of Bogdanov were but a small part of a larger Mongolian culture which they should join in – including Buddhism and the Khalkha Mongolian language. He declared: “The Buryats, as part of the great Mongol people, which possesses a script and unique literature, are not able to break with their own history for the sake of international policy.”

Zhamtsarano’s term “Pan-Mongolism” was borrowed from Russian religious mystic Vladimir Sergeevich Solov’yov, who had utilised the term as the title for an 1894 poem that was hot off the presses in 1905 – the year Zhamtsarano reappropriated it. To Solov’yov “Pan-Mongolism” was something to be terrified of – the vision of the hordes of Asia rising up in a new Mongol Empire and destroying the Russian Empire: “Pan-Mongolism! The name is monstrous yet it caresses my ear as if filled with the portent of a grand divine fate...the third Rome will fall to dust, nor will there ever be a fourth”. Zhamtsarano took this old Russian fear of the “tartar yoke” and inverted it back towards notions of a Mongol nation based upon shared ethnicity, in line with similar concepts from the time such as Pan-Slavism, Pan-Turkism and other Romantic Nationalist movements (Basaev 2015a). He dreamt of a future state for Mongols, legitimated by the past Mongol Empire, but with progressive European values such as mass education, science and national culture. More will be said on this idea and its fate throughout this thesis, because as it developed among Buryats it came to be strongly connected

with Geser and Soviet paranoia in the 20s-40s that the Buryats wanted to secede to start their own nation separate from the USSR.

However, Bogdanov (1907: 11, 45) did not seem too think much of this “Pan-Mongolism” announced by Zhamtsarano. He found it to be little more than attachment to a past that belonged in the musty world of an ethnological archive. The Buryats should come out into the open and embrace the fresh air of socialism, so he declared. As Bogdanov’s friend, the historian N. N. Koz’min (1925: 12, 24) observed, in such arguments it was as though the Buryat “intelligentsia” was divided upon all too predictable lines, adapted from similar debates in Russia. On the one hand Zhamtsarano was simply retooling the Romantic nationalist position of the *slavyanophil* (slavophile) into that of a *mongolofil* (mongolophile). Bogdanov, on the other hand, was championing the position of the *zapadnik*, the supporter of global Western modernisation (in this case through Marxism).

There is nothing new about the positions in this debate. Both are deeply ingrained in the history of the European modernity and are inextricably entangled with one another. They are epitomised by the “culturalist” reaction of Johann Herder against the idea of global progress towards eurocentric Enlightenment expounded by Immanuel Kant. To Herder the diversity of world cultures had “not lived solely to manure the Earth with your ashes so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture” (cited in Williams 1976: 79). Herder was *the* instigator of slavophilia. An entire chapter of his *Outlines of the Philosophy of History of Man* ([1784-91] 1966: XVI.6: esp. 482-4) was devoted to the Slavic peoples. In this he prophesied a coming age in which the Slavic peoples would “wake from their long and heavy slumber, shake off their chains of slavery” and transform central and eastern Europe into an exemplary “Arcadia” of peace and prosperity. Just as importantly he called for the preservation of the “decaying remains” of Slavic epic and traditions and the study of in Slavic history. This announcement set in motion a massive chain reaction in Europe and Russia of slavophilic culturalism, both “Pan-Slavism” and more individual Slavic nationalist sentiments (Gajda 2013: 45ff).

Some of its symbols and their effects ricochet down to the *korenizatsia* (indigenisation) policy of the USSR, and some to visions of a pacific global multiculturalism today (especially seeing that the Romantic Herder believed all people to be brothers and had no love for the State

or empires).¹⁵ Others drift down through German Romanticism to exceptionalist culturalist myths such as Nazism and its *Volksgemeinschaft*. Zhamtsarano's "mongolophilia" is but one more mutation. It is the sort of idea which could *only* have been produced by a European education, yet by someone caught in the midst of Tolz's non-binary "imperial situation" – a simultaneous insider and outsider in the Late Imperial *dispositif*. Zhamtsarano's symbolisation of a *Buryat-becoming* is inextricably entangled in *Mongol-becomings*, *Slav-becomings* and *modernity-becomings*.

4. Collecting Epics.

The most important question is whether there was any political "Pan-Mongol" ideology behind Zhamtsarano's efforts to commit Buryat epics to paper and publish them. Sweet and Chakars (2010: 9) in their article on the political history of the Buryats, "Identity, Culture, Land and Language", claim that Zhamtsarano's publications of Manshuud's Geser epic was an "act of resistance using 'modern' tools." They not only link Zhamtsarano's efforts to transcribe epics with his political activities regarding Buryat nationalism and social reform. They also position him at the head of a line of descent leading to contemporary post-colonial Buryat social activists writing in Russian. But what *were* Zhamtsarano's intentions at the time? How closely linked to his Pan-Mongolism were his efforts to take down Buryat epics?

The way in which Zhamtsarano (1918: xiii) represents the rationale behind his collection and publication of epics is his personal concern about the disappearance of the Buryat epic due to the aforementioned threat of an "influx of civilisation". As Vera Tolz (2011: 164) has shown in her work on Zhamtsarano's correspondence, in 1903 he wrote to his teacher Ol'denburg telling him that he believed current imperial policy to be no less than attempts to "weaken" and "annihilate" the Buryats who were "under attack from all sides." Zhamtsarano very clearly believed Buryat culture and, just as importantly, Buryat political organisation, was in jeopardy. However, there is never any intimation that the publication of these epics was intended to stir up collective Buryat national identity. In the early twentieth century, let us recall, there was no written Buryat language. Zhamtsarano was collecting and publishing material for a scholarly Russian audience of orientalist.

¹⁵ See Isaiah Berlin (1976: 230-33, 240-4) on the contradictory attitudes Herder possessed towards nationalism and the State.

Zhamtsarano's interest in transcribing *ül'gernüüd* began with a personal interest in his Khori Buryat relatives' epics during his teenage years in Aginsk. He had especially strong childhood memories of local versions of the Geser cycle and made a few early attempts to write down some of the stories he heard (Rupen 1956: 131). Throughout his lifetime, from his studies and publication of Manshuud's tales of Geser and similar work on the written Mongolian Geser corpus, Zhamtsarano was perhaps *the* most authoritative figure on Geser, resulting in some ten epics being published by Zhamtsarano over a period of some seventeen years under the aforementioned series title *Obraztsy Narodnoy Slovesnosti Mongol'skikh Plemen* (Samples from the Folk Literature of the Mongolian Peoples). The first was the Alar Buryat Yolbon Shalbagai's version of the popular epic *Alamzhi Mergen* (1913, 5297 lines, from August 1903), then in 1914 Manshuud Emegeev's story *Yerensey* and a short *ül'ger* (1868 lines) from another Kuda Buryat, Botooskhi Burlaev, called *Ayduray Mergen*, also taken down in August 1903.¹⁶ In 1918 he published two different versions of the story of *Kha Oshir Khubun*, from Petruu Mikhanov (500 lines) and once again Yolbon Shalbykov (4365 lines) that had both been taken down in 1906. In 1930-1 Zhamtsarano finally published Manshuud's twenty-two thousand-line three-part Geser cycle as two tomes, counted as a single volume.

Whilst studying in Irkutsk as an undergraduate student in folklore in 1903, Zhamtsarano began making regular expeditions into the countryside around Irkutsk to record folktales and epics (Hatto 2000: 136-7). This project was patronised by the scholar A. D. Rudnev in Irkutsk and also the Russian Committee for the Exploration of Central and Eastern Asia in St. Petersburg. While Rudnev (1924, 1925) seems to have been interested in the epics and made both English and Russian translations of Zhamtsarano's material, the committee in St. Petersburg, for the most part, had little interest in this, but seemed to fund it out of curiosity and because of the emphasis on the precarity of the traditions. One doubts if they even knew much about the Tibetan epics of Ke-sar (on which close to nothing had been published at the time) or the Mongol Script Geser, of which there were only some German translations (Bergmann 1804: v. I. 249-361; Schmidt 1839).

¹⁶ Sanzheev and Novikov (1936) later published a Russian translation of *Alamzhi Mergen*. Poppe (1980) translated *Alamzhi Mergen*, *Yerensey* and *Ayduray Mergen* into German, published in a single volume. Rudnev made both an English (1924) and Russian (1925) translation of Mikhanov's version of *Kha Oshir Khubun*.

Thus, it was remarkably easy for someone like Zhamtsarano to become *the de facto* expert on Geser and Mongol epic in general at the time, quite simply because no one else was or had the linguistic skills. As his patron Rudnev (1918) would recount in astonished admiration: “Since 1903, Tsyben Zhamtsaranovich Zhamtsarano has undertaken the collection of Mongolian epic tales. During his numerous trips to various Mongolian peoples he has managed to collect such an astonishing number of texts that no other collector has gathered, apparently, from any other people.” For the next thirty years Zhamtsarano would continue to do the footwork for this, recorded epics, published them and copied old manuscripts. There is even a Mongol Script Geser corpus still called “Tseveen’s version”, named after him because of his reception and copying of it in Kūriye (Ulaanbaatar) in 1914 (Rinchino 1960b).

As has been stated several times, at the dawn of the twentieth century there was no written Buryat language of any dialect.¹⁷ Zhamtsarano at first tried taking down epics in the Mongol script. However, he soon gave up on this and instead settled for a “Russian academic script” made by modifying Cyrillic with the addition of a number of Latin letters (Khomonov 1961-4. vol I: 227ff; Hatto 2000: 136).¹⁸ Curtin simply seems to have taken them down in Russian and invented his own orthography for proper nouns where necessary.¹⁹ It is imperative

¹⁷ In 1910 a schoolteacher called Nikolay Amagaev and the young nationalist scholar Elbedorzho Rinchino (who gave himself the *nom de plume* Alamzhi-Mergen after a hero from a popular Buryat *ül’ger* which Manshuud also knew) published a small pamphlet entitled “*Novyy mongolo-buryatskiy alfavit*” (New Mongolo-Buryat Alphabet). In this they attempted to create a written Buryat language and literary culture based on the Oirat “clear script”. However, nothing came of this, as there was no popular interest and at this point one could only print newspapers with express permission of the Imperial Russian Censor (Graber 2012: 127). Nonetheless, one should note that Kim and Boldanov (1994) mention a bilingual Russian and Buryat newspaper called *Zhizn’ na vostochnoy okraïne/ Züün Zügei Baidal* (Life on the Eastern Frontier), which had a short run until it was closed by the Imperial Censor in 1897. It is unknown whether there could have been other attempts at creating Buryat language news sources at this time.

¹⁸ Hamayon (2004: 295) states that Zhamtsarano took down Manshuud’s Geser “in Russian spelling”, which does not quite fully convey Zhamtsarano’s modifications to the Cyrillic script. These included the use of “j” /j/ instead of Cyrillic letters and ‘ instead of the soft sign (intro to Zhamtsarano 2011: 7-8). Zhamtsarano (ibid. 143-5, 154-6) also record several fragments of short epics using this script. It is interesting to note that Zhamtsarano (2011: 235) describes in his diary on the 13th of November 1906 how he taught the rich Western Buryat Pavel Kholodov’s son Semyon Pavlov “in Buryat letters” using his own Cyrillic system. It was while he was doing this that Zhamtsarano received news that Manshuud would again be ready to recommence the second and third parts of his Geser cycle in three days’ time.

¹⁹ Curtin never discusses the necessity of having to invent orthography for his transcriptions. It would not seem that he would have taken the myths down on paper in the language they were delivered to him. Multiple spellings appear in Curtin’s transcription of the names of characters and places in the tales or appear simply to be very rough phonetic transcriptions, which are nonetheless still legible to anyone familiar with the Buryat language or other recordings from Manshuud that reuse similar material. For example, the elided Gal Tulaan and the more accurate Galta Ulaan as titles for the Buryat smithing deity (Curtin 1909: 152, 156, 161, 183). Also note that *Gazada Dalai*, which actually means External Sea is translated as The Lateral Sea (163). Hamayon (1990) follows European

to note that in spite of his useful invention of an early written Buryat language, Zhamtsarano's publications were made for a very small Buryat-reading academic audience without a Russian translation. It was only later scholars such as Khomonov (1961-4, 1972) took it upon themselves to print Cyrillic Buryat and Russian parallel texts of Manshuud's epics.²⁰

Before Curtin and Zhamtsarano relatively little of any Buryat oral epics had been committed to paper. One Khori Buryat oral epic had been taken down in the 1870s, *Ereldei-Khan*, by Vladimir Yumsunov (Neklyudov 1987: 24; cf. Rudnev 1913-4 No. I-III), though it would not be published until 1913. The Orthodox missionary Nikolay I. Zatoplyayev recorded a version of the story of the hero *Altan Shagay Mergen* during his years among the Alar Buryats.²¹ This was later published in an 1889 collection of folktales, coedited with the early Buryat scholar Matvey Khangalov. Several fragments and episodes concerning Geser's battles with the monsters Lobsogoldoy-Khara and Dölmö Khaan had been taken down in the 1880s-90s by Khangalov (*ap.* Potanin 1894: 44-130), including from his own father and also the reciter Petkov Tüshemilov, but no "complete" Buryat cycle of the hero Geser existed on paper.²²

But why had there been so little interest in the epics by scholars up to this point? Roberte Hamayon (1990: 183-4, 2006: 24 n. 18) claims that this was because the Buryats believed that it was taboo for outsiders to be told the *ül'ger*. By the 1940s such taboos had fallen apart and thus

Classical geographical tradition, beginning with the ancient Greeks, in assuming that the external world-sea must be the "Ocean". The name for a sea spirit, Aberga Zgohun is left untranslated (Curtin 1909: 163). This represents the Buryat *Abarga Zagahan* = giant fish. This being appears again in the version of *Yerensei* taken down by Zhamtsarano from Manshuud (1918: lines 3465-3515). Also note that the daughter of Galta Ulaan is referred to not by the actual name of Gaguurai Nagoon as she is in Zhamtsarano's *Abay Geser* (eg. line 5437), but as Apha (Curtin 1909: 163). This is actually just the Buryat turn for wife *abkha(i)*.

²⁰ It must be emphasised here that the Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryat language was never an official written dialect of Buryat in the Soviet Era. Nor was it Zhamtsarano's dialect, which was Khori. Both Zhamtsarano's (1918, 1930-1) and Khomonov's (1961-4, 1972) versions of Manshuud's epics contain irregular and multiple spellings for words. Even the 1995 edition (ed. Tulokhonov) of Manshuud's *Abay Geser Khübiün* seems uncertain of the spelling and meaning of certain words. One should note that in 1931 the "official" dialect was that of the Selenge Buryats using the Latin script. This eventually failed because although it was very close to Khalkha Mongolian, to most Western Buryats it was too distant and almost incomprehensible.

²¹ Zatoplyayev himself is a fascinating figure. Vladimir Baraev (2013) discusses some of the description given of him by A. P. Chaivanov, a teacher of mathematics who worked in Alarsk region from 1900 to 1950. Zatoplyayev was a Christian missionary who built the first stone church in the region, based upon the form of a four-pillar yurt. He may or may not have been an ethnic Buryat. Zatoplyayev seems to have convinced the local *taisha* (prince) to have the local Buryat population forcibly mass-baptised, twenty people at a time. He learned Alar Buryat well and even attempted to translate the bible into the language.

²² These Geser episodes were later published independently by Khangalov ([1903] 1965: 1-44, 255-75) in his *Balaganskiy Sbornik* (Balagansk Notebook).

it became possible for *ül'ger* to be written down in large quantity (see chapter two) – just as they were disappearing. However, no reliable or even valid primary sources for confirming such a notion seems to exist.²³ An alternative version of this sort of argument posits the breaking of “taboo” much earlier. Hatto (2000: 132-6) seems to think that there was no scholarly interest in the *ül'ger* until the late nineteenth century, not because outsiders were not interested or were living increasingly closer to Buryats, but that the Buryat social systems were beginning to break down at this time and with them taboos towards outsiders.

Nonetheless, neither form of this taboo thesis appears necessarily valid. Both argue from an *absence* of evidence. If there was a taboo, then why would Manshuud have risked having not snippets of his stories, but thousands of lines worth of epic taken down by two academics? Curtin and Zhamtsarano were both outsiders, the latter in a far more complex manner, because while he was “Buryat”, he was not related to anyone on the West side of Baikal, spoke an entirely different dialect and was Russian educated. Curtin may have been rude to the locals in his demands for Manshuud and others to work for him by sharing their culture, but Zhamtsarano amidst recordings was attempting to convince Western Buryats that he “knew them better than they knew themselves” – that they were Buddhists and “Mongols” when this was simply not how they saw the world. Perhaps it was down to the social networks, or “imperial situation”, Andrey Mikhaylov was involved in as “middle man” between Russian society and Western Buryat communities around Ust'-Orda. With both Curtin and Zhamtsarano, Mikhaylov seems to have been more than willing to let outsiders know about Manshuud's abilities and the locals do not seem to have minded this. But evidence of an exclusive “taboo” on the *ül'ger* is never encountered. It simply seems to be that aside from the globe-trotting folklorist Curtin, who had already been interested in the Mongolic peoples, there was no real interest until Russian-educated Buryats emerged to write down the epics due to the orientalist values that their education had given them to commit epic to paper.

²³ One reference Hamayon gives includes Heissig's ([1970] 1980: 100) experiences amongst the Khalkha Mongols, in which possessors of Geser manuscripts did not want to lend them out to scholars for long periods as they considered the texts and their recitation to protect the herds and a reference. The only other reference included turns out to indicate an anecdote about one Buryat reciter concerned with his refusal to sing an episode of the Geser cycle concerning Geser's fight with the particularly evil monster Sherem Minaata (Ulanov 1968: 9f). This should be contrasted with the reciter Papa Tüshemilov's concerns over the taboo of forgetting the name of the wife of the monster Gal Dülme Khan (Baldaev *ap.* Tüshemilov 2000: 222 n. 1). Certain monsters might be taboo, but telling Geser or other *ül'ger* in general does not seem to have been.

5. Meeting Manshuud.

The great majority of material taken down by Zhamtsarano (1914, 1930-1) between 1903 and 1906 was from Manshuud Emegeev. Zhamtsarano, like Curtin, recorded a three part twenty-two thousand-line Geser cycle from Manshuud. This was so colossal that it took two separate sittings as Zhamtsarano (2011: 233-5) tells us in his now published *Putevye Dnevnik* (Travelling Diaries). One session of uninterrupted recitation lasted from the 2nd to the 5th of November, 1906, and another later in the month, from the 16th to the 17th. This was not the “same” story as told to Curtin, by any means. Curtin’s two stories of *Gesir* (*Abay Geser Khübüün*) and *Ashir Bogda* (*Oshor Bogdo*) reappear, though they do diverge substantially from one another because they are improvised “chain-type” epics.²⁴ The main difference, however, in the version of Geser Zhamtsarano took down from Manshuud, is that instead of the *Iron Hero*, whose story Manshuud seems to have improvised for Curtin once he had inserted him into *Gesir* as a minor character, another son of Geser is added: *Khürin Altay Khübüün* (The Boy Khürin Altay).

In mid-June 1905 Zhamtsarano met with Manshuud for the first time and recorded the epic *Yeren taba nahatai Yerensey yekhe übegen Untan Duuray Abakhay khoyor* (The ninety-five year-old elderly man Yerensey and his wife Untan Duuray, 9521 lines, Zhamtsarano 1914). This story has already been introduced under Curtin’s title of *Yerente Khaan and His Son Sogto*,²⁵ but perhaps some explanation of it is in order. *Yerensey* is a “chain epic” like the rest of Manshuud’s stories, but it is one organised around two nodes: the old man Yerensey’s adventures, and then, following his murder, his son Sogtos’s adventures to win a princess who has a magic potion capable of bringing Yerensey back from the dead. Sogto engages in all the typical challenges to win wives and impress fathers in law that Manshuud’s other heroes engage in – retrieving feathers from *Kherdig* (Garuda), chaining the mighty yellow dog, and so on. One wonders how Zhamtsarano (2011: 163-4) and Mikhaylov must have felt when at the outset, on

²⁴ The name Oshor/Ashir/Kha Oshir seems to have operated as a floating signifier for heroes in early twentieth century Kuda. I have already noted that Zhamtsarano in 1918 published two versions of the story *Khaa Oshor Khübüün* from the Kuda region. In his short *Materialy po Geseru* (Material on Geser) from 1942 S. P. Baldaev (fond 36 op 1. d. 191) writes that among the *ül’gernüüd* known by one Oshir Biltaev of the Togotskiy *ulus* there was an *Oshor Bogdo Khaan*. He also states that Biltaev knew *Altan Shagay Mergen*, another common “floating signifier” for epic heroes, which is utilised by Manshuud (Curtin 1909: 232-246). Indeed, none of these “Oshor” tales have much in common at all, except for the generic name of a hero which could be attached to “chain” epics by different storytellers.

²⁵ Lörincz (1976) and Poppe (1980) have both translated Zhamtsarano’s recording of *Yerensey* into Hungarian and German respectively. Zhamtsarano’s *Yerensey* is very close to that dictated to Curtin by Manshuud.

the 11th of June, they were told by Manshuud that it would take three to four days reciting non-stop to give the *ül'ger*, and perhaps fifteen whole days for Geser! Manshuud was not exaggerating - he recited *Yerensey* night and day without stopping from the 11th to the 15th of June. Although Zhamtsarano says that by this stage both the “rhapsode” and himself were exhausted, Manshuud still proceeded to give him a small taste of the start of Geser, promising that he would tell the whole thing next year.

Zhamtsarano (2011: 165), immediately realising the uniqueness and length of recitation that Manshuud was capable of as a storyteller, called *Yerensey* one of the “*samykh vyderzhannykh*” (most sustained) products of Buryat folklore he'd ever come across. No other Buryat *ül'gershen* he was to meet ever even came close to this sort of feat. As one might see, Manshuud represented a massive repository not merely for stories, but for the ability to generate them in formats up to tens of thousands of lines long through improvisation and elaboration on the motifs and “multiforms” he knew. The tales told to Curtin do not appear to have been anywhere near as long or complex. One should note that the four days for *Yerensey* alone, was the same length of time taken for all of the ten non-Geser *ül'gernüüd* Curtin received from Manshuud. Clearly Manshuud could compress and string out stories depending upon the context and demand of the audience. These *ül'gernüüd* are, after all, “chain-type” epics that simply bolt on more episodes.²⁶

The following year, from the 2nd and 5th of November 1906, Manshuud recited the first two parts of his tripartite *Abay Geser* cycle, entitled *Abay Geser Khübüün* and *Oshor Bogdo* all in one sitting. Somehow after this Manshuud still had enough strength left to also tell Zhamtsarano (2011: 233) a “short poem” called *Yaguurai Mergen*, which sadly does not seem to have ever been published. From Zhamtsarano's (2011: 233) travelling diary during the recording of Manshuud's Geser cycle one may read:

²⁶ With access to the Buryat one can clearly see that Manshuud's *Abay Geser* cycle contains a great deal of regularly recycled epithets and multiforms that produce “chains”. These include the hero waking up and washing himself in the morning (AG. 1054-7, 3457-62, 10452-8, 13465-9 cf. *Yerensey* 1195-1205) or the beating of the drums of the north and south to announce births and marriages (AG. 3731-4, 4041-4, 5345-8, 5885-9, 20985-995 cf. *Yerensey* 1000-4). Others include the setting out of a feast (AG. 1855-1860, 6753-8, 14,003-71 etc. *Yerensey* 970-982), or the hero arming himself (968-1245, 19567-20003 etc. *Yerensey* 526-550). These are used and reused, but often with slight inversions of lines. Some sections of Manshuud's Geser cycles are very repetitive. A clear example of the extreme forms of this is *Oshor Bogdo* traversing two different groups of snakes in a row by pretending to be one to outwit them (AG. 11395-464), or the multiple times Khürin Altai has to go and find monsters' external souls possessed in chests by their grandmothers whilst the monster goes to heaven to steal the hero's soul (ibid.15727-16004, 19381-20431).

2nd of November. I began to take down Geser from the rhapsode Manshud from Ust'...3rd. We continue with the poem. 4th-5th November. We continue day and night to take down poems. Manshud's song resonates sonorously deep into the middle of the night, keeping us from sleep. Yet, we remain tirelessly with him, amazed at his endurance. His state of exhaustion was horrible. His hands could hardly stir. Manshud's tongue could hardly move.

Zhamtsarano (2011: 233-5) describes Manshud in this state of total exhaustion, even "paralysation", several times during the recording of Geser. However, the fact was that Manshud, even with his horrifying state of exhaustion, was in no way done. Later on the 16th Manshud recited in a single day the final part of Geser, the story of *Khürin Altay*. Yet, two days after finishing Geser, Manshud recited another *ül'ger* that continued from the 18th and 20th of November 1906. This was the story of *Yabagan tümer teregte Khara Bukhyn khübüün* (The Black Bull Boy with his Iron Travelling-Cart, 4940 lines). This was not published until 1972 by M. N. Khomonov long after Zhamtsarano's lifetime.²⁷ For all this material Zhamtsarano and Mikhaylov paid Manshud twenty rubles for his trouble. The scholars themselves were incredibly exhausted after the ordeal, but what they had captured on paper was and remains a wealth of material from a single reciter unparalleled in the history of Buryat epic.

At the end of *Khürin Altay* Manshud invokes what is traditionally called the *üdeshelge* (ending) of the epic. However, rather than completion what this ritualised section conveys is the incompleteness of the cycle: "We will ask those who can sing it! And tomorrow we will have it told!" (AG. line 22,074). This could quite easily have meant that for Manshud he could have kept on going indefinitely, had he the energy, and even then probably finished with a similar open-ended *üdeshelge*. The fact is that in the first decade of last century this skill was

²⁷ *Bukhyn Khara* is a very simple story (and short for Manshud – only 4715 lines). It contains no winning of wives by impressing potential fathers in law or female characters at all. Obviously borrowing from Geser the hero begins in heaven and is told by the gods he has to descend to Earth in a mortal body, though little reason for this is given (11-300). On Earth he engages in the usual combats with *mangadkhay* families found in Manshud's other tales, and is aided by his friend the *Gunig Shara Nokhoy* (yellow dog that frequently appears in Manshud's stories) on several occasions (900, 2791-7, 3794). The story finally ends with a colossal wrestling match between the hero and the wrestler Melyeen Bükhe before the gods inform them that they are both brothers (4095-4232). They give up their fight and have a feast. This latter plot is found with little difference in Manshud's tale of the *Iron Hero* (Curtin 1909: 174-7). However there the wrestler brother Milen Bukhe only meets with the hero because the Dongin ruler, a potential father in law, sends for him to kill the hero who has taken on the form of a filthy old man engaged in the suit for his daughter. When the gods tell them they're brothers the wrestler pretends that the Iron Hero killed the old man, and, as a reward, the Dongin gives his daughter to the Iron Hero in marriage.

immensely rare. As Zhamtsarano (1918: xxvi) was to write: “*ül’ger*, as a general rule, should be laid down in verse, and if one has to hear an *ül’ger* in the form of a prosaic retelling (*v forme prozaicheskogo pereskaza*), it means that the tradition has not been observed (*soblyudena*), that the *ül’ger* has begun to be forgotten.”

The *ül’ger* could only reach such colossal size as it did with Manshuud because there are strong poetic patterns to its construction – multiforms and stock passages can be recycled and improvised around to create the “chain” character of the epic. By the 1940s, when efforts were made to gather as much Buryat Geser material as possible, very few of the reciters could sing or tell the story in verse. Manshuud was one of the last masters of this impressive skill, though of course there is insufficient evidence to substantiate just how common or uncommon such feats might have been in the nineteenth century. Perhaps only the *ül’gershen* Al’for Vasil’ev’s fifty-thousand-word rendition of *Abay Geser Bogdo Khaan*, recorded in 1944 (published 1995), outdoes Manshuud in size. Yet, by drawing attention to mere physical feat and mere length of the poem perhaps one would be putting *too* much emphasis on an archetypal image of Buryat epic as something which had degenerated from an imagined 19th c. “Golden Age” when there were Manshuuds and Vasil’evs everywhere. They may well have always been exceptions – simply the “chain-epic” taken to its logical extreme.

6. The Rhapsode, Shaman, Illiterate.

But how did Zhamtsarano attempt to represent the seeming uniqueness of Manshuud and his recitational feats? Zhamtsarano only goes into detail in one place regarding his interpretation of the figure of the *ül’gershen* and it is very interesting indeed because he overcodes it with a number of other symbols. This is in the Russian preface to his 1918 publication of the two versions of *Kha-Oshir Khubun* in Buryat. Here Zhamtsarano (1918: xiii) curiously represents the *ül’gershen* as closely echoing the shaman in Buryat culture: “The *rhapsode*, like the shaman, is a kind of inspired poet with a stencil (*vdokhnovennyy poet po trafateru*),²⁸ but there are always some variations, depending upon the mood and the situation.” By “stencil” what is

²⁸ Nikolaus Poppe (1980: intro section xiv) translates Zhamtsarano’s words into German as “*Der Rhapsode, ebenso wieder Schamane, ist auf seine Art ein begeisterter Dichter. Obwohl er im Singen einer gewissen Schablone folgt, so bringt er je nach seiner Stimmung und der äußeren Umgebung verschiende eigene Varianten herein*” (The rhapsode, just like a shaman, is an inspired poet in his own way. Although he follows a certain pattern in singing, he follows different variants depending on his mood and the external environment).

meant here is a pre-made form of ritualistic action around which the shaman and poet improvise. Zhamtsarano then expands the link between the shaman and *ül'gershen* (ibid. xiv) as follows:

As soon as you let a singing rhapsodist or shaman stop, even for a moment, he gets lost (*sob'yetsya*), starts to get confused, and his inspiration disappears (*vdokhnovenie yego izcheznet*). If he succeeds in continuing his narrative, it will already then be in an altered form, and one is forced to write a variant, and again another variant etc.

Apparently, this problem of getting confused was not uncommon. Zhamtsarano (ibid.) also emphasises that “good” shamans and *ül'gershed* who could sustain their stencilled “inspiration” were hard to find and that there were a lot of “bad” ones with relatively little knowledge or experience. The central link for Zhamtsarano’s comparison between these two Buryat institutions was the “inspired” mental state of the reciter and shaman (*vdokhnovennyi, vdokhnovenie, vdokhnovenost'*).²⁹ Moreover, one might emphasise that during his journey into rural Irkutsk in winter 1906, when Manshuud’s *Abay Geser* was recorded, Zhamtsarano was also engaged in ethnographic work looking for shamans too. In fact, when he was recording Manshuud in November 1906, Zhamtsarano was staying with Pavel Kholodov, a rich Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryat, because he claimed to know many shamans and might be able to get in contact with them. Most importantly Zhamtsarano (2011: 234) records on the 6th of November a meeting with a local shaman, in which Manshuud was involved. This was the day after the first *Abay Geser* recitation. Zhamtsarano writes that just as the shaman was going into a trance “prior to shamanising, the people, with Manshuud at its head, gathered and like a chorus sang to invite the spirits, so that they would enter into the shaman and tell them about things seen and heard”. From this it clearly appears that Manshuud’s ability as a singer was very much

²⁹ When I first read the only text I had available of Zhamtsarano’s 1918 introduction, the 1980 German translation by Nikolaus Poppe, I was immediately drawn to Poppe’s choice of words to translate “his inspiration disappears” (*vdokhnovenie yego izcheznet*) – “...und sein Elan verflüchtet sich”. ‘Elan’ here is a relatively uncommon borrowing from French *élan* and means vigour or vital power. Thus, I wondered if Zhamtsarano possessed some secret “vitalist” intent in his description, especially seeing the fact that he seems to have known the at that time very influential works of the philosopher Henri Bergson. In a diary entry for the 13th October 1923, the soviet musicologist S. A. Kondrat'yev notes upon meeting with Zhamtsarano in Mongolia that he was very well-read in European literature, including Bergson (Vasil'ev 1998: 110). I think one will sadly have to put this down to a bad translation on Poppe’s part.

recognised by the local people, although, so Zhamtsarano adds, they were all rather disappointed with the vague prophesies of the coming year that the shaman and his spirits provided.

However, the fact is that the shaman is “inspired” by spirits. No records suggest that Buryats have ever regarded the *ül'gershen* as possessed by spirits while he recites. Moreover, available anecdotal information does not make this any clearer. Sharakshinova (1991: 13-4) for instance records several reminiscences of Manshuud by Khartu Khabadaev, his nephew.³⁰ As with Zhamtsarano, Khartu describes Manshuud's recitational habits with the word “*vdokhnovenie*” (inspiration):

My uncle knew a lot of *ül'gers*, he told them willingly, and did not just tell them, but performed them by singing. Before he began singing an *ül'ger*, uncle Manshuud obligingly pronounced the call (*prizyvanie*) (to whom it was addressed, I do not know). After the call, as if entering into ecstasy (*budto voydya v ekstaz*), he began to sing the *ül'ger*. The singing of the *ül'ger* began with special sounds, expressing the singer's inspiration (*vdokhnovenie*): “Ehee...Hee! (Sharakshinova 1991: 13).

As one may see, Khartu had little conception of what religious meaning might lie behind the ritual of the “call”. The rapid uprooting and loss of Buryat culture in the past century has erased the memory of what the intention was. Perhaps Manshuud did not know and had merely inherited the ritual when he had learned how to recite. In the same way Bair Dugarov (2016: 215) notes that Manshuud's niece G. Kh. Akhayeva described the *ül'gershen's* abilities as “*Saanahaa kheliüüldog bayгаа*” ([something] from the other side made [him] speak). However, yet again this is a very opaque comment. Dugarov would see in this a “magico-mythological complex” linking the shaman and the recitation of the tales of Geser.³¹ Perhaps modern Buryats

³⁰ Sharakshinova (1991: 13-4) tells us that Khartu Khabadaev had learned his mannerisms of recitation from Manshuud, such as reciting with eyes closed. But most strangely, he had added to this by the fact that unlike his teacher he could not sit and sing. It would make him “speak awkwardly (*nelovko*) and no words would come”.

³¹ The best Dugarov (2016: 213-4) can summon is that the later Geser reciter Pyookhon Petrov was from a Western Buryat people called the Khangin, who were famous for their shamans in the 19th c., and that he himself was “considered a recognised authority in the field of shamanic poetry” (*schitalsya priznannym avtoritetom v oblasti shamanskoy poezii*). As to what this actually means seems uncertain, for Petrov was not a shaman, even if the scholar S. P. Baldaev (1961: 35-6), who had met a number of them in the past, described his fluid storytelling ability that was often accompanied by libations to the Tengeri (Bur. *khaylga, duhaalga*), with the words: “I had never met such a storyteller and so knowledgeable person (*znatok*) about shamanism like P. Petrov.” As to an actual example, one not given by Dugarov, perhaps one should note the fact that the day just before beginning to take

would like to believe such an idea in order to make up for the loss of tradition, but the truth is that we just do not seem to know.

Dugarov (2016: 212) also portrays Zhamtsarano as representing both the shaman and *ül'gershen* as the same due to them being: “*nositeli sakral'nogo slova i drevnikh znaniy*” (deliverers of holy words and ancient lore). However, this is not in fact the case. Zhamtsarano never says this, as easy to assume as the comparison might seem. As discussed above, it is “inspiration” and improvisation that leads Zhamtsarano’s comparison. What is actually the case is that rather than rendering the *ül'gershen* a kind of shaman, Zhamtsarano seems instead to collapse the figure of the shaman into the Eurocentric model of the possessed poet that goes back to the Homeric rhapsodes, and which became an integral symbol of “bardic nationalism” following Johann Herder. Perhaps the fullest and most influential vision Zhamtsarano (1918: xiv) produces of the figure of the Buryat *ül'gershen* is the following:

When the rhapsode gives forth his *ül'ger*, having already organised some fresh water to have handy so that he may drink from it from time to time, he then takes his seat, half closing his eyes, and leaving behind everything in favour of the *milieu* of his epic poem, drawling the words, he begins to sing. And, as he progresses, it becomes much more profound, presenting the listeners with one image after another, passing from event to event with amazing composure and self-control, in spite of his being inspired (*vdokhnovenost'*) and in spite of his very genuine passion. The listeners echo him as a chorus at those places where it is necessary to do so.

The utilisation of the terms rhapsode (*rapsod*) and chorus (*chor*) in Zhamtsarano’s descriptions of Manshuud, rather than any Buryat terms such as *ül'gershen* (epic reciter) or the rather neutral Russian *skazitel'* (storyteller) is indeed very curious. As has already been noted, when Zhamtsarano describes Manshuud, even in June 1905 before meeting him, he refers to him as a “rhapsode” – a word about as uncommon and arcane in Russian as it is in English. *Rapsod* and *chor* are Greek words, adapted to Russian, and now they are adapted to the Buryats. Zhamtsarano, writing for an educated Russian audience, simply perpetuates a chain of Eurocentric imaginings of the epic poet. Thirteen years on from 1905 the symbol of “rhapsode”

down Manshuud’s *Abay Geser*, Zhamtsarano (2011: 233) had recorded the tale *Üshin Khara Khübüün* (The Only Child Black Boy), from the twenty-seven-year-old “*nachinayushchiy shaman*” (beginning shaman), Lazar’ Bardakanov. However, once again there appears to be no necessary link here between being a shaman and being an epic reciter.

still had an important significance for Zhamtsarano in relation to Manshuud and Buryat epic reciters in general. To this day one often finds it used copiously to describe the figure of the Buryat *ül'gershen* by academics due to Zhamtsarano's influence (Sanzheev 1936a: vii-xlvi; Tudenov 1958 *passim*; Tulokhonov 1995: 512-7; Dugarov 2009: 71, 2016: 212-8).

But what is most interesting is how Manshuud the “rhapsode” is described as having “amazing composure and self-control, in spite of being inspired and in spite of his very genuine passion.” How does one rationalise this curious contradiction of control and lack of control? Beginning at least with Plato (*Phaedrus* 245, 249) the western oral poet, the “rhapsode”, has been celebrated as someone mad, someone not in control of themselves, and for that reason superior in their art than a sober storyteller. Plato even characterised the oral poet as a possessed conduit radiating divine power to the audience like the field of a magnetic lodestone (*Ion* 533-4). This *furor poeticus* (poetic madness) has been an enduring assumption in Western understandings of poetry, as something divine, which the audience too participate in by being present for it (Faas 1986:138-41; Burwick 1996: 22). However, Plato (*Republic* X.595-608) also recanted this, and pejorated the “rhapsodes” as instead conscious inventors of falsehood. Thus, the poet is caught between divinity and mendacity, the teller of transcendental truth from beyond the person and the conscious fiction-maker. It is this which Zhamtsarano seems to have inherited and with which he seems to be attempting to overcode Manshuud and his traditions for a eurocentric audience of Russian orientalists. However, certain problems come with this.

The most obvious is that Buryat culture was oral culture, whereas for the majority of Western history epic poetry has been largely a written phenomenon, aware that it has a superior origin in oral performance. Plato dwelt in a still largely oral, or more correctly “vocal” culture as Ruch (1977: 303) has termed in it relation to her influential work on mediaeval Japanese court poets, in which writing and high oral literacy coincided amongst elite groups. In ancient Athens as well as the rhapsodes, there were other groups such as the sophist reciters of speeches such as the titular figure Phaedrus of Plato's dialogue, who are often pitted as dishonest antagonists against Plato's protagonist and teacher Socrates. Plato has Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (245, 249, 274c-e) deliver a myth about the creation of writing by the god Theuth (Egyptian: Thoth) in which it is simultaneously condemned as a poison and aid for human memory. Walter Ong (1982: 167-8) elaborates: “Plato felt this antipathy because he lived at the time when the alphabet had first become sufficiently interiorized in Greek thought, including his own, the time

when patiently analytic, lengthily sequential thought processes were first coming into existence because of the ways in which literacy enabled the mind to process data". Plato himself wrote works that were dialogues, like play scripts, and not merely "normal" prose.

This situation of equivocation between oral and written in the *Phaedrus* has been extensively and very interestingly analysed by Jacques Derrida ([1968] 1998: 429-50) in his famous philosophical exegesis *Plato's Pharmacy*. To Derrida western history is undercut by the belief that the spoken word of someone who is physically present is far more real than that of the written word. Yet, western thinkers have emphasised the written as fixed, official, more accurately representing thought and capable of permitting one to live beyond one's lifetime. Most importantly, the written word is assumed to be more linear and rational. All of this is in spite of the absence of the writer from whom it would be possible to ask questions as to his or her intention. This difficulty makes the entirety of western history fundamentally uneasy, divided between two positions of *phonocentrism* and *logocentrism*, claiming respectively the superiority of the spoken and written. Are those whom one knows only through their written work really "there" or not? The answer is both at the same time each bearing the "trace" of the other. The matter can never be resolved into an either/or, even if one really wants it to be.

European Romantic ideas about "bardic nationalism" that stem from Herder further complicate the questions of "living culture", "deep time" and identity. As Hogan (2000: 249), building on Derrida, also notes, attempts to reject the *logocentric* authority of the written world and instead prioritise the spoken, such as one finds in European Romanticism, are dependent upon conjuring up myths of how, prior to being corrupted by writing, people were perfectly at one with their culture, nature and thought-structures. Writing becomes a kind of "Fall" of consciousness, but a necessary one. How else are the words of a primordial bardic nationalist "Homer" to survive? As a result the epic becomes "fixed" into a single textual form – at once preserved and "alive", but at the same time the "organic" living oral tradition is "dead".

Buryat culture at the turn of the 20th century was a *phonocentric* culture with no written language, but by putting Manshuud's epics on paper and preserving and publishing them the *ül'ger* was destined to become a "literary" phenomenon - especially as "living" oral epic became rarer during the Soviet Period. However, in the first decade of the last century Buryats, with the exception of a highly educated elite like Zhamtsarano and Buddhist monks were all "illiterate". Thus, the Buryats were developing a kind of *logocentrism*, so one might say, but it

was one which for “illiterate” people like Manshuud that was bound more closely to magic, fate and the veneration of authority than anything else.

There may be no mention of writing in Homer’s epics (Foley 2002: 74-7), but the tales of Manshuud, who has been dubbed the “Homer of the Buryats” by a number of scholars (Lőrincz 1983: 245; Dugarov 2009: 71), are full of books and writing. In Manshuud’s tales books exist to foretell the fates of characters. Sometimes they belong to Seven Lamas (Curtin 1909: 185-7, 197), who have no discernible religious purpose in the stories and exist solely to precipitate the plot by reading it out through divination. This same effect is achieved by personal “Books of Life” that characters carry around with them.³² Sometimes characters remove them from their own heads or innards in order to deduce their future.³³ “Books of Life” are found widely throughout West Buryat epics,³⁴ but only in Manshuud’s works are they found

³² See: Curtin (1909: 206, 220-1, 222, 233,241,257, 275-8, 280-11). One should emphatically note that Curtin’s non-descript “Book of Life” terminology is elaborated with access to the Buryat terms used by Manshuud to explain this. The most common terms include “*zayaanaa shara kheniye..zakhaya gurbaye*” (the book of fate...the three [books] of destiny, AG. 4098-4,100, 7820-5, 14409) and *Maiydari shara khenii* (the yellow book of Maitreya, AG. 9585, 10200 13077-9, 14404-7, 15723, 19374-6). “*Zayaanay shara kheniyn..zakhayaan shara kheniig*” (the yellow book of fate...the yellow book of destiny”) also appears in *Khürin Altay* (lines: 14,408, 17,725, 19,374-6) in relation to the yellow book of Maitreya. There is also a “*Zayaan Sagaan Tengeri*” (white god of fate) mentioned in the text (AG. 319-20, 15992, 16020), who is entrusted with divining Geser’s fate. These books may be connected with him/her. A “*khelgeyn sagaan nomo*” (white book of fate) is mentioned in conjunction with a figure called *Khelge Burkhan* (god of fate) (AG. 2496-507, 12015, 13700-1), who is mentioned (AG. 5307, 12013-4) simply as declaring and setting fate. Perhaps both of these are different name for the same archetypal figure who reads the book (s) of fate in heaven. An “*ereen kheniig*” (mottled book) for a book of fate is found at 7820-1 and 13313, which echoes “*alag ereen saarhayn*” (the striped and mottled paper) (AG. 372, 2724, 10268, 17165, 18504, 21269), used to describe official writs nailed to trees by heroes, gods and potential fathers in law in order to institute their wills.

³³ The latter seems to have its origins in a cross-fertilisation of concepts – at once older Buryat conceptions of divining the future from the entrails of animals, and a newer layer involving the reading out of sacred texts to bring good fortune (Khundaeva “*Abay Geser the Mighty*” n. on line 7823; Tulokhonov 1995: 439-0 n. on lines 4104-9) Yet, not all of these personal books are bodily. One of the most bizarre examples is when a “*Book of Fate*” of immense size simply falls through the smoke hole in the hero *Altin Shagay*’s yurt (Curtin 1909: 233). In the story of *Hunkuvai* that Curtin (pp. 220-1) records, the dead hero’s wife simply finds his “*book of life*” lying around at home in a trunk. Although such a thing never appears in the tales taken down by Zhamtsarano, in Curtin (pp. 280) the hero’s *mangadkhay* adversary can also possess his own books too, kept simply at home. The monster in question is on his way home to use his book to deduce who murdered his father. On the way the hero, who was responsible for this murder, also kills this monster too.

³⁴ There are similar “*books of life*” in other Western Buryat epics too, but none of them are produced from characters’ bodies except in some of the *Ekhirit-Bulagat* epics taken down by Zhamtsarano. For instance in *Khaa Oshir Kübüün* (Zhamtsarano 1918: line 661-6), and *Alamzhi Mergen* (Zhamtsarano 1913: lines 2597-2637), a book of Maitreya is produced from the forehead and a book of the Buddha from characters’ calves. Comparatively, in the epic of *Aiduray Mergen*, a book is simply removed from a trunk and read (Zhamtsarano 1914: line 180-6). In the Unga epics, if there are such books, they are in the keeping of three *sorzho lamas* or three *shebgeni burkhans* (three Sakyamuni buddhas) (Tüshemilov 2000: 2074-5), or they are simply owned by the hero without explanation. They are variously titled “*abta yekhe nomiie*” (ibid. 885), “*khuushan sagaan nom...akha sagaan nom,*” (old-time white book...old white book) (ibid. line 2057-9, 3992-3), “*ekhe sagaan nom..akha sagaan nom*” (motherly white

belonging personally to every character, almost like passports. The ability to read the “Books of Life” of others is also used to demonstrate intellect and magical power and exists in some cases to impress the fathers of the girls whom the heroes pursue to marry (Curtin 1909: 156, 184, 241). Manshuud’s understanding of books as passports to character’s futures and as devices to precipitate his plots is extremely sophisticated in its own way. Yet this is a far cry from what the twentieth century would bring for Buryats under the Soviet Era preoccupations with literacy, which will be discussed in coming chapters. The transcribed epics of Geser would become fixed “literature”.

As Chagdurov (1980: 126) suggests, the ability to read and to cause others to do what one desires through writing marks the fact that heroes of Manshuud’s epics represent members of a literate feudal class – namely Buddhist lamas. Writing makes one powerful, in control of fate. No character who consults a “book of fate” ever discovers some horrifying deterministic truth. Rather these are used to inform the hero of the secrets of *mangadhkay* (monsters), who have stolen their wife or property and so on. In one particularly curious case in Manshuud’s tales taken down by Curtin (1909: 237-8) the ability to read is used to demonstrate the independence of a character who does not want to do what the hero Altin Shagay desires, which is to look after the latter’s lands in his absence. This character is solely called the “lettered man”. Altin is amazed at the “lettered man’s” superhuman ability to read. The man openly declares “I am khan for myself”, and Altin only manages to persuade him eventually to do his bidding at great expense – including making him his adoptive brother.

Altin Shagay ends with a promise from Manshuud that the lettered man has his own tale that should be told (pp. 248). Yet Curtin never took it down, nor did anyone else. There is no other character like this in the rest of Manshuud’s tales that have survived. Maybe Manshuud simply invented the story of the “lettered man” on the spot. Perhaps, when he created the “lettered man”, he may have been thinking about Curtin who was taking down his stories on paper – something which had likely never happened to Manshuud before. This is a bold suggestion and tempting to consider. Yet with Curtin and, more importantly, Zhamtsarano,

book...elder white book) (ibid.6609-11, 7494-6) or “*zayaanaa shara hudli*,” (yellow sutra of fate) (ibid. 3000). In Pyotrov (1940] 1968: 2775, 12334) the term “*ekhe nom*” (“mother of books) occurs as the title for Geser’s private book, but in this epic the book motif is quite rare. Soktoev (ed. 1995: 439 n. on line 4099) notes most of these titles that appear for “books of life” and also adds “*nom sazhan*” (holy book). However, it appears that only the Ekhirit-Bulagat stream of Buryat epic seems to have conflated these books of fate with the human body. Moreover, only Manshuut appears to have applied them widely to characters outside of the protagonist of the stories.

taking down Manshuud's *ül'gernüüd*, publishing them and making them "academic", the entire edifice begins to shift. Manshuud becomes bardic nationalist "rhapsode", but the produce of the "rhapsode" exists only in books which Manshuud himself would have never been able to read. In the next chapter I trace how the Soviet Period attempted to do exactly this: to turn Geser and the *ül'ger* into "text" and history for a national Buryat culture, whilst the oral traditions themselves were allowed (or even encouraged) to die away.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that Zhamtsarano's efforts to take down Buryat epic were part of his reaction to the perceived "influx of civilisation", but do not appear to have been undertaken with any express desire to unite Buryat identity using this material. Zhamtsarano himself was a liminal product of the *dispositif* of Late Imperial "influx" who viewed and represented Manshuud through the lens of the Homeric culture hero and the Buryats through the lens of Romantic Nationalist "mongolophilia", though the two are never explicitly brought together to create a nationalist myth. Thus, Zhamtsarano subverted the ideology of orientalism towards his own ends for two separate tasks in response to "influx": to preserve the epics and to try to produce a "Pan-Mongolism". These never consciously overlap. The Soviet Era, however, would bring with it very different ways of knowing and assumptions about the purpose of epic and "Pan-Mongol" identity that would find Zhamtsarano at first celebrated, and then, like many of his contemporaries, condemned during the Purges of 1936-9.

DISPOSITIF 2: 1940-53.
The Stalinist Period,
The Crisis of “National Epic”.

“I did not criticize [the epic] and did not think properly about it. And now, after detailed acquaintance with the sources, I have become convinced that Geser does not represent anything of value for the Buryat-Mongolian people, since this is not our epic, but borrowed from the Mongolians and adapted to our way of life.” - G. Ts. Bel’gaev, 1948.

Chapter 2. The Invention of the Soviet Geser.

During the Stalinist period, forty years after Zhamtsarano sat down to record Manshuud, Buryat academic and journalistic elites attempted to produce a nationalism based around Geser. Geser became useful material on what Terence Ranger calls the “supply side” to deal with an “urgent need”: the drive for each of the USSR’s republics to create its own unique soviet *natsional’naya kul’tura* (national culture). In the short period between 1940 and 1948 Geser was elevated from a peripheral oral tradition to the position of *the* symbol of Buryat national identity by Russian Mongolists and Buryat academics attempting to engineer a Buryat mass culture and history compatible with Bolshevik mores. The Geser *ül’ger* tradition was recast as historical document to produce a necessary proletarian and populist “deep time” in order to make up for a lack of conventional historiography and collective culture. At the centre of this was Manshuud’s *Abay Geser*, which scholars conjectured contained somewhere between 500- and 1200-years’ worth of historical strata. Even when many other variants of the Geser *ül’ger* were collected, Manshuud’s still seemed to stand out as utterly different and “primitive”. *Abay Geser Khübüün* became an integral node in *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming* around which political aspirations could be centred and remains so to this day.

Over the next three chapters I trace the process of how the “invention” of the Soviet Geser flowered into a crisis over the very nature of Buryat identity. In this chapter I analyse the development of Soviet academic interest in Geser and how, through a series of passing speculations and the need to invent a tradition, it was nominated as national epic.

1. Pan-Mongolism.

The USSR of 1940 was a vastly different place from the Late Russian Empire of 1906. In this intervening period a great many drastic and traumatic changes took place for the Siberian Buryats. The Russian Revolution turned into the long and arduous Russian Civil War (1917-22), during which many fleeting Buryat-Mongol ethnostates attempted to emerge, before finally, in 1923, the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (BMASSR) was formed. Next there were the first two Soviet “Five Year Plans” (1928-37), which brutally forced the Buryats into *kolkhozy* (collective farms), often at gunpoint or through planned starvation. Many killed their livestock and escaped to Mongolia and China, echoing on a

much larger scale a similar exodus that had already taken place during the Civil War due to ethnic tensions with Russians and soldiers returned from the Great War.¹

Following this there were the Stalinist Purges (1937-8). During these Zhamtsarano and many of his fellow Buryat elites were imprisoned and executed under the false presumption of being Japanese spies and reactionary “Pan-Mongolist” nationalists. So too in September 1937 the BMASSR would become the recipient of a *raschelenie* (dismemberment) out of fear that for it to remain intact would encourage Pan-Mongol aspirations between Buryats on both sides of Baikal. Ust'-Orda and Aginsk became their own autonomous *okrug* regions.

As was detailed in the previous chapter, Tseveen Zhamtsarano did not immediately publish Manshuud's Geser, as he was very busy and had collected a great deal of epic material during his ventures into the Cisbaikalian hinterlands beyond Irkutsk in 1903-6. *Abay Geser* would not appear in print until 1930, when Zhamtsarano had been exiled from Mongolia for “distancing” himself from the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (Rupen 1956: 132; Yusopova 2011: 203ff). In spite of all Zhamtsarano's efforts to develop literacy and academia in Mongolia and the seeming disinterest of Ol'denburg and his other old teachers to help him with this, his “distancing” had largely been due to his “Pan-Mongolist” politics. Zhamtsarano was sent to Leningrad, where he was to work under the watchful eye of Nicholas Poppe – the foremost Mongolist of the era. Because of Zhamtsarano's work on Geser and Buryat epic which he brought with him to Leningrad, Poppe too became interested in Geser. He would end up exerting a short but powerful influence on the elevation of Geser to the position of “national epic” and the historical direction of *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming*.

Zhamtsarano's political ideal of a “Pan-Mongolist” state for all Mongolic peoples was only just beginning to develop in 1906. The attempted Russian revolutions of 1905-7 came to very little of course. In 1911 he moved to Mongolia, where he worked as a teacher on the behest of the Russian government until 1914. During this period he founded a library which

¹ This situation continued on throughout most of the early 1930s, until livestock numbers were reduced substantially, by some 62.5% from their 1929 total (Zaitseva 1993: 67-8; Forsyth 1994: 333f). In some cases entire families and communities of Buryats and Russian peasants were shot as dissidents by the Soviet government during this period and no figures on the numbers killed are known. Yet it was not violence that managed to defeat the pockets of rebellious Buryats and Russians, rather a somewhat cunning ploy made by the government of the new Buryat Mongol Republic itself. Anyone who was not a member of a collective farm had to pay three times the set price for goods, from potatoes to tobacco and flour. Non-collectivised Buryats, unable to be entirely self-sufficient, were soon priced out of the market, incapable of buying food staples or sell their animal products, and simply gave in. By 1932 some 25,000 Buryat families agreed to be collectivised, elevating the proportion to some 65% of the indigenous population of the Buryat-Mongol Republic, and by 1938 there were less than 8% of Buryats remaining outside of the *kolkhoz* system (Zaitseva 1993: 67-8; Cakars 2008: 66). The number of livestock now stood at some 50% of what it had been at the outset in 1929. The “dismemberment” of the Buryat-Mongol Republic later in 1937 would also cause the loss of some 43% of the ethnic Buryat population to the new provinces of Aga and Ust'-Orda (Forsyth 1994: 344).

would eventually become the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. In late 1917 with the Bolshevik Revolution the Russian Empire began to collapse into a patchwork of territories disputed over by the communist “Reds” and the Tsarist “Whites”. Zhamtsarano was suddenly in the right place at the right time, as part of a small, liminal Russian-educated Buryat elite, to develop his ideas. One only need look at his proposed school curriculum for the years 1917-18 which was avidly supported at the first All-Buryat National Congress – Buryat-Mongol history, language, Buryat studies, Buryat-Mongol literature (Batuev 1994: 22; Sablin 2017: 76). While Russian remained the state language, the imperative was to make Buryat the primary language of educational instruction: “linguistic and intellectual spaces had to be protected from Russification”, as Sablin (*ibid*) notes. Zhamtsarano’s plans were immensely idealistic, and perhaps a little absurd, because of the simple fact that there were hardly any educated Buryats to teach these things. Nonetheless, this did not prevent Zhamtsarano from continuing to nurse such aspirations.

In Southern Siberia the political situation became immensely convoluted during the Civil War years, as is commensurately described by Ivan Sablin in his recent book *Governing Post-Imperial Siberia and Mongolia, 1911-1924* (2017). Between 1917 and 1922 several Buryat ethnostates emerged claiming autonomy. One was Buryat-Mongolia, which appeared in April 1917, and which was run by *Burnatskom* (the Buryat National Commission), which included Zhamtsarano, Elbegdorzhо Rinchino and a number of other prominent Russian-educated Buryat intellectuals. It supported the Provisional Government and national autonomy. Buryat-Mongolia was eventually incorporated in 1920 the BMAR (Buryat Mongol Autonomous Republic), part of the new Far Eastern Republic (FER) run by the remnants of the White forces in Siberia, but headed covertly by Moscow and the Bolsheviks. The FER and BMAR gained support both from the fledgling RSFSR (future USSR) and Japan, which had invaded and occupied Siberia up to Chita during the Civil War. Both Japan and the Soviets agreed that the creation of a “buffer state” was the best way to keep the peace. Zhamtsarano and his fellow Buryat elites were even promised by Japan that they might be willing to support a Pan-Mongol state. However, this came to nothing.²

² As Sablin (2017) argues, the main problems that hobbled these fleeting states were violent internal disagreements about land ownership. The areas around Lake Baikal did not just include Mongolic peoples grouped together as Buryats – there were also Evenki, Tofa and a large number of Russian settlers. Between the Buryats and Russian settlers competition, pogroms and theft became especially ferocious. Various attempts to divvy up territory into *aymags* and *khoshuuns* that would include or voluntarily exclude Russian settlers and Cossacks came to very little. Committees such as *Burnatskom* (Central Buryat National Committee), of which Zhamtsarano was a major founding member, began with ambitious ideals to creating a modernised, literate Buryat-language Buddhist communist theocracy, but quickly had to abandon them. It was hard enough trying to

By early 1922 it was clear that the Civil War was coming to an end. There was now confusingly both the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Republic (BMAR) and an Autonomous Mongol-Buryat Republic (AMBR) run out of Irkutsk and backed by the Soviets. Mongolia had been liberated, the Whites were defeated. In October the Japanese left Siberia. On the 15th of November the FER was officially incorporated into the USSR. The competing BMAR and AMBR were amalgamated on the 30th of May 1923 into the BMASSR (Soni 2007: 57). Those members of the now defamed “bourgeois” *Burnatskom* who were not killed by a Manchurian warlord luring them in with an “official dinner”, gave up on it and moved towards efforts to reform Buddhism and make it compatible with communism. This was undertaken under the name of the “*obnovlenicheskoe dvizhenie*” (reform movement).

But this wasn't the end for Pan-Mongolism. In 1921 Zhamtsarano, as the major educational figure in Mongolia, had already written the platform for the Mongolian communist revolution while in Khyakhta. Pan-Mongolism shifted south. Zhamtsarano managed to make sure that the following was included:

In view of the fact that the peaceful existence of the Mongolian popular masses and their joining in the culture and knowledge of enlightened peoples depend on the formation of an independent, sovereign state of the Mongolian nation, not on enslavement and oppression by foreign imperialists, our People's Party strives ultimately toward the unification of all Mongolian tribes in one independent state (Ballis 1941: 300).

Similar views were followed up by Elbegdorzh Rinchino who, at the first *khural* (parliament) of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party in 1924, demanded attention to Pan-Mongol solidarity in the face of Chinese attempts to displace and colonise Inner Mongolia at the time (Rupen 1956: 389; Soni 2007: 57). In 1927 he wrote an article in the journal *Refeolutsiosnyy Vostok* (Revolutionary East) in which he referred explicitly back to the promise for a Pan-Mongolic made in the 1921 platform, but this time under the name “ethnographic Mongolia” – a cultural rather than geographic construction (Soni 2007: 57).

As Sweet and Chakars (2010) emphasise in their article on the history of Buryat “insurgent planning” over the last century, there is always the danger of seeing Buryat attempts at self-autonomy as singular, when in fact upon closer inspection they are multiplicitous and often convoluted. One might say that there were many Pan-Mongolisms,

attain recognition of one's autonomy, let alone manage an impoverished, large, remote region with little in the way of communications networks and fewer than two hundred thousand people.

or a rhizome of *Pan-Mongol-becoming* - all highly contingent upon the availability of resources and symbols and proximity to power and other causes. The Pan-Mongolism of Zhamtsarano began as a movement for modernisation united through Buddhism – it was easily adapted to communism when the need arose. Indeed this “Pan-Mongolism” was also contemporary with and fed into nebulous efforts towards the formation of a Pan-Buddhist state by the Buryat lama Agvan-Dorzhiev who had been Tibetan ambassador to the Romanov court and later the USSR in the 20s and 30s. Dorzhiev ([1921] 1994: 31-5) considered the teachings of Buddhism and Communism to be thoroughly compatible and attempted to make reforms in Buryat Buddhism such as the separation of church and state and the teaching of European and secular subject matter at lamaic monasteries. Buryat scholars such as Rinchino, Zhamtsarano and lamas such as Bazar Baradin and Gombojav Tsybikov threw their support behind this (Soni 2007).³

But what were others saying about these Pan-Mongolising ideals? In April 1919, as Bolshevik forces were slowly edging their way across Siberia, a Buryat Section of the Irkutsk Provincial Committee of the Russian Communist Party was formed in direct competition to *Burnatskom*. To legitimise itself it denounced Zhamtsarano and his associates as “petty bourgeois nationalist Buryat intellectuals” only interested in Buryat culture, education and independence (Haptaev 1949: vol. 2 154; Sablin 2017: 148). They claimed that what the Buryat masses needed was to recognise their need to become part of the Russian Bolshevik effort and fight the class war.

From the “white side” in November of the same year one might also note a message sent by the Kolchak government in Omsk to the American occupiers in Vladivostok. This claimed that a future Pan-Mongol state would unleash a potential “yellow flood on Europe” and called the Buryats “the future Prussians of the Far East”. So too was it rumoured that the Tibetans, Kalmyks and Kazakhs were also keen to join such a state (Hyman 1997; Sablin 2017: 129). It was as if the Whites were terrified that the spirit of Chingis Khan might rise again. While the Pan-Mongolist Buryat intellectuals might have held lofty ideals, they were certainly not particularly dangerous. The simple fact is that the various imagined Pan-

³ However, Dorzhiev eventually lost faith in the Communist cause with the death of Lenin and became a double agent for both the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and USSR during the turbulent 1920s when Soviet authorities became interested in Tibet as possible grounds for encouraging communist revolution (Rudnev 1956; Znamenski 2011). However, the idea of a Pan-Mongol state under the Dalai Lama, as Dorzhiev imagined, was more than a little idealistic. Hampered by the fact that Tibetan was only known by an educated minority of lamas amongst the Mongolic peoples and ongoing infighting between the Panchen Lama, Thirteenth Dalai Lama and Mongolian Jebtsun Dampa at this time, there was little chance of anything coming to fruition. Pan-Mongolism was a fantasy.

Mongolisms came to very little because they had been based in an idealistic politics about a united Mongol and Buryat identity that in reality did not exist. Nonetheless the logic of the Civil War propaganda – that of Zhamtsarano and associates as “bourgeois nationalists” trying to form some super-state that would cause the Mongol Empire to rise again – would indeed return to haunt these thinkers many years later.

During the Soviet Purges of 1937-8 the spectre of Pan-Mongolism was risen from its grave bringing a tragic and largely baseless ending to the lives of Zhamtsarano and his associates. In August 1937 Zhamtsarano was arrested on trumped up charges of attempting to create a Pan-Mongolic state under the protection of Japan. As noted, the Japanese had abandoned such an idea relatively early on. Recent information garnered from Soviet archives in St. Petersburg suggests that Zhamtsarano died on the 14th of May 1942 in Sol'-Iletsiy prison in Orenburgskiy Oblast' (Yusupova 2011: 212). Baradin was shot in 1937; Rinchino on the day of his trial in 1938; Agvan Dorzhiev met his end in a gulag hospital in 1938. All of these men, in spite of their efforts at modernising the Buryats, reforming Buddhism and encouraging Buryat self-determination, were haunted by their connections to *Burnatskom* and Japan's unfulfilled promise to support a Pan-Mongol state. During the paranoia of the Stalinist Purges this was enough to condemn them as Japanese spies and reactionary nationalists. In the largest case against Pan-Mongolism during this period some 6267 people were executed, most of them lamas because of their traditional patronage in Leningrad by the Russian Tsars, beginning with Pyotr Badmaev, the Buryat doctor-lama and diplomat to Alexander III (Soni 2007). As I will soon describe, so too did Geser come to be bound up in accusations of Pan-Mongolism because of the epic's seeming appeal not merely to Buryat culture, but to Mongolian and Tibetan culture too.

2. Choosing a National Epic.

The guiding principle of culture in the USSR during the 1920s-40s was that each Republic was to develop its own national culture through a Soviet lens: “*proletarskaya po svoemu sodержaniyu, natsional'naya po forme*” (proletarian in its content, national in form) (Stalin Vol 7: [1925] 1952: 138). This ideal can be traced back prior to the Russian Revolution. In January 1913, the young Stalin, while in exile from Russia due to political activities, went to Vienna in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to research how the Marxists there theorised the way to deal with a state composed of a great many minority populations, on the presumption that a future communist Russia would also have to deal with this same problem. The Austro-Hungarian answer was to give representation to all the minorities in the state's capital.

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However, Lenin and Stalin (1913) adopted the opposite strategy in their *Marxism and the Nationalities Question*. Each minority should possess its own autonomous state and create its own version of soviet culture. But all should be ruled centrally from a single capital. Stalin, himself of Georgian origin, adamantly believed that only through the “mother tongue” could “a full development of the intellectual faculties of the Tatar or of the Jewish worker” be achieved.

This strategy with its fixation on disseminating Soviet ideology through local language and culture and at least titular autonomy was in many ways unavoidable. The majority of the population the fledgling USSR inherited from the gargantuan and largely underdeveloped Russian Empire did not even speak Russian, nor did some nationalities, such as the Buryats, even have a written language of their own. In 1923 the policy of *korenizatsia* (indigenisation) was born – the idea of promoting communism through the formation of local ethnic “cadres” of workers and intellectual elites in order to avoid the “Great Power Chauvinism” of simply trying to impose a communist Russian mother culture (Vihavainen 2000: 79-85). As Andrei Znamenski (2011: 116) adroitly describes the situation:

This is how the famous Bolshevik “affirmative action empire” was born. Beside the noble goal of making all nationalities equal, courting local nationalist sentiments was a very handy tool of control. Essentially, it boiled down to the good old principle, divide and rule... Even miniscule tribes of hunters and gatherers in Siberia, some numbering less than two thousand people to their schools, language and indigenous bureaucrats.

Indeed, in many of the diverse republics that composed the USSR there were small local *natssoviety* (nationality soviets) for all local minorities, but in the BMASSR the imperative was the *oburiyachivanie* (buryatisation) of all local media, schools and literature (Chakars 2008: 37; Graber 2012). This strategy appealed greatly to the Russian-educated Buryat elites such as Zhamtsarano, because throughout the Russian Civil War they themselves had long nursed aspirations towards creating a modern Buryat ethnostate with mass education in the Buryat language (Sablin 2017: 76). Manshuud’s illiterate understanding of books as passports to characters’ futures produced from their heads and livers was a far-cry from what the post-revolutionary twentieth century would bring to Buryats. As Graber (2012: 130) writes:

Would-be enlighteners worked to revolutionize textual practices, in the process disparaging existing forms of authority that were incompatible with a Soviet ideal

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of proletarian empowerment. Books that had been worshipped as ritual objects and used by Buddhist lamas were now remade into objects for the direct use of all citizens. While the Buryat of the past accepted a blessing on the head from a text-as-ritual-artifact...the Buryat of the bright and glorious Soviet future would have in his (or her) own hands a book, and thus the means to drive a tractor or build a city... Through active engagement with state-produced texts, newly empowered Buryats would become rational, modern Soviet citizens both reflective and constitutive of state ideology.

However, things soon changed. In 1937, as already mentioned, the mass purging of local cadres began, as Stalin became increasingly paranoid about the presence of foreign spies and influences. In 1938 “socialism in one country”, though first touted in 1924 due to the increasing realisation that a global revolution was not going to take place, became the official policy. By 1940 Russian became mandatory in all schools and many nationalities who had experimented in using Latin scripts, such as the Buryats, were now compelled to use a Cyrillic script instead in order to encourage association with Russian culture rather than with outside influences.⁴ Moscow was of course still concerned about the spectre of Pan-Mongolism. Nonetheless the imperative to create “national cultures” continued, and the question of national epics as a way to display their legitimacy became especially important in the early 1940s.

But what about Geser? The fact is that the only material available to understand the beginning of his elevation to national epic during this period is the testimony of G. Ts. Bel’gaev, director of GIYaLI (State Institute of Language, Literature and Culture) in the May 1948 “trial” of Geser (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338). The few other scholars who have

⁴ In the first two decades of the twentieth century a number of early attempts were made by Buryat elites to develop scripts, but none of these caught on. Perhaps the most important was that of Elbegdorzh Richnino (writing under the name Alamzhi Mergen after the epic hero) and Nikolay Amagaev (2010a). Following the Russian revolution initially the Classical Mongolian script was used by the Buryat-Mongol Republic, but because of a lack of teachers this attempt largely failed. In 1931 authorities commissioned Nicholas Poppe to remedy this by switching to a Latin script (see Yukiyasu 2006). This, yet again, was largely unsuccessful because it utilised the Selenge Buryat dialect that is far closer to Khalkha Mongolian than any of the other Buryat dialects. In 1939 this was changed to a Cyrillic script based off a standardised literary version of the dialect of the Khori Buryats, who were a minority population compared with other ethno-linguistic groups. (Montgomery 2005: 238-53). Khori was chosen largely because it was the commonest dialect around Ulan-Ude, and had already been touted as a replacement in 1936 (Yukiyasu 2006). This remains the standard written language to this day, due to a much higher degree of mutual comprehensibility. However, the reasons for the changes were not entirely so simple. The Selenge dialect, because of its proximity to Khalkha, also threatened the possibility of furthering the idea of a Pan-Mongolian language (Forsyth 1994: 433). When the dialect was changed towards Khori to be more inclusive, M. N. Yerbanov, the secretary of the Buryat-Mongol Republic, was conversely obliged to reassure Moscow that there was no chance of it precipitating a *local* nationalism instead (Humphrey 1983: 417f). No matter what decision was made, it was possible for it to be held as suspect in the pressure cooker that was soviet politics in the late 1930s.

commented on this period have also been reliant upon it because of the fact that there simply does not seem to be more available material (Bazarov 1995: 123-7; Chakars 2008; Basaev 2013 Pt II-III). As this is a testimony *against* Geser as national epic and those who worked on the project, one must read it with an eye conscious of ideological details. Bel'gaev tells us that in the second half of 1939 (no definite date is given), the celebration of a *dekada* (ten-day festival) of Buryat culture was announced (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338 p. 2-3). This was set to take place under the auspices of the Union of Writers of the USSR in Moscow in October 1940. During the planning for this in the summer of 1940 it was suggested that a national "epic of some sort" (*kakogo-nibud' eposa*) should be commemorated. Other nationalities had begun celebrating "jubilees" of their own for national epics in the 1930s: the Karelians the *Kalevala* (1935, 100 years since its publication), the Georgians the *Knight in Panther's Skin* (1936, 750 years), the Russians the *Lay of Igor's Campaign* (1938, 750 years), the Armenians *David Sasun* (1939, 1000 years), the Kalmyks *Jangar* (1940, 500 years).⁵ Thus, it became imperative for the Buryats to compete with this and legitimise their own identity through epic.

However, as surprising as it may sound today, the Buryats did not have a clear "national epic". This was largely because outside of the Pan-Mongolist aspirations of Zhamtsarano and others, they had never been a self-conscious nationality. *Korenizatsia* and "national cultures" thus required the engineering of one. The fact was that Geser was but one of three *ül'gernüüd* suggested in summer 1940, the other two being *Shono Baatar* and *Alamzhi Mergen*. Bel'gaev (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338 p. 1-2) goes as far as to put Geser last in the list – *ili zhe Gesera* (and also Geser), which may well be an attempt on his part to downplay interest in the subject. Yet *Shono Baatar* would perhaps have been just as troublesome a choice as Geser in retrospect. Unlike Geser it clearly relates to historical events – the Dzungar ruler Tsavan Ravdan and his son Galdan Tseren in the early-mid 18th century. But just like Geser *Shono Baatar* is not wholly unique to the Buryats as an epic. Variants are found in many places in Inner Asia, from the Kalmyks and the Oirats in Xingjian to the Kazakhs.⁶

⁵ In the case of *Jangar* the date of 500 years for its anniversary was constructed to be quite exact: the epic's origins in the defeat of a Ming general by the Oirat ruler Esen Khan in 1440 (Hamayon [1996] 1998: 14).

⁶ See Khamaganov (2015) on the history of Galdan Tseren as an epic figure among various Mongolic peoples. See Menyayev (2017: 342-3) on *Shono Baatar* in Xinjiang. Gomboev (1890: 36-51) includes a short poetic version of *Shono Baatar* taken down by P.P. Batorov from an unnamed reciter from Alarsk in the 1880s. M. N. Khangalov (2004 III: 59-63) also recorded a prose story about the hero. Poppe (1940: 11) connects this variant of the story with the last of the Dzungar Khans and appears to be the first person to do so. It is also curious to note that a different short variant taken down by Nikolay Amagaev was one of the few things ever printed using Agvan Dorzhiev's early Buryat alphabet (Amagaev 1910b). A much longer version was taken

Yet, so Bel'gaev recalls, Geser quickly won out because two Mongolists, Nicholas Poppe and Garma Dantsaranovich Sanzheev believed Manshuud's version of the epic to be the oldest work of Buryat culture. In support of Geser Poppe circulated a small handwritten essay entitled "On the Chronology of Geser" (*O Khronologii Gesera*, 18th July 1940); Sanzheev added to this enthusiasm for Geser and its primordially with his own essay "On Buryat Epic" (*O buryatskom epose*, 10th August 1940) (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338 p. 2). Bel'gaev (p. 3) at this point mentions that a dating of Geser as old as 1000-1200 years had been suggested, that it went back to eighth century. This came from Poppe's "Chronology" essay. However, both scholars soon changed their minds on the age of the Buryat Geser. As there were no discernible Buryats so early, six hundred years, dating back to the 13-14th c., the era of the Mongol Empire, when the Ekhirit-Bulgat and Khori Buryats were imagined by many scholars to already exist as definite groups, became the new version.

This 600-year dating, so Bel'gaev tells us, followed Poppe's (1937: 60) book *Khalkha Mongol'skiy Geroicheskiy Epos* (Khalkha Mongolian Heroic Epic), which claimed that the epics of all the modern Mongolic peoples had been formed in the Mongol imperial window between the 14th and 17th centuries. Poppe and the scholar S. P. Baldaev who had formerly endorsed the 1200-year figure, both then changed to endorse the lower figure, so Bel'gaev (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338 p. 4) claims, and everyone simply went along with them because "they played the answering role on all questions, as those who knew Geser best". It was all down to whatever these two thinkers decided. But how could there be such disparities in opinion, even for Poppe himself? As Poppe was a major consultant for the *dekada*, everyone just agreed with him, so Bel'gaev says (p. 3). While Bel'gaev was obviously attempting to offload the blame for interest in Geser onto others, there is still an elephant in the room, so to speak. The fact is that neither Poppe nor Sanzheev, nor any other scholar at the time except perhaps the imprisoned Zhamtsarano, really knew a great deal about the Buryat Geser at all.

Working in Poppe's archives in St. Petersburg, the Buryat scholar D. B. Dashibalova (2012: 81-2) has uncovered and published the majority of the "Chronology" essay (Poppe 10,

down from the Osinsk reciter Sagadar Shanarsheev in 1936 by the folklorist A. M. Kamgashalov (published 1943). This version has recently been published in a Buryat/Russian dual language edition by the Buryat poet Aleksey Gatapov (2015). Kharirueva and Semyonova (2005: 11-2) mention that Khangalov recorded unspecified epic material from Shanarsheev, which might seem to suggest that he too was responsible for the initial Shono Baatar epic as well. Yet, Shanarsheev was born in 1880 and would have been very young when Khangalov was collecting material. It seems very unlikely. Nowhere else is it suggested that Khangalov took down any material from him. Shanarsheev died in 1940. Like Manshuud, once again folklorists seem to have been in the right place at the right time just before it was too late. No subsequent Buryat *Shono Baatar* stories have been recorded, though apparently the *ül'gershen* Al'for Vasil'ev claimed that he knew the story.

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d. 6, l. 3a-4a). It is worth quoting at length for how it rationalised the 1200-year dating for Manshuud's Geser:

Widespread among the Buryat-Mongols, the heroic epic tales of Geser represent a grandiose cycle of poems, united under the common name "The nine branches (ie. chapters) of Geser," some of which have been written down from the words of folk storytellers and also published. The recorded part (3 branches) contains 22 000 lines. It must be assumed that all the "nine branches" contain from 60,000 to 75,000 lines. Information about the epic hero of Geser has long reached European scientific literature. A short retelling of some stories were given by Benjamin Bergman (1802). Pallas, who travelled through Buryatia and Mongolia in the reign of Catherine II, describes the images of Geser visible in Kiakhta – at Maimachen (1775). First the legends about Geser were written down in Mongolian letters in a more or less complete form in 1630, but these records were "processed" (*podvergilis' "obkratke"*) by lamas. This "processing" was led by the Jangjiya Qutuytu. In his biography, he mentions that, he considered it necessary to cleanse from it all that contradicts the teachings of the Buddha. This book version of Geser was later (in 1715) issued by decree of the Chinese emperor Kangxi. This version differs significantly from oral folk traditions, but it is not a falsified version. Regarding the antiquity of legends about Geser there is no exact data. These, of course, existed already at the very beginning of the 13th century, for in one of the sayings of one of the heroes Chingis Khan (around 1206) the following comparison is related concerning wine: "When it hits the tongue, then it will bite like a bee, when you drink too much, it storms like Geser" (*kogda ono popadaet na yazyk, to kusnet ka plecha, kogda vyp'esh' lishnee, ono buystvuet kak Geser*). Since this date is the only date to mention Geser, it should not be imagined that the stories originated in that year: they could have already been known before. The surviving mentions in Tibetan sources say that Geser was a great hero, a leader of raiders (*druzhin*), who lived in the 8th century AD. This same reference is also found in the history of the Mongolian chronicler Sagan Secen (written in 1663). If we take into account that the content of the Buryat stories about Geser include a number of elements characteristic of the ideology of a tribal/familial society (*rodovogo obshchestva*) (in which there are strong matriarchal elements [*elementy matriarkhal'nye*]), then all of this permits Geser to be of great antiquity and us to think that the story reflects the life of a tribal society in about the 8th century, though, of course, a fantastical refraction (*v fantastichnom prelomlenii*). Thus, it can be assumed, that in the most ancient parts (*v drevneishikh svoikhchastyakh*) of the *Geseriad*, going back to the VIII century, there is an antiquity of 1200 years.

There is a great deal to unpack here and much of the rest of this chapter will be taken up with it because the elements involved in Poppe's "Chronology" are curiously contradictory and

incorrect but have had a profound influence on Geser studies. Some aspects such as the theory that the Jangjiya Qutuytu, the head of Buddhism in Mongolia, was involved in the early history of the transcription and publication of Geser in 1630, upon inspection, turn out to be utterly false but require a certain amount of elaboration.

The most glaringly obvious problem is that there was no first Jangjiya Qutuytu in 1630, quite simply because he had not been born yet! This secret biography theory stems from an unpublished work by Zhamtsarano (n.d.137-41) called *Konspekt Uligerov* (Conspectus of *ül'gers*), located in his archives in St. Petersburg. In this work Zhamtsarano claims that he had met a Buryat lama called Sodnom Zhigzhitov who had once come upon a secret biography belonging to the first Jangjiya Qutuytu, Agvan Lobsang Choyndan (1672-1714). In this secret biography it was apparently stated that the Mongolian Geser corpus had been first written down under the Jangjiya Qutuytu's instruction from Ölet Mongol epic reciters and was then deliberately stripped of "pagan" pre-Buddhist elements. But the fact is that no one else has ever come across even a mention of this secret biography – most likely it never existed. Zhamtsarano may have simply made it up in order to distance the Geser tradition from Buddhism, for it is highly likely that the work was written while he was in exile in Leningrad during the 1930s when Soviet attitudes towards the religion had already turned into open purges and persecution of lamas in the BMASSR and Mongolia. Zhamtsarano certainly seems to have been unaware of Geser's Tibetan origins, or perhaps ignored them in favour of the idea of a Mongol origin to the stories. I will return to this *Konspekt Uligerov* again in the next chapter because it has been responsible for more than a few errors about Geser that have been repeated over the years.⁷

⁷ If there has been anything that has seriously hindered the progress of the study of the Mongol Geser corpus it has been this "secret biography" theory. The "conventional" biography of this important religious figure does not mention Geser even once (Neklyudov 1984: 157). Let's begin. A passing reference in Stein (1959: 76) claims that there is a Mongolian "tradition" that the original manuscript for the 1716 xylograph was written in 1630. Stein cites Damdinsüren (1957: 56) as the source for this, who in turn indeed says that the 1630 date refers to a "*mongol'skaya traditsiya*" (Mongolian tradition). Damdinsüren's source for this claim is from a book called *Zapiski Buryat-Mongol'skogo GIYaLI* (*Writings from the Buryat-Mongol GIYaLI* 1941: V-VI. 9). The reference is to Poppe's 1941 article and indeed it says 1630. Neklyudov (1984: 158) rightly insists that this 1630 in Poppe's article must be a misprint for 1680 made by Poppe himself or the publisher. However, one finds this same 1630 repeated again in the unpublished "Chronology" essay (Poppe 10, d. 6, l. 3a-4a *ap.* Dashibalova 2012: 81-2). Thus, Poppe seems to have made the same mistake twice, which is a little bad for such a famous Mongolist. But why should it be 1680? Simply because in 1630 the first Jangjiya Qutuytu had not even been born! The misprint is made to fit with a period when he was alive – 1680. The reason for all of this confusion is that the origin for Poppe's (1941: 9) comment and the "tradition" in question is no more than Zhamtsarano's (n.d. 137-141) anecdote mentioned above from the lama Sodnom Zhigzhitov. Only Neklyudov (1984: 157) has noticed this. Poppe had obviously read Zhamtsarano's unpublished article. The lama in question, as has already been mentioned, never gives a date for the composition of the 1716 xylograph's original source manuscript in his story or even when the Jangjiya Qutuytu was supposed to have ordered the collection of oral material to be done. Yet, because of the confusion due to the 1630 misprint, Stein (1959: 76) endorses the idea that the "Les Mongols" in general believe that the former date was that of the transcription and the later was

Other matters are a lot simpler. The Pallas (1776 Vol I: 121-3, 1793 Vol IV: 162-6) and Bergmann (1904: 233-84) references are sound, and the 1715 Mongol “book version” of Geser was actually the 1716 Peking xylograph. The reference to Sagan Secen is to the famous 17th century Mongol chronicle the *Erdeni-yin Tobci* (Precious Summary). At section 12r14 of the text (de Rachewiltz ed. 1990: 22) one does indeed find “*Geser čerig-ün qayan*” (Geser, khaan of armies) in a catalogue of khans and *elčis* (ambassadors), but nothing else. As to where Poppe found the wine simile he gives, I have been utterly unable to find it.⁸ No other source seems to mention it at all. 1206 is ridiculously early in Mongol history for any source on Chingis’ life to have been written down. This said, it is a lot easier to believe that the Mongols might have vaguely known about Geser in 1663 than in 1206 or even beforehand, as Poppe would have us believe. So too, as to what source(s) Poppe had available on the Tibetan Geser at this time is also a mystery, but as the information he gives is so very general it would seem difficult to deduce it anyway. But it is at this point, with the “deep time” of the Tibetan Geser, that one sees a curious sleight of hand in which Manshuud’s Geser with its touted “tribal society” and “matriarchal elements” is found instantly equivalent, even though the two belong to very different cultural worlds. This barely makes sense. What is going on? One needs to look closely at the attempts made by Soviet Mongolists and folklorists at the time to develop a Marxist historiographical lens for reading their material.

During the 1930s Buryat folklore had already begun to bloom as an academic discipline in its own right. Much of this was reliant upon Zhamtsarano’s material, which in turn encouraged later scholars to repeat his efforts and go in search of *ül’ger*. The first sign as to the future direction of the scholarship on Buryat epic was made by the Mongolist Nikolay Vladimirtsov (1923: 7), in which he had described the Buryat epics as “*udivitel’noe pervobytnymi arkhaiskimi*” (amazingly primitive, archaic). This was because of the presence of the pre-Buddhist Tengeri deities and other shamanic elements, as well as the

when the text was simply “*éditée*” during the *lifetime* of the first Jangjiya Qutuytu. Even more interesting is that date 1630 appears again in Bayartu (1989: 76) in relation instead to the *Nomči Qatun* Mongol Geser MS. from there it ends up in Setsenmunkh (2004: 222). Comparatively one finds a more general period for this manuscript, sometime between 1614 and the 1640s, according to Heissig (1970: 407; 1979: 29) and Rinchen (1960c: intro. 3). Perhaps Bayartu (1989: 76) saw Poppe (1941: 9), or more likely Damdinsüren (1957: 56), and assumed this date indicated the *Nomči Qatun* MS. There would seem nothing in particular to fix the *Nomči Qatun* MS to 1630. It is curious that Damdinsüren (1957: 56) gives the name of the 1941 book containing Poppe’s work, but Poppe’s name is never given in relation to it in this instance. Perhaps Poppe was still a “fascist” *persona non grata* in the USSR at this point and thus could not be named. Poppe’s 1941 article, for that matter, is not at all mentioned in Stein’s (1959) book - it is merely from Damdinsüren that he has taken his information.

⁸ In the introduction to an edition of Manshuud’s *Abay Geser*, A. I. Ulanov (*ap.* Khomonov 1961: 3) claims that this passage comes from the *Altan Tobchi*, along with the same claim of the 1206 dating. The passage is not in the *Altan Tobci* either. It seems as though Ulanov has assumed Poppe made a mistake and tried to correct for it without checking for the reference. No citation for the passage is given by Ulanov anyway.

image of primal herding and hunt lifeways they conjured up. Vladimirtsov (ibid 14-16) also particularly emphasised the size of Manshuud's Geser: "colossal Buryat epic, far exceeding the Iliad in form" (*daleko prevoskhodyashchee razmerom Iliadu*) and declared that the Buryat epics in general were "not inferior to the epics of other peoples of the world" because they display a long history of popular creativity over many generations. Thus, by 1923 Manshuud's Geser had already been declared primordial, the work of aeons, something comparable with European epic traditions. Several years later, also reflecting on the texts Zhamtsarano had assembled, M. B. Zabanov (1929: 56) likewise articulated what he saw as a "deep time" inherent in them: "elements of different cultural epochs are combined, beginning with the most archaic forms of social behaviour, finishing with forms of current existence". It is this sense of "primitivism" and continuity inherent in the Buryat oral epics, and especially Manshuud's Geser, that sets the basis for what was to follow.

However, the thinker who gave structure to this sentiment was G. D. Sanzheev. In 1936 Sanzheev published two works which to this day still continue to exert a profound influence on the study of Buryat epic. The first was a forty-page introduction to a Russian translation made by the scholar Ivan. A. Novikov of the *ül'ger* of *Alamzhi Mergen* (5297 lines). Zhamtsarano had taken this down from the *ül'gershen* Yolbon Shalbykov/Shalbagai in Kapalsk, Alarsk district in August 1903, and had printed it in Buryat without translation in 1913. Prior to this, there had of course been Mikhayl Khangalov's Russian translations of several episodes of Geser that appeared in in G. N. Potanin's (1893: II.44-112) work and then separately in Khangalov's own *Balanganskiy Sbornik* (1903: 1-41). In 1924 the Russian orientalist Rudnev, who was a patron of Zhamtsarano, had also made an English and in 1925 a Russian translation of Zhamtsarano's recording of Shalbykov's version of *Khaa Oshir Khübüün*. Today almost nothing is said about either of these *Khaa Oshir Khübüün* texts. Nonetheless, Novikov and Sanzheev's *Alamzhi Mergen* was one of the first translations of Buryat epic into Russian for academic purposes, rather than as a mere curiosity. Khangalov and Zhamtsarano may have initialised academic interest in Geser and Buryat folklore, but after Sanzheev the *ül'ger* was to become a source for speculating about Buryat *history*. Buryat epic was passed through the lens of a rapidly developing Soviet Marxist anthropology determined to find historical layers in folkloric narratives.

Sanzheev had begun to collect epics from the regions of the BMASSR in the late 1920s. But in the mid 1930s a new rich seam opened up – the Unga valley in Irkutsk. This region is also called Priangaria, because it is on the far side of the Angara River, its left bank. The stories collected included *Tüley Mergen*, *Öre Khenze Ulanday Mergen*, *Bulgan Tolgoy*

Khübüün and *Ere Dökhley-Bogatyr*'. Most of these *ül'gernüüd* were very short and very little has been written about them. Nonetheless, the similarities and differences inherent in this new material, compared with merely that of Zhamtsarano and Khangalov, allowed Sanzheev to develop a speculative history of the development of the Buryats based upon certain phenomena contained in the epics. No one had posed such an idea before, not even Zhamtsarano.

In 1936 Sanzheev also published a landmark article entitled *Po etapam razvitiya buryat-mongol'skogo geroicheskogo eposa* (on the stages of development of the Buryat-Mongol heroic epic) in which he posed that there were three major categories of Buryat epic. Previously, Zhamtsarano (1918: xii-xviii) had merely divided Buryat epics into those east and west of Lake Baikal: Khori and Ekhirit-Bulagat. The former were shorter and showed signs of developing "into aristocratic beginnings" (*na aristokraticeskikh nachalakh*). The latter were much longer and probably older, but only this was ventured:

The heroic adventures (*oblavy*) of the Ekhirit-Bulagat heroes are a necessity because the families of Ekirit-Bulagat heroes subsist on game (*zverinnoy*). But the adventures of the Khori Buryats – they are an exception for the heroes. They function as assistance (*podspor'ye*) for the people; and at the same time, adventures are arranged for viewing foreign countries to establish relations with other heroes. It is a way to make an alliance or start a war. Sometimes the Khori-Buryat hero, during the adventure, seeks out plentiful pastures for migrations, where he later moved with his people. The adventures of the Khori-Buryat hero are of great manners and intelligence in character, with the participation of foreign khans and their dignitaries.

However, Sanzheev was not interested in the Khori epics. In fact, very little has been written at all about the Khori epics over the years, most likely because the much larger Western Buryat epics have seemed more primordial and interesting. When the Khori epics have been discussed at all, it is to say that that they are later, the product of a people who had adapted to being herdsman long before the Western Buryats (Ulanov 1974: 14; Dugar-Nimaev 1988: 3). In some ways perhaps this might make them seem less "genuine". Moreover, the general assumption seems to have long been in Buryat scholarship that the Khori epics are the decayed remains of a once much larger epic format like that of the Western Buryats (Ulanov 1957: 162, 1974: 76; Tudenov 1958: 41-44; Shoolbraid 1975: 25; Burchina 1990: 20-21; Tulokhonov 1995: 450). Perhaps only Tudenov (1958: 41-44) in his early study of Buryat

epic *stikholozhyonie* (poetic metrics) has done them a little justice, looking at the extended *ugtalga* (opening) that Khori epics often have.⁹

However, the fact is that as quickly as the Western Buryat epics were disappearing, the Khori Buryat epic tradition seems to have disappeared slightly earlier, by the first couple of decades of the 20th c. This is even if, so Zhamtsarano (1918) claimed, there were “many *ül’gers* among the Khori people at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries.” Perhaps the last Khori epics to be recorded were *Yoro Yobshol*, *Khüldiin Khükhe Moritai Kharaltuur Khaan* and another version of *Lodoy Mergen* by A. D. Alekseev in 1937 (BNTs SORAN inv no. 120 2754). Most importantly there is certainly no Khori Geser that has ever been published. As A. I. Ulanov (1953: 103) would declare during the “scientific session” to redeem Geser, the Mongolian Geser was certainly common in manuscript form on the east side of Baikal (particularly in Aginsk), but as to oral epics the Khori were in the “*protsessia zabyvanii uligerov*” (process of forgetting the *ül’gers*).

With the Khori epics discounted, Sanzheev, on the other hand, delineated those on the West side of Baikal into three categories: a primordial Ekhirit-Bulagat category, which included all the epics Zhamtsarano had recorded, those of the Unga valley in the Nukut and Alar *aymags* of the BMASSR, north of Irkutsk, and an Okinsky category to the south of Lake Baikal. This third Okinsky group, seen to be far closer to Khalkha Mongolian culture than the others (Sharakhshinova 1968: 26), has failed to live on as a distinct taxonomic category, except perhaps in Oka Buryat scholar Bair Dugarov and his 1983 paper on an Okinsky version of Geser. Instead the dynamic between the two Ekhirit-Bulagat and Unga epic categories has been emphasised.

Sanzheev (1936b) regarded the Ekhirit-Bulagat epics as the product of a *zverolovyy* (hunting, fur-trapping) people, who dwelt in a world of dense forests and lofty mountain. As to their composition, he viewed it as very simple, *odnokhodovyy* (one way) – simply battles between small tribal families who represented their enemies as *mangadkhay* monsters. As I have already described in the previous chapter, Manshuud’s heroes, especially Geser and his sons, engage in feuds with families of *mangadkhay* monsters. Into Sanzheev’s Ekhirit-Bulagat

⁹ Most recently see G. B. Rinchinov’s 2006 thesis *Zhanrovaya spetsifika Uligerov Khori-Buryat* (Features Specific to the Genre of Khori-Buryat Epic). Zhamtsarano took down a number of Khori epics such as *Lodoldoi Mergen*, *Shoroltor Mergen*, *Tümer Khyumhatai* and *Übegen Zhibzhen*, which were published by Rudnev in Russian in 1913-4. Zhamtsarano referred to them briefly in his introduction to his publication of the two variants of the Western Buryat epic *Khaa Oshor* (1918: xvi, xxxiii). The only other collections of Khori epics have been Dugarov-Nimaev’s 1998 *Uligery Khori-Buryat*, which includes Zhamtsarano and Rudnev’s material, and M. N. Namzhilova’s 1997 *Khorinskie Uligery*, which features some good background information but only a few short epics. P. 81 of this text gives a full list of Khori epics in SORAN archives in Ulan Ude and St. Petersburg.

group went *ül'gernüüd* such as Manshuud's *Abay Geser*, *Yerensey* and *Khara Bukha Khübüün* as well as epics such as *Altan Shagay*, *Osoodor Megen*, *Ermei Bogdo Khaan*, *Gunkhabay Mergen*, *Bayan Badma Khaan*, *Alamzhi Mergen* and *Ayduaray Mergen* (Sanzheev 1936b; Sharakshinova 1969). The majority of these were collected and published by Zhamtsarano (1913, 1914, 1918, 1930-1) and variants were not found by subsequent scholars. His recordings have remained the best-preserved and archetypal Ekhirit-Bulagat epics.

One stand-out quality in the Ekhirit-Bulagat epics seemed to be the abundance of “zoomorphism”. Heroes are aided by speaking cuckoos and kings of the ants and often transform themselves into birds, mice, weasels and other creatures to travel or fight an enemy (Sanzheev 1936a,b; Sharakshinova 1969; Shoolbraid 1974: 76). Another is the common trope begun by Sanzheev in *po etapam* of the Ekhirit-Bulagat epics being full of primordial “matriarchal” figures such as the sisters in the stories of the heroes *Alamzhi* and *Ayduaray Mergen*. As noted, “matriarchal elements” were one of the main ingredients in Poppe's “Chronology” essay in arguing that the Buryat Geser represented a “tribal society”. These female characters, in order to aid their sick brother or raise him from the dead, have to put on the hero's armour and go out on quests gaining objects and magical cures by winning wives under the pretence of being men.

In some stories such as *Geser* and *Yerensey*, the patriarchal rule of the father dominates or he must be saved from death or danger by his heroic sons. In others, the sister dominates. In 1990 (189-217 cf. 2014: 3) Roberte Hamayon undertook an in-depth study of these *épopées-à-soeur* (epics for the sister) and *épopées-à-père* (epics for the father), but much of what she says does not reach beyond the assumptions laid down by Sanzheev in 1936.¹⁰ Sanzheev, as was popular in early twentieth century mythography, and is best epitomised by thinkers such as Robert Graves, believed that in the distant past societies had universally been ruled by matriarchies, and that this had later given way to patriarchy and feudalism. Such ideas have continued to be echoed in Buryat scholarship (Ulanov 1957, 1963: 14; Kuz'mina 1980;

¹⁰ Thus, Hamayon (2006: 15-18) is right to be confused as to why the Ekhirit-Bulagat, traditionally hunting rather than herding peoples, developed an epic tradition of tens of thousands of lines – something usually associated with herding peoples. The Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryats seem unique. But there might be a simple answer to this. Seeing that Geser in its Mongolian and Tibetan incarnations is such a large an epic and that the Khori Buryats on the other side of Baikal, where Mongolian Geser texts were far more prevalent, only tell very short epics, perhaps it might have been the introduction of Geser that spurred the creation of the Ekhirit-Bulagat long epic. Maybe if there had been no reception of the Geser cycle, which most likely through an oral medium from the Khongoodor in the 17-18th c. and then reinforced by texts later on in the 19th, as was argued in the introduction, then there would have been no creation of the other epics of tens of thousands of lines either: *Alamzhi Mergen*, *Shono Baatar* or *Yerensey*. One can but speculate and it would take a long book to do so convincingly. I leave this as a future task and return instead to the politics of the Soviet Geser.

Khundaeva 1991: 96-100; Tulokonov 1995: 383; Nikolayeva 2005), long after they have disappeared elsewhere.¹¹

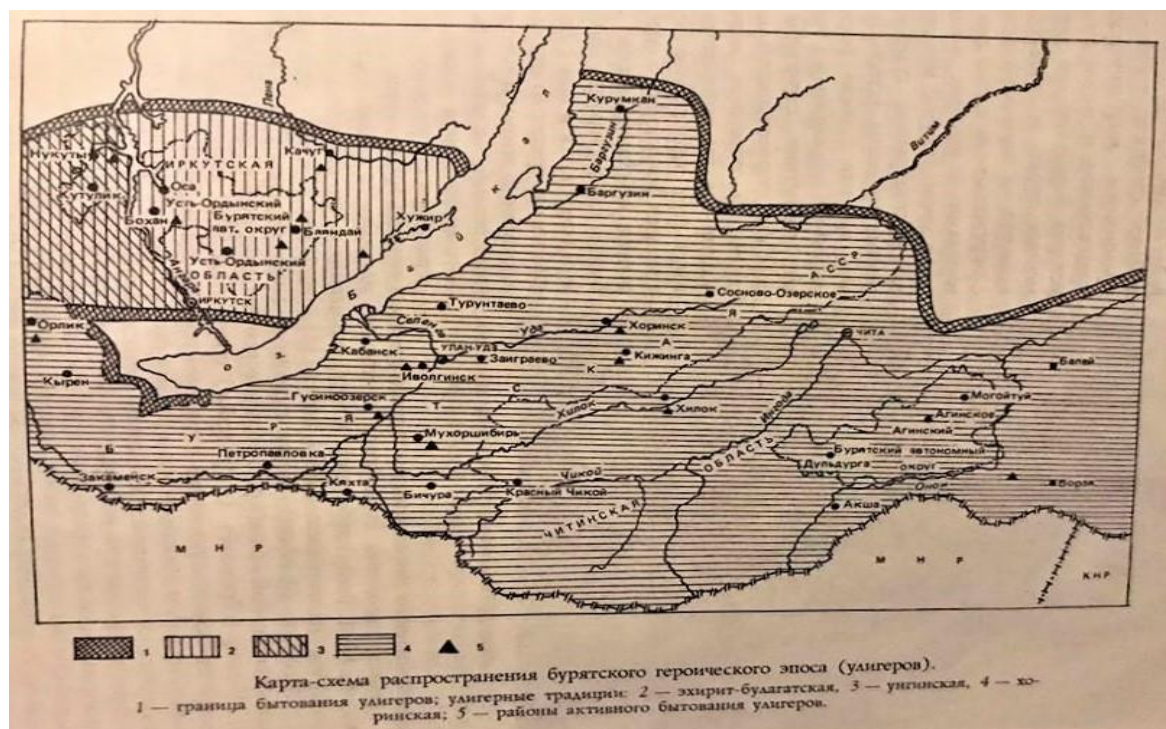
In comparison, the Unga epics were regarded by Sanzheev and all Buryat scholars since as being less primordial than the others because they largely dealt with social worlds of human and *mangadkhay* khans, their heirs and armies. Through Sanzheev's Marxian lens, these epics appeared to be the product of a "feudal stage" of Buryat culture, which made them later than the "primordial" Ekhirit-Bulagat category. The other stories that have been traditionally categorised as Unga epics include *Altan Shagay*, *Dalan Tabatai Übgen*, *Ere Khabtas Mergen*, *Khaan Sergei Mergen* and *Uzhaa Hamagan*. Most of these are not well-known, even by Buryat scholars.¹²

Next page: FIG 1.

Map of the Range of Epics classifies as Khori (horizontal lines), Ekhirit-Bulagat (hatched) and Unga (vertical lines). Black circles represent major towns, black triangles "active" sites for epics. However, it is uncertain when this image was drawn. It does not seem to appear in any earlier work, nor does there seem to have been any other efforts to make such maps before or since. Image by V. T. Novikov in M. I. Tulokhonov et al's edition of the reciter Yolbon Shalbykov/Shalbagai's *Alamzhi Mergen* (1991: 11). Readily obvious is the small territory in which the Ekhirit-Bulagat and Unga epics were found.

¹¹ The fact is that there is nothing vaguely matriarchal about Manshuud's Geser, except perhaps Geser's transformation into a donkey by one of his wives who is jealous of the other (Curtin 1909: 159-63; AG. lines 5864-7308). Geser's other wife then has to solve how to turn him back into a human. This latter wife seems to have her basis in the Amazonian figure Aju Mergen who does this in the Mongol Script and Unga Geser versions (Heissig 1983a: 5 system Ch. VI.XI). Aju Mergen appears in all the Unga Geser epics but not Manshuud's. Excepting Heissig (1983b), no one has ever attempted to explain the origins of this character in the Mongolian Geser corpus, for which, he fell back on dated concepts of primordial universal matriarchy, comparing Aju Mergen to the Greek Amazon Hippolyta and also the German Valkerie Brunhilda of the German epic the *Nibelunglied*. Just as surprising, in her recent and far-reaching book on the Amazon myth and its connections with Inner Asia, Adrienne Mayor (2014) seems completely unaware of the "Amazonian" sister figures in Buryat and Mongolian epic. They remain an enduring feature of epic, but not something to be put down to unverifiable early twentieth century theories of universal matriarchies. Gomboin (1990: 20) notes the similarities between the story of the sister-warrior who has to pretend to be her brother in *Ayduray Mergen* and the Altay Turk *Altayn Sayym Salam* and Tuvan *Boktu Kirish*, none of which Mayor (2014) mentions. Clearly such myths do not merely belong to the Buryats.

¹² The only book of note on them is Darima Burchina's *Geroicheskiy epos unginских buryat* (2007), which worked largely with archival material that had previously gone almost entirely unread. For the most part this work is simply a survey and catalogue of the epics and their variants. When I spoke with her in June 2016, Burchina informed me that there was still much work to be done on them and that excepting a few variants of Geser, almost none of them had ever been published due to lack of funding and interest by scholars. Nonetheless, Sanzheev was more than aware when he applied this division of Ekhirit-Bulagat and Unga that many epics such as *Geser*, *Yerensyi* and *Shono-Baatar* were found widely amongst the Western Buryats, and not merely in specific regions such as in Ust'-Orda or the Unga valley. So too, should it be emphasised, that both the Unga and Ekhirit-Bulagat epics are told in the same Ekhirit-Bulagat dialect of Buryat. The difference is one of a perceived historical difference, as though those Buryat *ül'gershed* living *kompatno v Priangar'ye na sravitel'no nebol'shoye territorii* (compactly in Priangaria in a comparatively small territory), as Bair Dugarov (2013) has described it, possessed a much later epic tradition, and all those south of the Angara river closer to Irkutsk a much older one that had preserved thousands of years of Buryat "deep time". This seems rather strange.



As has been noted, in order to theorise the *razvitie* (development) of the Buryat epic, Sanzheev was highly dependent upon the epics he had found in the Nukut and Alarsk *aymags* north of Irkutsk. A year after *po etapam*, in September 1937, Nukut and Alarsk would be severed from the BMASSR as part of the Stalinist Purges. They would become part of Itkutsk *oblast'*. The Ekhirit-Bulagat epic-cradle of Ust'-Orda, and Zhamtsarano's birthplace of Aginsk became their own autonomous *okrug* regions. Yet it would remain that that the BMASSR as official Buryat-Mongol Republic was to be reliant upon these in order to produce the idea of a "national epic". Geser would become a matter of necessary appropriation, though in 1936 Sanzheev could never of course have foreseen this. What was most important for Geser was this: Khangalov's fragments of Geser would later come to be included in this Unga group, as well as all the other Buryat Geser variants *except* that of Manshuud. Never again would another Ekhirit-Bulagat Geser be found, though of course, as was discussed at length in the previous chapter. Manshuud himself was able to produce two very different recitations of it and Curtin's recording of this material went almost entirely unknown in the USSR during the Soviet Era.

In short, the Ekhirit-Bulagat Geser is all down to the idiosyncrasies of a single reciter who was fortunate enough to be recorded. As was emphasised in the previous chapter, it would seem almost impossible to establish just how close Manshuud's epics may have been to others

or how “original” his narrative lifeworld and its multiforms were simply because so little material has survived. Yet, Sanzheev’s taxonomy made Manshuud’s Geser to be singled out as utterly unique, as the longest sustained work of Buryat “deep time”. It is from this basis that Poppe legitimises the idea that the only full variant of the Buryat Geser he knew, that of Manshuud, could be considered an ancient source on Buryat history. Through sleight of hand, as noted, Poppe anchors it to an 8th c CE dating through reference to the Tibetan Geser. Thus was the antiquity of the Buryat Geser constructed.

In 1940 Nicholas Poppe also wrote a short article entitled *Nekotorye problemy buryat-mongol'skogo geroicheskogo epasa* (Several Problems of Buryat-Mongol Heroic Epic), which utilised Sanzheev’s Unga and Ekhirit-Bulagat division in discussions of the Buryat Geser. Poppe (1940: 10) is quick to point out the uniqueness of the Mongol script 1716 Geser to the point of calling it the national epic of the Mongols (*natsional'nym mongol'skim eposom*):

Thus, there is no basis to not consider the *Geseriada* the national Mongolian epos, and merely a translation from Tibetan. It is a quite original and independent composition, for which only several parts of the Tibetan Geser was used.

However, when Poppe comes to discussing the Buryat Geser, he is not quite so levelheaded. The problem is that the Geser cycle supposedly has nine branches (*yühen halaa*), a curious trope which was described in the introduction to this thesis, and which does not reflect any existing variant of the cycle. As the reader may have noted, this trope also finds its way into the “Chronology” essay, where it is used to describe Manshuud’s tripartite *Abay Geser*, *Oshor Bogdo* and *Khürin Altay*: “The recorded part (3 branches) contains 22,000 lines. It must be assumed that all the “nine branches” contain from 60,000 to 75,000 lines.”

Thus, in order to fill out the nine branches, Poppe (1940) proposes that Manshuud’s *Abay Geser* and its two continuations with Geser’s sons are merely the first three branches - the centre of a massive cycle which also includes Manshuud’s *Bukha Khara Khübüün*, and the story *Altan Shagay*. While Jeremiah Curtin had recorded a variant of *Altan Shagay* (*Altin Shagai*) from Manshuud, this is not the one that Poppe obviously means, but another variant taken down by Zhamtsarano from the Alar Buryat *ül'gershen* Kh. N. Tenret'yev in Khundulun in 1906 and published in 1913. Poppe was clearly working with Zhamtsarano’s archival materials in Leningrad, but as an enemy of the state current perishing in a gulag, Zhamtsarano's name of course is never mentioned. The reader is not told *who* took down Manshuud’s *Abay Geser*. Zhamtsarano had been *removed* from Buryat scholarship for political reasons. This

would continue throughout the 1940s, in both the planning for the “jubilee” and the “consolidated Geser”. Yet of course without Zhamtsarano there would be no Buryat “deep time”.

Even stranger than Poppe’s forcing all these stories into a kind of “meta-epic” rather than realise that the nine branches is simply a cultural trope, is Poppe’s addition to the mix in the 1940 article of a supposed fourth part of Manshuud’s Geser, the story of Geser’s grandson, Oshor Bogdo’s son, *Ünshin Khara Khübüün* (The Only Child Black Boy). Manshuud never told such a story. Zhamtsarano did indeed take down a tale with this title down from the Kuda reciter Lazar’ Bardakhanov on the 29th-30th October 1906, the very day before he started the Herculean task of writing down Manshuud’s *Abay Geser* (Zhamtsarano 2011: 233). It has never been published, and no one else ever seems to have read it or referred to an archival location or its relation at all. Moreover, Poppe in this 1940 paper produced several other minor errors, which are still occasionally repeated by scholars.¹³

In spite of this, Poppe in the 1940 article does not yet attempt to supply an age for the Buryat Geser, as he does in the “Chronology” essay. The following year Poppe (1941) wrote once again on the Buryat and Mongol Geser variants in an article entitled *Ob otnoshenii buryat-mongol’skogo Gesera k mongol’skoy knizhnoy versii* (On the Relation of the Buryat-Mongol Geser to the Mongolian Book Version). Yet he did not give any theoretical dating here either. Until 1941, so Bel’gaev (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338 p. 5) recounted in 1948, Poppe had simply claimed that all the variants of Geser came from Tibet. After this point, in order to legitimise the Buryat Geser for the jubilee, he needed to show that the Buryat Geser was unique. But this was difficult to prove. In *Ob otnoshenii* Poppe now bizarrely claimed that the Buryat Geser “has no relation to the Mongolian book version” (*nikakogo otnosheniya ne imeet k mongol’skoy knizhnoy versii*). The likely reason for this was to support the idea that the Buryats had their *own* national epic. Even today one can find this 1941 article cited for precisely this nationalistic reason, as one may find as the concluding argument but a few years ago in a paper by Buryat geserologist Bair Dugarov (2015: 274 cf. Poppe 1941: 13): “...the Buryat “Geser” as a grandiose epic, constructed to the same type as all the heroic epic works of

¹³ Another issue this article is responsible for is the idea that in an episode reminiscent of Odysseus’ blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Geser blinds the *mangadkhay* Asuurayn Shara. This never happens; in fact it is Geser’s wife Aguy Gookhon, who, in the form of a bird, pecks out the monster Yobsogoldoi’s eyes. This eye-fixing ruse does occur, however, in the story of *Alamaldjin* taken down by Curtin (1909: 273-4) from Manshuud. For that matter Manshuud’s story of *Bukhu Khara Khübüün* (1972: line 1305f) contains a very similar episode to book IX of the *Odyssey*, in which a one-eyed monster is blinded and the hero escapes by clinging to a large goat from the monster’s herd (Neklyudov 1987: 62). The motif of blinding the ogre is a very common one throughout Eurasia, and is found in some Tibetan Geser epics (David Neel 193: 129; Hummel 1998: 65-68). See Frazer (1921 appendix 13) for the best listing of variants of this motif, which does include at least one Italian story in which a hero pretends to be an eye doctor to blind a trusting monster.

the Buryat-Mongols, is entirely the product of an epic artistry of the Buryat-Mongols and the national epic product of the Buryat-Mongols.”

Having declared the Mongol Geser corpus the “Mongol national epos” it became imperative to differentiate them, and so too the Mongols from the Buryat-Mongols. The simple fact of the matter seems to be that when the decision to choose Geser was made in 1940-1, very little was known at the time even by the experts on what Geser was about and where the epic came from. Yet, it would only be *because* Geser was chosen by Poppe that it would become the national epic of the Buryats. Without this there might be no Geser Studies today. Trying to prove that the *whole tradition* came from the Buryats was impossible. And yet, rather than simply theorising that what lay beneath the figure of Geser in Manshuud’s epic was a Buryat “deep time”, as prior and subsequent scholars did, efforts now seemed to slide dangerously towards wanting to claim that Geser was not from Tibet at all, but was originally a Buryat product! As Bel’gaev admitted during the 1948 trial of Geser (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338 p. 2-3), it was very obvious that the Buryat versions were a variant of the Mongol Geser, but “none of us were interested in the years 1940-1 in questions of the origin of Geser, rather everyone was saying that Geser was Buryat.” The need to produce an “invented tradition” and “deep time” for Buryat culture to showcase an epic jubilee like other minorities became paramount, even if it was obviously incorrect.

Moreover, Bel’gaev (p. 6) also admits that among the Buryats Geser was not widely known. He only existed in the ‘Western regions’ – Ust’-Orda (which was no longer part of Buryat-Mongolia after September 1937), and some parts of Lena, Tunkinsk, Ol’khon Island, Baikalo-Kudar and Barguzinsk. From the very start of Geser as Buryat “national epic”, Geser has been a geopolitical act of reappropriation. As I will show in the next chapter, this fact would emerge during the 1948 “trial” of the epic hero and fuel conspiratorial theorising that intellectuals had invented an epic that did not belong to the people. Yet, as I will also discuss in the fourth chapter, it was precisely this reappropriation beyond Buryatia that aided and precipitated the revival of Geser by elites in Buryatia during the 1990s as a symbol of Pan-Buryat cultural unity.

3. Collecting Geser.

Thus, with very little knowledge of Geser and a couple of speculative theories about Buryat pre-history, Poppe and Sanzheev had convinced the Writers Union of the USSR that Geser was wholly Buryat, had an ancient and anniversarial dating, and should be the national epic. On the 31st of May 1941 a short article appeared in the official soviet organ *Pravda*. The article announced that five days earlier the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Union of

Soviet Writers had decided that they would celebrate the six-hundred-year “jubilee” of the Buryat hero Geser in November 1942 (Cf. Bazarov 1995: 124; Cakars 2008: 126). This celebration had already been accepted and decreed by *Sovnarkom* (Council of the People’s Commissars), including Stalin, on the 6th of May (Basaev 2013 Pt II; Baldano 2014: 32). So Basaev (2013 pt II) claims it was the “*pervym dokumentom, podpisannym predsovnarkoma Stalinym v tot zhe den*” (the first document signed by Stalin’s presidium on that day), but it seems uncertain if there is any proof to this. The anniversary was to be commemorated with the publication of a parallel text of Geser, in both Buryat and Russian - a “scientific publication”. As to why Manshuud’s Geser or another single variant was not chosen and why a *svodnyy Geser* (consolidated Geser) had to be produced instead, remains a mystery.¹

Perhaps this was an attempt to copy what had happened to the Armenian epic *The Daredevils of Sassoun* (Sasna Tsrher) for its jubilee in September 1939. Here the thousands of pages of epic that had been gathered were turned into a collated edition and Russian translation called *David Sasunskiy* (*David of Sassoun*) that remained the dominant popular edition throughout the Soviet Period.¹⁴ In retrospect, today gesserologists such as the poet and scholar Bair Dugarov (2007: 7-8) seem to view the efforts to create the “consolidated” Geser as a positive one still worth celebrating, though one should notice that he manages to elide the Russian translation of the epic entirely (while he is of course writing in Russian). It is as though the project was entirely concerned with rendering Geser into modern Buryat for the Buryats and little else:

The need to create a composite version of the Geser epic in the literary Buryat language, along with scientific research and academic publications on the most original oral versions of the *Geseriada*, was understood by the scientists-researchers of the epic, and by the representatives of the writers’ union, as the number one national priority. Such a pressing task was determined by the ideology of the creation and development of national literature and the [understanding of the] Buryat literary language, as a single verbal and artistic process, in which heroic epic Geser, which existed in different dialects in the Buryat-Mongolian language and was widely-known to Buryats living on both sides of Baikal, was called upon to unite the many centuries old oral tradition of the epic word with the commonly understood literary language of the Buryats of the twentieth century.

It is very interesting to compare this with comments made in 2009 for an article on the Buryatian news site *Infpol* titled *Ulanovu – 100 let, Geser – 1000 let* (For Ulanov – 100 years,

¹⁴ The 1948 testimony of Bel’gaev (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338, *tezisy, predstavlenye t. Belgaevym*, p. 67) refers to *David of Sassoun*, the *Kalevala*, *Jangar*, *Olonkho* and *Manas* and their “jubilees”.

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for Geser – 1000 years) by an uncredited author who nonetheless seems well-versed in the history of Geser:

There is a paradox. In spite of the wealth of the content of the *Geseriada*, the fact is that until now the overwhelming majority of people do not know the authentic sound (*podlinnogo zvuchaiya*) of this epic. Everyone knows the “consolidated text” of Geser, the poetic translations of which into Russian were made by the literary “slaves” (*rabami*) of the famous Soviet poets Semyon Lipkin and Vladimir Soloukhin. But in fact this is not an authentic testament (*autentichnym pamyatnikom*) of the literature of the Buryats. This is a kind of literary hoax (*literaturnaya mistifikatsia*), the result of literary “design” (*dezayn*). This text was never written down by folklore researchers from its bearers, it never existed as a scientific fact, but was artificially created by the playwright Namzhil Baldano to a politically determined date by compiling two genuine *ül’gers* (*dvukh podlinnykh uligerov*) about Geser.

These are indeed some very harsh words – hoax, design, slaves – as opposed to the *podlinnyy* (authentic) Geser. Yet, the fact remains that without the “consolidated” Geser project, no variant but Manshuud’s may have ever been collected. For instance, one should note that following a swift description of the contents of the epic of Geser in the May 31st 1941 *Pravda* article about the upcoming jubilee, the writer states that of some one hundred-thousand lines of Geser that had been transcribed from reciters by scholars, only some twenty-two thousand recorded prior to the Revolution had ever been published, in 1930-1. Here the writer was referring to Zhamtsarano’s transcriptions of Manshuud’s Geser, but neither man’s name is mentioned. There is a bitter irony to this namelessness. Just as Geser was about to be elevated to the supreme symbol of Buryat culture and historical identity, Zhamtsarano himself, as has been noted, was dying in a labour camp as a “Pan-Mongolist” enemy of the people. One wonders if Zhamtsarano, had he not been imprisoned, would have suggested of Geser as Buryat national epic. He may well have suggested Manshuud’s *Yerensey* instead, or simply recommended a Russian translation of Manshuud’s *Abay Geser* be published – something which did not end up taking place until M. N. Khomonov undertook the task in 1961-4.

Nonetheless, even with Manshuud’s Geser scholars thought that they simply did not have enough Geser material or know enough about the hero. If a “scientific text” was to be made, this would mean going in search of as much Geser material as possible. Thus, just as the *Pravda* article had said about the new unpublished 100 thousand lines of Geser, at the end of 1940 collection of epics had begun in the *aymags* (provinces). This was the greatest and only concentrated effort to collect Buryat Geser material that has ever been undertaken. Bel’gaev names the scholars D. D. Khiltukhin, A. I. Shadaev and I. N. Madason as the

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collectors, but perhaps Sergey P. Baldaev was the most important. The fact is that those who went in search of Geser were not searching randomly. Baldaev especially had a great deal of previous experience collecting folktales. In 1916 Baldaev had recorded *Alamzhi Mergen*, *Kharaasgai Mergen* and *Shono-Baatar* from Al'for Vasil'yev, whose version of Geser he was to later take down. In 1917 Namzhil Baldano had taken down *Altan Shagay Mergen* from Platon Stepanov, another Geser reciter who would be visited again during the early 1940s.¹⁵

Collection of Geser started in November 1940 and continued in to February – the coldest and most inaccessible time of year for visiting the rural areas in Southern Siberia and the time of year when *ül'ger* was traditionally told. Many traipsed through the snow on foot to do this with nothing but pencil and paper, as Geser expert Bair Dugarov emphasised when I spoke to him in July 2016. The collectors were not merely keen to learn about Geser for scholarly reasons. The November 1942 deadline for the jubilee was a very short period to collect, assemble and translate the proposed “scientific edition” of the epic. Bel'gaev tells us that as director of GIYaLI, he immediately busied himself with preparations for the “jubilee”, so too Sanzhiev as deputy directory. Other major figures were N. Zugeev, who was secretary of the project from May 1940; D.D. Khiltukin, A. I. Ulanov and so on were just academic workers. Maksim Shulukshin was the “controller” of the Union of Writers in Buryatia at the time; Galsanov its secretary. K. N. Namsaraev, N. G. Baldano and A.I. Shadaev were writers who were interested in the project and came to play a major role. These names would become of great importance in the creation and condemnation of Geser that was to take place some eight years later.

Perhaps the most important Unga Geser from this period was taken down by I.M. Madason from the then 63-year-old *ül'gershen* Pyookhon Petrov. Although Petrov was then in his sixties he still worked at the local *kolkhoz* in Angara, Irkutsk and was still actively involved with it as a labourer until he was seventy (Ulanov intro. Khomonov 1968: 3-10). Madason had first heard the Geser epic at age five or six when he was growing up in the Osinsk Valley, Irkutsk. Inspired from that moment, a schoolteacher later introduced him to Khangalov's 1925 *Balaganskiy Sobornik* (Balagansk Miscellany), which contained the Buryat Geser material from Pyetkhooba Tüshemilov and members of Khangalov's own family and was first published in Potanin's works in the 1880s-90s. So too in 1934 had the

¹⁵ However, these tales collected by Baldaev were not published until the 1950s-60s (Baldaev 1959, 1960, 1961).

scholar R. F. Tugutov had already taken down a 5000-line version of Geser from Petrov, which as of yet has still not been published.¹⁶

Madason met with Pyookhon Petrov in October 1940, and after three days of drinking, riddles and short-folk tales such as *Zaakhan Khübüün* and *Khiin nokhoi khoyor*, the *ül'gershen* was finally ready to tell him Geser. This was even if he claimed that his brother Noyot was a far superior storyteller and that the young man would have done better to get him to tell it, were he present. What resulted from this was the 12,357-line *Geser* which Aleksey Ulanov was to publish in a dual Buryat-Russian translation in 1960 (and, rare for a Buryat epic, again in a second edition in 1968). The “consolidated Geser” would end up being largely a product of this variant and Manshuud’s *Abay Geser Khübüün*. Because of its relatively early influence, Petrov’s has remained *the Unga Geser* and is referenced more frequently than any other Unga variant.¹⁷

Nonetheless, it was S. P. Baldaev who was responsible for collecting the majority of Unga Geser epic material that is available today. During his career Baldaev (1960: 3) would end up taking down some seventy epics from several hundred lines to tens of thousands. Of the Unga Geser cycles he took down at this time, some were merely prologues, and some many episode narratives. These were from the reciters Platon Stepanov, Bazhei Zhatukhaev, Nikolay Ivanov, R. N. Bulashov, A. Khabtarinov, Dmitriy Tarkhaev, Aleksandr “Al’for” Vasil’ev and Papa Tüshemilov. This catalogue encompasses all the great Buryat Geser reciters besides Manshuud Emegeev.¹ Thereafter there have not been any others. The call for collecting Geser came at just the right time, as many of the reciters were very old and sadly would pass away in the coming decade. Thus, Geser became “literature” on paper, fortuitously preserved, but at the same time rendered the possession of an academic few.

1940-41 was to be the most fertile period in Buryat Geser studies for the gathering of primary material. It is estimated that some 115 thousand lines of Geser were gathered for the project (Baldano 2014: 32). Sadly, however, only the Geser variants of Petrov (Khomonov 1968, Prevolykiy 1999), Dmitriev (1953), Vasil’ev (1995) and one variant of Papa Tüshemilov (Chagdurov 2000) have ever been published. The best they have had was a second “*svodnyy*

¹⁶ Burchina (2009: 261) gives the BNTsSORAN inventory numbers for this version as 1023, 1375, 1376, 1377. When I interviewed BNTs folklorist Natal’ya Nikolaeva in June 2016 she was working on a Russian translation of this version but said that funding for its publication was unlikely.

¹⁷ I.M. Madason also took down some ninety pages of Geser from Tüshemilov later in 1941 (Ulanov 1968: 5). Other scholars were also involved in the booming interest in Buryat folklore in the BMASSR, even if their transcriptuons have never been published. In 1937 one Shaldaev, on whom I can find very little, had already taken down fifty-one typed pages worth of Geser from Apollon Toroev. In 1941 Khiltukhin had taken down a Geser variant from Paramon Dmitriev. The scholar Boldanova also transcribed a variant of Geser from Ivanov, which was almost identical with that taken down by S. P. Baldaev from the same reciter earlier the same year (Khamiruev and Semyonov 2005).

Geser” of some sections of Toroev, Vasil’ev and Tüshemilov published together by Chagrurov (1995) under the title *Abay Geser*. All the other transcripts remain in the archives of the *Tsentr Vostochnykh Rukopisey i Ksilografov BNTs SORAN* (Centre for Eastern Manuscripts and Xylographs, Buryat Scientific Centre, Siberian Department of the Russian Academy of Sciences), which I visited in June-July of 2016.¹⁸ One of their most remarkable aspects is the fact that much of the paper on which they had been typed or hand-written had been recycled. Often on the reverse side of the only copies of these epics in existence there were children’s drawings. Paper was rare. In 1990 Darima Burchina published an epitome of the contents of many of these Unga epics entitled *Geseriada Zapadnykh Buryat (Geseriad of the Western Buryats)*, and this is the text most frequently consulted concerning their content.

One of the most interesting Unga Geser variants is that of Tat’yana. M. Boldonova taken from Papa Tüshemilov in 1948 – much later than the others. Boldonova was perhaps the first notable female Buryat Geserologist, a field today where of the few remaining Buryat Geser scholars in Buryatia today - Darima Burchina, Natal’ya Nikolaeva and Yelizaveta Khundaeva – are female, though traditionally Geser was the province of only male performers. Although Boldonova lived until the late 1980s, it would only be in 2000 that Chagdurov finally published this variant. However, the reason for this was not merely that there was not a great deal of money to publish such things during the Soviet Period. The reason is that Boldonova had to hide her transcription and in the end forgot about it (Chagdurov 2000: 6). In 1948 attitudes to Geser suddenly changed – the hero became anathematic to Soviet ideology. I explore how and why this happened in the following chapter.

Nonetheless, in the winter of 1940-1 Buryat academia had suddenly opened a new window onto a whole new world of Geser and Buryat folklore. The Buryat Unga Geser epics are remarkably similar to one another in content and the majority of their episodes (or “branches” – whether more or less than nine). Moreover, many of their episodes have a clear ancestry in the Old Mongol Script Geser corpus (see: Lőrincz 1972, 1974), though there is not the space to go into detailed comparisons here.¹⁹ A chart is appended at the end of the chapter.

¹⁸ The archival numbers for the unpublished Unga Geser texts for those who are interested are: Apollon Toroev *Geser Bogdo* (1937), inv no. 1899; Maysyn Alsyyev *Abay Geser Bogdo-Khan* (1944), Baldaev fond inv. no. 327/465; D. Tarkhaev, *Abay Geser Khaan* (1941), p. 11 d. 296; R. N. Bulashov, *Abay Geser Khaan* (1943), Baldaev fond op. 1 d. 191; A. Khabtarinov, *Abai Geser* (1940), Baldaev fond no. 11; Platon Stepanov, *Abai Geser Khübüün* (1941), Baldaev fond op. 1 delo 159; Al’for Valsil’yev, *Abai Geser Bogdo Khaan* (1916), Baldaev fond, op. 1 d. 155; Nikolay Ivanov, *Abay Geser Khan* (1940-1), Baldaev fond, op 1, d. 168; Bazhei Zhatukhaev, *Abay Geser* (1941), inv no. 1569. I seem to recall, however, that I was unable to find Zhatukhaev’s version. This seems to be an old catalogue number and no amount of searching by myself or others could turn it up. The Baldaev fond is also referred to as fond 36.

¹⁹ Succinctly, all of the episodes found in the 1716 Mongol Script Geser xylograph are commonly found in the Unga variants, with the exception of its seventh chapter - Geser’s journey to the underworld to

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Most importantly, in the Unga Geser the hero is a khan with an army, as too is the case of many of his *mangadkhay* enemies. Just as Sanzheev's theory of *razvitie* (development) had theorised the category of the Unga epics to belong to a "feudal" culture, the new Unga Geser variants did not appear to contradict this.

Manshuud's *Abay Geser*, which through Sanzheev and Poppe had been elevated to the status of primordially and national epic, may seem very simplistic, repetitive, even dull, in comparison with these others.²⁰ Manshuud's *Abay Geser*, even without its two continuations, is largely eleven thousand lines of the hero fighting formulaic duels with families of monsters and nailing them to trees. It is, as argued in chapter one, an oral "chain epic" composed of improvised repeating motifs which *includes strong aspects of Geser material*. While the Unga epics are also improvised, they possess a much stronger "loyalty" to the narrative of the Mongol Script Geser. Manshuud's Geser *is unique*, though we may never know if it is indeed "amazingly primitive, archaic" (to quote Vladimirtsov), or simply an idiosyncratic product. Nonetheless, as the *de facto* only Ekhirit-Bulagat Geser according to Sanzheev's system of classification, this made it the only ancient Geser. Thus, the more Buryat Geser variants that were recorded, the more Manshuud's seemed to stand out. Sanzheev and Poppe's theories had been cemented. They had successfully created a "deep time" for the Buryats, one which, as will be explored throughout the rest of this thesis still survives today, having been passed through multiple *dispositifs*.

rescue his mother's soul. Lőrincz (1972) lists, however, that Mongol Script manuscripts of this episode were present on both sides of Baykal. Yet, strangely, this never transferred to the oral epics of the Buryats. Perhaps it was regarded as a taboo topic, but more likely it was simply never transferred via oral means, such as through the Khongoodor. Shoolbraid (1974: 76) notes a variant of Tüshemilov's Geser taken down by Baldaev in which the monster Sherem Minaata is located near the land of the dead. This seems to merely be a coincidence, and not an intended underworld journey, as she imagines. Nothing about the land of the dead is explicitly mentioned. As well as this, two of the "extra" chapters of the Mongol script corpus are very common in the Unga Geser. One is Geser's battle with the monster Nandulam/Angdulam, whose name is rationalised in Buryat as Gal Dülen (Fire-Flame). The other is the later variant of the 1716 xylograph's chapter six in which the monster who disguises himself as a lama to turn the hero into a donkey has a name. In Mongolian he is Lusaya, in Buryat Lobsogoldoy/Yobsogolgoy. Both of these latter episodes also occur in Manshuud's versions of Geser when curiousl, there are few other direct parallels with whole episodes in the Geser tradition. See footnote 13 in chapter one of this thesis for details.

²⁰ Perhaps the most astounding aspect of the epic is the number of times the *mangadkhays* Zuudag Shara and Dan'yal Shara are reused as stock enemies and killed over and over again by Geser and his sons in Zhamtsarano's recording. Zuudag is killed by all three heroes (AG. 7098-210, 12665-13879, 18126-20430). Dan'yal Shara is also killed three times in total - twice at the hands of *Khürin Altay* (ibid. 9390-984, 14881-15370, 18915-20430). Dan'yal Shara also appears as the main antagonist in Zhamtsarano's recording of Manshuud's *Yerensey* (1914: 776ff). Zuudag Shara also appears in *Bukhyn Khara Khübüün* (1972: line 1123f), where, after some swift wrestling the hero tears him apart. One wonders how many times over Manshuud's career that these two stock monsters were killed by various heroes.

Mongol Corpus (Heissig 1983a)	Mansh. (Curtin)	Mansh. (Zham.)	Petrov (Bald.)	Dmitriev	Tushem. (Bold.)	Zhat.	Ivanov	Toroev	Stepano	Vasil'ev	Alsyyev	“Consolidated Geser” (Baldano)
I. War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	War in Heaven	Cosmogony	War in Heaven	War in Heaven (I, II)
I. Youth and 3 wives	Youth and 1 wife.	Youth and 1 wife	Youth and 3 wives	Youth and 3 wives	Youth and 3 wives	War continuation	Arkhan Shütger	Youth And 2 wives	Youth and 3 wives	War In Heaven	Youth And 3 Wives	Youth and 3 wives (III)
II./XV. Tiger	Killing the Traitor Agsagalday	Killing the Traitor Agsagalday	Orgoli	Cutting Giant Edyr Tree	Orgoli	Youth and 3 wives	Youth and 3 wives	Tosg-oldoy	105-headed monster Moyl Khara Baba	Youth and 3 wives	Orgoli	Arkhan Shütger (IV)
III. Khan of China	Gal Nurmar	Galkha Nurman	Abarga Mogoy (snake)	Ogtoni	Cutting Giant Larch	Unblock Holy spring	Abarga Mogoy (snake)	Sharabli	Sharablin	Gal Dülme	Lama Dobogo	Orgoli (V)
IV. /XII. Monster of North	Duals with various mangadkhay	Marries Gaguuray Nogoos	Abarga Sesen	Abarga Sesen	Abarga Sesen	Güme Khan	Gal Dülme	Ol'khon	Gal Nurma Khaan	Khitad Gümen Khaan	Sharaysk Khans	Sherem Minaata (VI)
V./XIII. Shiraygol Khans	Marries Gaguuray Nogoos	Turned into horse by Yobsogoldoy and Gaguuray	Sharablin	Sharablin	Sharablin	Gal Dülme (income-plete)	Zorgodoy Mergen Steals Hero's Wives			Lobso-Goldoy Moyl Khara	Gal Dülme	Abarga Sesen (VII)
VI. /XI. Turned to Donkey/ Lubsaga	Turned into horse by mangadkhay	Kills Yobsogoldoy's family and nails Gaguuray to tree	Gal Dülme	Raises heroes	Sherem Minaata		Taril Eryeen and Daiyn Eryeen villains			Sharablin	Arkhan Shütger	Losbgo-Ldoy (VIII)
VII. Hell.	Tengeri make Iron Hero to save Geser	Duals with various mangadkhay	Lobso-Goldoy	Gal Dülme	Gal Dölmö		Lobso-goldoy			Arkhan Shütger	Abarga Sesen	Sharablin (IX)
VIII. Raise Dead Heroes	Story of the Iron Hero	Finds out Gaguuray and Yobsogoldoy still alive so nails them to a tree again.	Sherem Minaata	Lobso-goldoy	Güme Sesen Khaan					Sherem Minaat	Lobso-goldoy	
IX. Angdulan X. Cotong	Story of Ashir Bogdo	Story of Oshor Bogdo	Four Fiends	Gümel Sesen Khaan								
XIV. Način Khan 2 chaps		Story of Khürin Altay	Gümen Sesen Khaan									

Chapter 3. The Trial of Geser

In the previous chapter I described how Poppe's *ad hoc* millennial dating of Manshuud's Geser was utilised to produce a "national culture" and "deep time" for the Buryats, though in the end only 600 years was agreed on for the jubilee. Here I now turn to the fall of the epic and its hero. In spite of all the preparations were made to collect material and to have the "consolidated" text ready for the planned millennial jubilee in November 1942, this never happened. Instead the project to produce the text would soldier on for nearly a decade until finally there was an inquiry into the ideological value of the hero and his epics. Geser would come undone and with him Buryat academia. The very notion of what it meant to be Buryat too would be thrown into disarray due to the fact that Geser was also shared as an epic tradition with other Mongolic peoples and the Tibetans. Without a unique "national epic" to give Buryat culture a much needed "deep time" of its own, what history did the Buryats have?

In May 1948, nearly some eight years after the "consolidated text" project and plans for a jubilee were initiated, the Secretary of the BMASSR's branch of the CPSU, Aleksandr V. Kudryavtsev, called a meeting on the topic of the progress of the project and the ideological value of Geser in general. As will be discussed in detail in this chapter, the fact was that Kudryavtsev had already spent several years conducting public denunciations of presumed "Pan-Mongolists" and "bourgeois" intellectuals.

Geser gave Kudryavtsev an excuse to crack down on political opponents connected with the project. In May 1948 both the Geser epic tradition and those who had worked to translate, popularise and propagandise it were put on trial. However, unlike the Moscow "show trials" and Purges and their regional variants a decade earlier, there was no pre-prepared narrative against Geser except the suspicion that the *mangadkhay* (monsters) the hero fought in the epics might represent Russians. Instead the accused were given turns to competitively denounce aspects of Geser and their co-workers in efforts to vindicate themselves. From this a coherent but erroneous narrative emerged that the attempt to elevate Geser to the status of "national epic" had been a plot by "bourgeois nationalist" and even "fascist" interests all along. Thus, in many ways what I will be analysing and describing in this chapter is more of a political crisis among the BMASSR academic and political elites coming to fruition rather than simply a crisis of Buryat identity.

As I showed in the previous chapter, Geser's elevation to the position of national epic had been a necessary invention. However, this required "reversible forgetting" – the religious and feudal aspects of the hero and the rarity of the epic as a living tradition had to be toned

down or ignored entirely to make the hero compatible with the Soviet *dispositif* of Marxist “national cultures”. This problem was deeply imbedded in the Soviet *dispositif*'s conception of the value of epics and folklore. The key to the development of a Soviet folklore had been Lenin's ([1913] 1972 Vol. 20: 21) proposition that “the elements of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary forms, in every national culture, since in every nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism.”

Thus, Buryat culture and its epic traditions could be selectively mined and celebrated for assumed “elements of democratic and socialist culture.” Yet, Lenin had also given a *caveat*: “But every nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of ‘elements’, but of the dominant culture. Therefore, the general “national culture” is the culture of the landlords, the clergy and the bourgeoisie.” Thus, the epics had to be purged of any religious and aristocratic content. When in 1948 the Geser project came under scrutiny these troublesome facts – and some old theories too - such that Geser was really a calque for Chingis Khan - could suddenly be “remembered” by the accused in order to shift the blame from themselves on to others. Attempting to show that one had always been ideologically sound from the very start of the project and never believed in Geser's value, but that others working on it had believed, thus became a survival strategy in a political landscape still dangerously close to the Purges that had liquidated the Buryat intelligentsia but a decade before. In order to dissect this narrative, I will undertake a close reading of the language used in a transcription of the May 1948 meeting on Geser kept in the National Archives of the Republic of Buryatia (NARB f. 1 op. 1 d. 4829 l. 338) entitled *Soveshchaniya po voprosu o “Geseriade” 20-21 maya 1948g* (Meeting on the question of the Geseriad, 20th-21st May 1948).

1. Kudryavtsev and the Monsters.

In 1943 Alexander Vasilevich Kudryavtsev, the “*Zloy Noyon*” (Vicious Lord), as some Buryat intellectuals later dubbed him (Basaev 2013 pt II-III), was appointed by Moscow to his position as First Secretary of the CPSU in the BMASSR. He was the second non-Buryat to be given this post following the “dismemberment” of the Buryat-Mongol Republic in 1937 - a clear sign from Moscow of its ongoing concerns with paranoia about “Pan-Mongolism” and nationalism amongst the Buryats. Kudryavtsev soon began to develop a preoccupation with rooting out “bourgeois nationalists” among the Buryat intelligentsia. An enduring target was Buyanto S. Sanzhiev, a young propagandist for the CPSU in Buryatia and involved in the Geser project

since its early beginnings under Poppe in 1940. In 1946 Kudryavtsev even attempted to coin the term *sanzhievshchina* (Sanzhievism) as a synonym for “bourgeois nationalism.” So Sanzhiev would later recall of the period:

from the autumn of 1946 to the spring of 1951 ... a rampant campaign of persecution and the persecution of cadres of science and culture was conducted. This was conducted at party conferences, writers' meetings and at scientific meetings. The defenders of the epic were removed from their posts, expelled from the republic... I was criticized quite unreasonably for allegedly not suppressing, but supporting nationalistic manifestations on the part of some scientific and creative workers (Shulukshin, Balburov, Eliasov, Yampilov, Metelitsa)... At the 24th plenum of the regional committee of the party (1946), in my speech, I fundamentally rejected the accusations brought against me regarding errors of a nationalistic nature, as unreasonable, tendentious (Buyakhaev 2013).

Thus, the downfall of the Geser project was in many ways far from unexpected. The May 1948 meeting about Geser was instigated by Mikhail Khamaganov, the editor of the Buryat Soviet “organ” *Baykal*. What caught Kudryavtsev’s attention was Khamaganov’s belief that the term *mangadkhay*, used for the monster enemies of Geser, was really a racist slur against Russians. Geser was anti-Russian propaganda. Indeed, in the 1948 trial of Geser, the poet Namzhil Baldano claims that in his composition of the “consolidated text” he made sure to delete the word *mangadkhay*, because it had indeed been used in the past with such connotations, especially in the compound *orod mangad* (Russians-monsters).¹

In composing the text Baldano replaced *mangadkhay* with “*shulmas*” – a far more culturally neutral term for evil spirits. Something very interesting is taking place here - the necessary erasure of resistance to colonialism. In comparison, later during the 1953 redemption of Geser, the young doctoral candidate G. N. Mikhaylov (ibid. 48) would later defend the use of *mangadkhay* on the basis that while indeed the term was used against the Russians in a number of Buryat dialects, he believed it to be much older. The Buryats had only come into contact with the Russians during the 17th century, and Manshuud’s Buryat Geser with its warring families of heroes and monsters was primordial: shamanic, pre-Buddhist - matriarchal even. The *mangadkhay/mangas* was ancient, and well-attested throughout Mongolian folklore – the Russian association was late. Mikhaylov (ibid. 56) even cites a scholar called T. A.

¹ In Manshuud’s epic *Bukhu Khara Khübüün* one can even find an example of this “*orod mangad*” (1972: line 1725), though it does not seem to mean monsters anymore, merely a formulaic compound for Russians. See the entries for *mangad* and *mangadkhay* in Shagdarov and Cheremisov (2010: 535).

Bertagaev who had found an example where the Kazakhs are described by Buryats as *mangadkhay*, thus paradoxically clearing the term of an implicit connection with Russians, though no source for this Kazakh variant is given.

This concern about the inherent racism of national epics was not unique to Geser at the time. One might note as a comparison that in 1952 concern was raised in Kyrgyzstan that because the enemies of the epic hero Manas were Chinese, that this might get in the way of the then important “Sino-Soviet friendship” (Benningsen 1975). In Azerbaijan *Dede Korkut* was also decried as endorsing violence against Armenians and Georgians (Bagirov 1951: 8). Clearly the Soviet *dispositif* of “national cultures” was troubled by concerns about nationalism, which offered Kudryavtsev and others in similar positions in the other ASSRS the opportunity to condemn the epics.

Indeed, the Stalinist drive for the minorities of the USSR to produce “national cultures”, each with their own “national epic” did not come to difficultly merely in the BMASSR. As Van der Heide (2015: 198) writes of the effects of this ideology on the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*:

The war years of the early 1940s brought a new attitude towards the epics: in order to keep the non-Russian population involved in the Soviet project, Soviet patriotism was recast by use of symbols that had previously been defined nationalist and reactionary. This brought the Manas epic back to the publishing realm and made room for the publication of the Manas series of chapbooks. Soon after the war, however, the epics and their protagonists were accused of bourgeois-nationalism and feudal-clericalism.

In the spring of 1952 a chain reaction of denunciations of “national epics” swept across the Turkic ASSRs. Benningson (1975: 463-74) has called the period of 1952-3 the “Crisis of the Turkic National Epics” and is perhaps the only person to have attempted a catalogue of the persecutions that went on.² What began with accusations that the Azerbaijani *dastan* (epic)

² Daniel Prior (2000) and Nienke van der Heide (2015) have more recently examined the long history of the misfortunes of the Kyrgyz *Manas* in detail. In 1937 it was decreed that by the start of 1938 a Kyrgyz and Russian parallel edition of *Manas* should immediately be published. However, this did not come to fruition. As with the purges of local cadres that took place in the BMASSR and much of the rest of the USSR in 1937-8, one hundred and thirty-eight Kyrgyz elites who had been elevated to their positions by the policy of *korenizatsia*, were shot on the 3rd November 1938, including four who had been members of the editorial board for the *Manas* project (Prior 2000: 25-32). Nonetheless, in March 1940 it was suddenly announced that there should be a jubilee for Manas. In 1941 a 1100-year jubilee was set to be celebrated in 1947 as though nothing had happened at all. However, in 1947, shortly before the celebrations, an article by one S. Malov appeared criticising the proposed 1100-year dating and the jubilee was abandoned (van der Heide 2015: 226). Like Geser, the jubilee would not be celebrated until the 1990s, after the fall of the USSR. On the history of the Uzbek Alpamysh during the Soviet Period see Ch 2 of Paksoy (1989).

Dede Korkut was a product of an aristocratic elite, soon moved to its Turkmen cousin *Korkut-Ata*, and then the Uzbek *Alpamysh*, Kazakh *Koblandy Batyr* and then smaller Turkic ethnicities and their epics, such as the Tatar *Shoro Batyr* and Nogai *Er-Sain*. During this period the Uzbek scholar Shark Yilduz famously called the March 1952 meeting of the Uzbek branch of the CPSU and the Uzbek Writers' Union to denounce the epic of Alpamysh, "*Alpomish dostonining mukhokamasi*" (the trial of the Alpamysh *dastan*) (Paksoy 1989: 12 n. 39). The Kyrgyz *Manas* also later received a "trial" on the 6th-10th of June 1952. In the same way one might also speak of the meeting that took place under Kudryavtsev on the 20th-21st of May 1948 as the "trial" of Geser, a motif which I will return to many times during this chapter.

However, the "Crisis of Turkic Epics" took place much later than the crisis of Geser in the BMASSR. Why was this so? Quite simply because Khamaganov's complaints about the *mangadkhay* monsters played into Kudryavtsev's desire to uncover evidence of nationalist activities (whether real or otherwise). If the jubilee had taken place and the "consolidated text" had been published sooner, then perhaps Geser might have avoided the fall that took place in May 1948. Personality clashes and a "revolving door" of contributors and no deadline had allowed the project to languish, forgotten until it was too late. Ironically, the May 1948 "trial" would allow a new honesty in approaching Geser's history to come forth from scholars and propagandists who had spent years strategically ignoring the feudal and religious aspects of the hero in order to present the image of a figure friendly to the Marxian "national cultures" initiative. The accused would for the first time in the history of Soviet Geserology speak at length about the hero's connections with Buryat shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism. However, this would be as an instrument in order to denounce Geser, blame others, and save themselves from political persecution.

2. The Forgotten Jubilee.

What had been happening during the eight long years that the "consolidated text" project had been going? In spite of the massive wealth of material that was assembled for the "scientific text" of Geser no jubilee took place in 1942. In June 1941 Nazi Germany broke its non-aggression pact with the USSR and invaded. The USSR had entered the "Great Patriotic War". Jubilees for national epics became somewhat less important. However, this also offered an unparalleled opportunity for Geser to be mobilised as a symbol of the Buryat warriors on the front fighting the Nazi invaders. For instance, Sherkhunaev (1959: 55) records that Pyookohn Petrov conflated Geser's battle with the monster Lobsogoldoy with that between the USSR and

Hitler!³ The dualistic narrative of the epic's cosmic battle between good and evil, could be adjusted to this next context very easily, just as it has been adjusted to many cultures and *dispostifs* before and since.

During the War some Buryat academics and politicians also tried to encourage the idea that Geser could be a model of bravery and manliness to encourage the Buryats in the battle against the Nazis. However, very little except the titles of a few works and records of allusions to Geser in war poems seems to have been preserved. For instance, the poet Tsyden G. Galsanov (1953: 34), who had been the secretary of the “consolidated Geser” project, gives a list of allusions and comparisons to Geser in war-poems from late 1941: “In the nine branches of Geser the courage of the people is praised”; “With the indestructible courage of the great hero Geser” “I shall go forth with the title of hero, With Geser's courage I will ride out”; “I will bring forth equal courage to that of the hero Geser”; “I will hold to Geser's oath”. Galsanov also cites a poem called *Okhotnik na fronte* (hunter on the front, *Burgiz* 1942, line 32) by the poet R. F. Tugutov, who had taken down Geser from Petrov in 1934. Tugutov represents the Buryat sniper, Tsyrendashin “Mergen” Dorzhiev as one of Geser's thirty-three heroes who come to Earth to vanquish evil. It is unclear whether these had originally been written in Buryat or Russian, but what does seem clear is that Buryatian propagandists were working very hard to encourage the use of Geser. If only more material had survived from this period, there might be a great deal more to say about it. Indeed, the most important question is: how much *did* average people in Buryatia, both ethnically Buryat and Russian, actually know about Geser?

The likely answer was that in the BMASSR they would have known very little. In the May 1948 “trial” of Geser, Galsanov (*ibid.* 18) would note a 1941 letter to secretary of the *aymags* VKP (b) from former secretary of the State Institute of Language, Literature and Culture, GIYaLI, on how preparations for the Geser jubilee require local press, radio, and lectures about Geser to take place in each *aymag*. The former secretary in question seems to have been the poet Maksim Shulukshin, whom will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, though Galsanov does not name him directly. According to the letter, however, all questions on scientific matters concerning oral folklore, in particular work with storytellers (*skazitelyami*) were to be deferred to the “qualified powers of the local intelligentsia” – i.e. GIYaLI. In short GIYaLI were “inventing” Geser as folk culture, so Galsanov was claiming, because it simply was not part of really-existing Buryat culture. He says:

³ In the Tibetan Geser tradition there is at least some records of one episode in which Geser defeats Adolf Hitler (Maconi 2004: 343). This seems entirely coincidental.

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This letter was read in almost all *kolkhozes* of the Republic, printed not only in the papers but also by the institutional press. I remember that at that time the editorial staff of the newspapers *Unen* received many lines of verse from our soldiers, possessed by the spirit of the *Geseriada*. The letter was this spirit. In these lines the heroism of our soldiers was sung in relation to the “heroism” of Geser, our soviet heroes were identified with the *baatars* and *merged* of Geser. In this period our poets too were infected by this. Many of our poets have lines about Geser, among which composers of verse I myself number. I have reread these lines and their error is obvious. I publicly denounce them as anti-populist.

Why did Galsanov do this? He answers (*ibid.* 19):

The unmitigable fact is that among the people, in our *uluses*, one does not meet with “Geser” as popular-heroic epic (*narodno-geroicheskiy epos*). I, for instance, in my local (*rodogo*) *kolkhoz*, have not found a single old man, nor for that matter, a single young man who knew even a single verse. At very least, that is the situation in our Republic. But as concerns Ust'-Orda national Okrug, a few variants of Geser exist there, from which this “Geser” was written down by the institute of culture.

Reading this, one must of course emphasise that what Galsanov is saying is of an ideological nature, an attempt to condemn Geser and exonerate himself. However, the fact was that it appeared that what he was saying about the Buryat Geser was true - it was not some common piece of mass-entertainment, and it was especially not common at all in the BMASSR as it stood in the 1940s. Before Galsanov's testimony in the 1948 “trial”, the director of BMIKIE (The Buryat-Mongol Research Institute for Culture and Economics) at the time, Gombo Tsybikovich Bel'gaev had already openly declared that the Buryat Geser tradition seemed to be an ancient product of the Ekhirit-Bulagat dwelling on the West side of Baikal in “Western regions of Buryat-Mongolia” and that within the rest of the BMASSR it was not widely known. The playwright and poet Namzhil Baldano (*ibid.* 10) too had stated that the Geser *ül'ger* was mostly found in Ust'-Orda and Irkutsk, where it had once perhaps been common, but in 1948 hardly existed even there. Within the bounds of the BMASSR it has always been rare, but now no longer exists, so he says, but there were some remnants in Baikalo-Kudarsk, Tunkinsk, and parts of Barguzinsk and Kurumkansk *aymags*. In the 1953, during the later “scientific session” to redeem Geser, G. D. Sanzheev (*ibid.*19) would admit that in 1937 when he and others went

to Khorinsk and Yeravninsk *aymags*, all they found were a few very short stories and people who knew little “*pereskazy*” (synopses) of Mongolian Script Geser material.

This lack of Geser as a wide-spread, living oral tradition presents a disturbing problem, and remains so even now, echoing down to the *Geseriada* celebrations of the 1990s and Geser in the twenty-first century. The long Geser *ül’ger* did not “belong” to the territory of BMASSR after 1937, nor Buryatia as it currently stands today. Yet while Irkutsk, Ust’-Orda and Aginsk never attempted in the 1940s to make Geser their “national culture”, the BMASSR did. The BMASSR at the time, however, was regarded as *the* Buryat state, and thus to legitimise itself, it reached over its current borders to find Buryat “deep time” outside itself. It is unclear whether Bel’gaev and Baldano had been aware of the near non-existence of Geser epics in the BMASSR from the very start of the “jubilee” project, but nonetheless the imperative of the *dispositif* had been to create a “national culture” to legitimise Buryat identity before the rest of the USSR anyway. Now the truth, suddenly recalled for ideological purposes, could be used condemn the hero and those who had worked on the “consolidated text” project.

But at the same time the Great Patriotic War itself also spelled the beginning of tragedy for Geser as “national epic” long before Galsanov’s complaints were filed. In 1941 Nicholas Poppe, the instigator of Geser as primordial national epic, was captured by the Nazis while in the Caucasus. As he was of Russian and German extraction and knew the language of the local peoples (as well as Mongolian, Buryat and many other minority languages), his value was instantly apparent to the occupiers. In 1943 he was sent to Germany to work for the Wansee Institute as an expert on the USSR’s minorities. At the end of the war he was held by the Red Army as a Nazi collaborator before eventually being acquisitioned by the CIA and sent to the USA where he would spend the rest of his career developing Mongolian Studies as a discipline there.⁴

In the USSR Poppe came to be characterised by authorities as having been a “fascist” all along. Thus, in the 1948 “trial” of Geser this added an extra ideological dimension to Galsanov’s attack. The fact that the people did not celebrate Geser as an important part of their culture and GIYaLI’s “invention” of it as the national epic had already been suspicious. Galsanov, steeped in paranoia, alighted upon the non-sensical explanation that pushing this epic was a secret “bourgeois nationalist” plot orchestrated by the “*gitlerovskogo spiona Poppe*” (Hitlerite spy Poppe). The true aim was nothing short of “Pan-Mongolism” – for the innocent

⁴ See Price (2016: kindle ed. ch 4 n. 20) which details the various declassified CIA documents concerning Poppe and the fact that it was on the behest of American sociologist Talcott Parsons that Poppe was brought to the US because of his valuable expertise on the Mongolic peoples and minorities in the USSR in general.

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Buryat masses to be steered towards association with a Tibetan and Mongolian epic hero whom they did not even traditionally celebrate. All along it had been about fascism: “*Eto – odna storona populyarizatsii Gesera.*” (this – the single ideal behind the popularisation of Geser). Galsanov (ibid. 17) declares:

For this reason, the statements of Shulukshin, Manzhigeev and others about the alleged uniqueness and populist nature of the Buryat-Mongol “Geser” have no real ground to stand on. It must be said that these utterances and opinions have come to print because of influence from the fascist Poppe and from the nationalists Shulukshin, Manzhigeev, Bal’burov, under the protection and support of Sanzhiev and others, very closely bordering upon Pan-Mongolism, with its platform, which sets itself up to distract the people’s attention away from class warfare and the interests of the living, and to befuddle the masses of the people with religious intentions and the speculations of lamas and shamans, issuing from them (somehow) as a popular creation. These people knowing that this epic does not exist among the people, as has now become clear, zealously propagandised “Geser” as a monumental popular-heroic epic. They used all forms of propaganda, so it happens.

With the listing of these names one enters properly into the spirit of the “trial” of Geser. Elements of suppressed truth could now be exposed for ideological purposes. Yes, Geser had little presence in the BMASSR, which is why the scholars and propagandists had had to *invent* the “national epic” and proselytise him as a figure of Buryat national identity during the war. Yes, Poppe had played the most important role in legitimising the “national epic” and so too had he indeed been taken off to Nazi Germany (though he does not seem to have ever nursed Nazi principles). Yes, Geser had a long history in connection with Buddhism and shamanism among the Buryats. Yes, “Pan-Mongolist” ideals had existed in the past among the Buryat intelligentsia from 1905 to the mid-1920s.

Selectively putting these elements together into an imagined “fascist” plot formed what, following Sheila Fitzpatrick’s (1994: 299-300) work on the Stalinist “show trials”, I will call the “master plot” of the meeting on Geser that became affectively a trial of those who had been part of the “consolidated text” project. When Fitzpatrick uses the term “master plot” this is to convey both the conspiratorial and the theatrical aspects of Stalinist era show trials. However, while *Pravda* in the late 1930s was responsible for proselytising the “master plot” of traitors among the Bolsheviks in order to encourage similar show trials in the regional USSR, with

Geser there seems to have been no top-down invention of a “plot”.⁵ It instead it seems to have worked a little differently.

3. Shifting the Blame.

It is very unclear precisely how much time was allowed for preparation and collusion by those who were summoned for the “meeting” about Geser in late May 1948. The “master plot” seems to have been an emergent property of the confessions and blame-shifting that took place during the meeting. The meeting becomes a trial, with one speaker building on what the previous speakers have said, with the major difference being that each attempts to show that he believed Geser to be ideologically unfit to the “national epic” from the very start. It is everyone else’s fault for not recognising this, and thus, surely they must have known it too and must have only been endorsing the project for some sort of sinister ideological reason.

In the end the only way for this to come to a resolution was for Poppe and the touted “bourgeois nationalists” to be blamed so that everyone else could be innocent pawns doing a job they had been instructed to do – *invent* a national epic for a jubilee. Thus, there is a ritualised, theatrical blame-shifting that culminates in finding a scapegoat to whom the fantastical accusations of “fascist plot” could stick. Poppe had long since left the USSR and the “nationalists” named were people who were already in goal for falling foul of Kudryavtsev. Those who were present could thus vindicate themselves by blaming those who could not be there to admit their wrong or shift the blame elsewhere. The buck stopped, so to speak, with those who were absent and already regarded as traitors and thus could not defend themselves. And of course, with the castigation of Geser.

Here is a prime example of this ritualised attempt to shift the blame. It has already been shown Ts. Galsanov claimed to be an early detractor from within the Geser “consolidated text” project. In the 1948 meeting he (ibid. 18) emphasises that after he came out against Geser, he says that Sanzhiev, the head of propaganda, had summoned him and Khotsa Namsaraev and had said: “You have misunderstood Geser, make a revision.” The “controller” of the project at the time, Maksim Shulukshin (of whom much will be said in the next chapter), so the reader is told, simply brushed off Galsanov’s ideas by claiming that it was obvious Galsanov had no prior knowledge of Geser. Galsanov (ibid. 19) then adds that he opposed Baldano’s work on

⁵ Fitzpatrick’s (1994) claim was that much of the show trials that took place in the regional parts of the USSR were “bottom-up” – produced by the locals themselves from the impetus the “master plot” provided by Moscow’s show trials. Michael Ellmann (2001), in comparison has attempted to show that much of this was actually orchestrated by “top-down” efforts *from* Moscow. Fitzpatrick (2002) replied to this, reiterating many of her claims and asserting that what she is looking at is “cultural history” more than political “social history”. As more evidence comes to light we may gain a more nuanced understanding of what took place during the late 1930s.

the “consolidated text”. He claims that he demanded that everything to do with religion and gods be removed from the “consolidated Geser” and that this was ignored. In the end all Baldano did was replace *mangadkhay* with *shulmas*, as has already been mentioned.

It would appear that Galsanov is trying to utilise his history of opposition to the project for all it is worth to cleanse himself of the taint of involvement with Geser altogether. It is difficult to deduce if this is true, as there are no other available sources, or whether simply personal disagreement has been retooled into an invented history of ideological purity. He finally claims that even by May 1941 he was aware that Geser was a religious product of shamans, lamas and “noyons” – the exploiters, and not the people. He says that as soon as he heard about the idea of publishing a book on Geser: “I thought that it was not only not worth it, but that it was harmful”- something totally at odds with Marxism-Leninism.

As Bel’gaev (ibid. 4) had already explained at the “trial”, the Buryat Geser *ül’ger* is filled with pagan gods and cosmic battles in heaven. So too do the written Mongol version of Geser possess strong feudal and Buddhist aspects. The Mongol Geser belongs to the era of khans fighting one another; the Buryat Geser makes no mention of any “concrete” peoples, either historical or fictitious. Ergo, the answer was that it had to be primordial. Many Mongolists such as Kozin, so Bel’gaev (ibid. 5) claims, perspicaciously tried to bridge the gap by sensibly concluding that Geser as character was only added later from the Mongols, but that beneath this there was much older cultural layers. Geser was incorporated by Buryats because he was seen as compatible with “the interests of shamanism”. The hero was then, so is recounted, used against “Buddhist interests”: “having utilised the contents of Geser, they adjusted him to Buryat soil” (ibid. 5). This seems trivially true. However, it is the instrumentalisation of these facts, the sudden “return of the repressed” (to co-opt a Freudian term) by Bel’gaev and Galsanov that one should dwell upon.

Having declared these facts, Bel’gaev moves from merely neutrally describing the history of the project to recanting his involvement in it. This begins with his recognition that the orientalist Grigori Potanin (1890: III. 129, 1891 IV. 817-820; 1899: 845) had most likely been correct: Geser is a mythologised version of Chingis Khan and the name of the character probably means Caesar. Such theories had been very common in the nineteenth century, but like the religious aspects of Geser had been deliberately forgotten in order to retool Geser into a Soviet symbol of proletarian “national culture”.⁶ During the late 1940s the Mongolist

⁶ Since the nineteenth century scholars had argued where Geser had come from. Many influences have been suggested from the Roman and Byzantine Caesars and Alexander the Great (Shaw 1871: 287; Grünwedel 1898: 457; Roerich 1942: 202-204; Ligeti 1951: 341-342; Uray 1985) and Chingis Khan (Potanin 1890: III. 129,

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Aleksandr Kozin (1946: 173-178, 1948: 1948, 244-46) had begun to endorse the Chingis theory once again, which is most likely what had caused Bel'gaev to become aware of it. As I discuss in the next chapter, after the May 1948 meeting Kozin was to become the recipient of harsh criticism for his ideas about Geser. However, he was not present at the May 1948 meeting, which seems to have been simply about the scholars and propagandists of the BMASSR and Kudryavtsev's suspicion of them. Thus, within the "closed world" of the Geser trial Kozin's ideas could be used to vindicate those present and condemn Geser.

Bel'gaev (ibid. 7) claims that after serious consideration of the contents of Geser he had by 1941 already decided that this populist understanding of the epic was false. Nonetheless, he claims that initially he was able to avoid this realisation because, as Lenin had declared about all cultures, the Buryat epic seemed to also possess a firm anti-feudal ideological value – one that was "humanist and democratic" – because it contained strong "satirical elements" against the khans and *noyons* (lords). However, he soon realised that not only did the people have close to no familiarity with the epic, it also had "nothing of value in its ideological attitude... thus there is no need now to print and popularise it." The GIYaLI institute had "from the very beginning made a serious error." What a claim indeed! Perhaps this particular attempt to prove ideological purity and denunciation of Geser from the very start of the project, some eight years prior, is more than a little absurd. Kudryavtsev, for one, is amazed by the declaration. He asks Bel'gaev why after being the head of the project for eight years, all of a sudden, he has changed his opinion in less than two days:

So, in two days you have done what you did not manage to do in eight years while you were heading the Institute of Culture and Economics, working on this composition?

Bel'gaev has very little to say in reply except a sudden realisation that "*eto ne nash epos*" (this is not our epic):

1891 IV. 817-820; Kozin 1946: 173-178, 1948: 194, 244-46) to the 8th c. Tufanian warlord Gosira/Gosilo (Tib. rGyal-sras) (Potanin 1893.I.348-349; Damdinsüren 1957; Stein 1959: 275f). However, the fact remain that Geser has been linked in Tibet alone with various aristocratic families (Stein 1959: 275f) and absorbed details from various religious culture heroes such as Padmasambhāva (Samuel 2005: 175-177) and Milarepa (Kornman, Khandro and Lama Chönam 2015: xxv, xxi, xxx, li) for so long that it is inscrutable to suggest that there was an "original" Geser. Either way, prioritising origins tells us little to nothing productive about how the hero has been received and evolved into what we possess today. As Hummel (1998: vii-viii, 74-81) has argued, the origins of the Geser cycle may well be very ancient, but there are so many layers within the cycle in even Tibet, that proposing any exact historical genesis for Geser is seemingly impossible.

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I did not criticize it and did not think properly about this. And now, after detailed acquaintance with the sources, I have become convinced that Geser does not represent anything of value for the Buryat-Mongolian people, since this is not our epic, but borrowed from the Mongolians and adopted to our way of life.

This utter denunciation of any connection between the Buryats and Geser in many ways exemplifies the language of the Stalinist Era “show trial”. Geser has been rendered entirely Other to Soviet Buryat life. There is no way back now, unless the other speakers were perhaps somehow to denounce Bel’gaev as a politically unsound liar concerning the nature of Geser. But they don’t. Bel’gaev taking the fall with his sudden change of heart after eight years can only accelerate the unravelling of Geser, but no scapegoat for the project has yet been found. After Bel’gaev the recanting and accusation can only become much worse in the search for the scapegoat. The playwright and poet Namzhil Baldano (ibid. 8) then speaks. He begins by reiterating that Bel’gaev was the head of this project for eight years and it is very hard to understand why he has suddenly changed his mind about its value. He adds that Bel’gaev “strongly demanded” Geser to be published. Baldano then tells his own story in relation to the Geser project, which in his case was the composition from 1943 of the “*svodnyy tekst Gesera*” (consolidated text of Geser) for the jubilee. This had already been in motion since 1941, following the collection of epics. Baldano says that he was working for Obkom VKP (b) and was called in because the project had not been working.

Baldano (ibid. 8) claims that he was chosen to work on the “*svodnyy tekst Gesera*” because of his previous work on reinterpreting the Buryat epic *Kharaasgay Mergen*. He claims that he had very little knowledge of what the project was about. Baldano immediately spent three to four months in GIYaLI’s manuscript collection to familiarise himself with the material available: “the consolidated text was composed by making use of all notable written versions in Buryat-Mongolia.” He then claims that it was not until November 1943 that the project started when he was “summoned” (*vyzvan*) by the propagandist Sanzhiev to commence on producing the consolidated poeticised Buryat part of the text immediately. Baldano recounts that he then spent three years, until 1946, working on the text. He defends his efforts by judiciously adding: “In the task of composing, a careful selection of all that was valuable for ideological and artistic attributes was undertaken, a cleansing of the alien and extraneous, a watchful attitude towards the materials involved and the preservation of stylistic features.”

The institute then decided that it wanted the text Baldano produced published and the jubilee held as soon as possible. However, Baldano was unhappy because, so he claimed, there

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was not enough manuscript material from reciters to work with. This is very odd, for as was described in detail at the end of the previous chapter, by early 1941 there was quite a great deal of material to work with indeed – hundreds of thousands of lines of it in fact. Kudryavtsev then asks why Bel’gaev and Zugeev wanted the project rushed. The answer is that Sanzhiev and Shulukshin “pursued a definite purpose – to inflict harm on the ideological front.” Some scapegoats have been found. As has already been noted, Sanzhiev was an easy target in the era of Kudryavtsev. Shulukshin, who had already been falsely imprisoned in 1946 for embezzling government funds was another. I look at his case in detail in the next chapter. Yet, so Baldano adds (*ibid.* 9), it is “*bolee chem strannym*” (more than strange) that after eight years since its announcement the text still hadn’t appeared in publication. Clearly there were communication problems in the project. Perhaps if the text had immediately been printed and/or the jubilee been held, it would not have come to the trial of a “meeting” at which Baldano, Bel’gaev and others found themselves trying to offlay the blame onto one another for a failed project on a topic about which hardly anyone but a few intellectuals seemed to care because they had been ordered to produce a national culture from what was available.

However, from this point onwards Baldano (*ibid.* 9-11) seems to incriminate himself. He says that he didn’t understand why the historians of the institute had said that the Geser epic was 600 years old – in fact it seems much older - there seems to be primordial matriarchal elements. Did Baldano actually know much about Geser? Although he claims that originally, he thought of Geser as merely a Buryat folkloric product, he says that he knows Kozin’s work on the written Mongol Geser texts, yet nothing of Tibetan versions. Baldano may have simply been a poet and not a folklorist, but hardly anyone else at the time in Russian academia would have known anything of the Tibetan versions. On the question of ideological value he denies that it has any except, perhaps for stirring up a little bit of patriotism (*ibid.* 10) and adds, as Bel’gaev had, that there was no ideological need for the text to be published or jubilee to be held. At this point the abandonment of both seems to have been guaranteed. Was Baldano simply trying to copy what Bel’gaev had said? The answer is that he very likely was because once Bel’gaev had recanted his faith in the project completely before Kudryavtsev, there was no way to go back.

Baldano (*ibid.* 10-1) then moves to offload the blame by shifting it to the Russian poet Mark Tarlovskiy, who was responsible for the “consolidated Geser’s” Russian translation, after Baldano had rendered it poetically into Buryat. Baldano says that he met Tarlovskiy in Moscow in 1944 and that his translation “abounded with an excessive adoration for the Geser epic.” Baldano claims that he did not have much of an understanding of Geser, so he blindly signed

off on Tarlovskiy's translation. He then says that he realises that this was a mistake (*oshibku*), and he asks for forgiveness. The union of writers had demanded that he finish the project and write a conclusion for the book, so he did.

Only part of Tarlovskiy's planned Geser appears to have ever been finished and was printed in a compilation of Buryat poetry in 1959 (Tsedendambaev and Dugar-Nimaev 1959: 37-75). Coincidentally, it would also not be until 1959 that the consolidated Geser, after more than fifteen years of setbacks, was finally printed under the title *Geser: Buryatskiy Geroicheskiy Epos* (Geser: A Buryat Heroic Epic). However, by this stage it had passed through so many hands that if one is to inspect the title page of the book it is almost impossible to deduce who was actually responsible for it. One side suggests that it was actually the product of Russian translator and poet Simyon Lipkin and Ulanov, and its *verso* mentions Baldano and Ulanov, *but not* Lipkin at all, as Harvilahti (1996: 44) perspicaciously notes.

Lipkin had already been responsible for "poeticising" the Russian translation of the Kalmyk *Jangar*, which had been released in time for its 500th anniversary in 1940 and had worked with Tarlovskiy on the Kyrzyz *Manas* for its anniversary in 1941. Geser, in many ways, was simply one more project in the chain of national epics for soviet national cultures. *Geser: Buryatskiy Geroicheskiy Epos* would later become the most widely-known and read text of Geser during the second half of the Soviet Period. It would be published in Russian in 1959, 1968 and 1973. Baldano's Buryat version would not appear until 2007, finally installed side by side with the Russian in a luxuriantly produced volume to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of his birth. That the two sides were never brought together during Baldano's lifetime is perhaps a powerful symbol of the historical unease inherent in the interweaving of *becoming-Russian* and *becoming-Buryat*.

Moreover, it should be emphatically noted that *Geser: Buryatskiy Geroicheskiy Epos* was not even a "full" translation of a Geser epic. Most of the "nine branches" Baldano broke it up into – the second, third, fourth and fifth (Geser acquiring his three wives, fighting the monsters Arkhan Shütger, Gal Nurman, Orgoli) and the seventh and eighth (fighting the monsters Abarga Sesen and Lobsogoldoy) are reduced to short summaries (1968: 135-40, 186-90). Only in 1988, at the end of the Soviet Period would a "full" Russian version of this artificial text appear, not from the pen of Lipkin, but from the poet Vladimir Soloukhin instead.⁷ Yet,

⁷ For an interesting stylistic comparison of Tarlovskiy's, Lipkin's and Soloukhin's translations see Raytsanova (1999). She sides with Tarlovskiy's use of anaphoric verse and horizontal alliteration (features typical of Mongolic verse) and concludes that the "translations of S. Lipkin and V. Soloukhin can be considered good, but are not the most successful translations."

this emphasis on the Russian translation over the mother language was not an unusual outcome for the “national epics” in the USSR. As Gazizova (2009: 35) writes on the Kalmyk epic of *Jangar*: “In the Soviet period *Jangar* was not forbidden; however, it was popularized as a literary text but not as oral epic, and the Russian translation was much better known than the original Kalmyk version.”

Kudryavtsev (ibid. 11-12) then procures a text called *Detstvo Gesera* (The Childhood of Geser). He points out that in this Baldano had said that Geser is a “hero of the people, a commander, a protector of the oppressed.” Baldano replies that he was only doing what he’d been hired to do in the first place: *write propaganda*. Thus, his representation of Geser was “*preuvelicheno*” (exaggerated) in comparison with his actual beliefs and understanding. Baldano also notes that the “childhood” text had never “seen the light of day” – it had been censored (which Galsanov during his questioning on p. 19 gladly takes responsibility for). However, beyond this, Baldano (ibid. 11) has very little to say in his defence except that everything, like the involvement of Tarlovskiy, was “*moya oshibka*” (my mistake) and that there is no need for the “consolidated” Geser ever to be printed.

Baldano is finally asked by Kudryavtsev what he thinks of the two chapters of the “Consolidated Geser” published under Galsanov (of which today there does not seem to be a surviving copy). He answers that they were published “*oshibochno*” (in error, cognate with “*oshibka*” – mistake – once again). In a final and rather blunt move Kudryavtsev asks what Baldano thinks of Galsanov’s opinion that Geser might be Chingis. Baldano simply pleads ignorance: “This document has not reached us” (*Do nas etot dokument ne doshyol*). If Baldano knew Kozin’s work, as he claimed he did, then presumably he would have known about his theory that Geser is really Chingis. However, it remains unclear whether Kudryavtsev would have known this. Yet Kudryavtsev did not need to press the matter further. Baldano, just like Bel’gaev, had become supine and defeated. He has disavowed Geser and blamed himself and that was good enough.

4. Geser As Populist Saviour.

The writer Khotsa Namsaraev (ibid. 12), who had also been in on the project from the start, then speaks. He claims that thus far in the “meeting” the epic itself has not been sufficiently inspected. He begins with a long speech on Soviet values, claiming that his central concern is: “the ideological value of our published works, which are designed to carry our people into a shining communist future, assistance to overcome the remnants of the old (world) in the consciousness of the people – dictated by my sense of writerly duty.” He (ibid. 13-16) then

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begins to construct a condemnation of the Buryat Geser epic on the basis of its Tibetan origins – clearly identifiable by the presence of Tibetan names of characters and places (he gives a table of these) - though he admits that he knows very little on such matters, and even less on Geser epics in China.

The crux of the argument is that the idea that Geser is a proletarian product about “class warfare” between the hero and evil khans is a “*iskazhennom vide*” (garbled view). It is a religious work about being saved from “*grekhi*” *ili chto-nibud’ takoe*” (“sins” or something like that). The plot is actually about heavenly powers that rule over the people and decide their fates. He finally ends by declaring that if the religious aspects of the history of the epic were looked at more closely “more facts and proof of the antipopulism (*antin narodnost*) of this work, alien to us in spirit” would be discovered. As has been noted, the transference from divine salvation to millenarian communist salvation was very easily achieved in relation to Geser. Such things are not as distant as they may seem, but to the USSR at the time, nothing could have been more ideologically “alien to us in spirit”.

Galsanov (ibid. 16-7) also bases his recanting of Geser on similar grounds. He begins by speaking about a “Buddhist pantheism”, which permitted Geser to be borrowed across into the shamanism of the Buryats, which possessed somewhat similar beliefs about reincarnation. Later he adds that because of this the Geser epic and its social functions are bound up in superstition (*sueverie*) - reciters won’t recite this or that branch of Geser if it is rainy weather, for fear of angering the gods. While, as argued in previous chapters, the theory of there being a “taboo” against telling Geser to outsiders is probably false, there are certainly situations in which twentieth century reciters have felt taboos about the epic because of its concern with the powers of good and evil. Galsanov acidly notes that those who wrote down Geser from the *gesershed* Paramon Dmitriev and Papa Tushemilov are quick to add that they did not “libate” (*vsprysnuli*) even a single litre of vodka to the 55 western and 44 eastern Tengeri gods. The whole thing belongs to a “religio-shamanic worldview”. Those who see it as a popular work, Galsanov (ibid. 17) declares, are committing an act of falseness and have gone down “the wrong path”.

The fact, however, is that there is a long political history to Geser as a salvific figure, wherein revolutionary and millenarian religious elements could mingle. In relation to questions concerning the Second French Revolution of 1848 and its meaning to the scholar Bobrovnikov, the first great Buryat intellectual Dorzhi Banzarov (1891: 217) had replied concerning the state of Buryats under Russian rule: “It seems that it was such a time as now when Geser was born into the world. Judging by the character of our times, is it not fitting for another Geser? At such

a time his thirty-three heroes will appear for us.” This notion of Geser as liberator was not unique. During her travels in Tibet and China during the 1920s Alexandra David-Neel ([1931] 1933: 33) met with a Mongol lama, who not only believed Geser to be emphatically Mongolian, but also of his impending return in order to rid Asia of European colonial oppressors:

Suddenly he will rise in all the greatness of his power and terrify the men of wicked heart who are prone to malicious activity. His numberless horsemen will follow him at lightning speed...to the conquest of the world, he will lead the millions of Asiatics who, today, are drowsing...he will throw back into the sea the insolent Whites whom the Chinese have so weakly allowed to establish themselves with them as masters...he shall invade the countries in the west, and everywhere the cleansing army will have passed, nothing will remain, no, not even a blade of grass!

Geser had long been a soterical hero, a saviour, whose epics detail how he came from heaven to earth to eradicate all evil in the world. From at least the eighteenth century to the early twentieth, from Tibet to the lands of the Buryats, through the spread of Tibetan Buddhism Geser was integrated into the Chinese war god Guanyu, originally a historical figure and best remembered for his role in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.⁸ Some of the most interesting examples of the wealth of information Mongolian scholar Bymabyn Rinchen assembled at the end of the 1950s on the religious and political aspects surrounding the figure of Geser under the title “En Marge du Culte de Guesser Khan en Mongolie” (On the Marginality of the Cult of Geser in Mongolia). These include Qing enterprises such as the erection of a statue of the Tibetan titled *ži-pa ge-ser* (Geser the commander) at Maimachen in Urga in 1894 in order to promote and consecrate their war with Japan. So too did lamas of the same temple declare the White Russian

⁸ Some images and descriptions of statues and pictures of Geser/Kuan-yü may apparently be found in Grünwedel (1905: 33,271). One curious matter is that on each page of the original 1716 Geser ms. it claims that the text is a Mongolian copy of the Chinese *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which it clearly is not (Harvilahti 1996: 43-4). In spite of Geser’s strong connections with Guan-yu, the central figure of this Chinese novel, from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries, Bayartu (1989: 232-233) suspects that this may have been a deliberate trick to get the text around Chinese censors. However, as to what might be censored in the text, excepting perhaps chapter III in which Geser fools the ruler of China in a number of creative and demeaning ways, is uncertain. There appears relatively little that is nationalistic in the text. For that matter, according to the colophon at the end of the text it was the Qing emperor Kang-xi (Mong. *Engke-Amuγulang*) who ordered the text to be printed in the first place (Schmidt 1836: 191) and no scholar seems to have doubted this matter. Thus, perhaps scholars are perhaps overanalysing what might simply be a mistake made by Chinese printers. What is more of a controversial matter is that many Mongolian copies of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* existed in the monasteries of Ulaanbaatar, where synthesis between Geser and Guan-yu was particularly important during the nineteenth century (Rinchen 1958: 9). All of these, curiously, are missing chapter seventy-seven in which the character Guanyu is put to death. As Rinchen (ibid.) suggests, this may have been regarded as very taboo to the Mongols and thus was not translated.

general Roman Ungern von Sternberg to be *geser-ün qubilyan* (reincarnation of Geser) in 1920. Comparatively the lamas of Zegün Kūriye declared Sternberg to be the reincarnation of Begtse/Jamsaran, also divine figures strongly associated with Geser as guardians of the Buddhist faith (ibid 9-10).⁹ As Heissig (1966: 32; [1970] 1980: 97-101) has shown, the cult of Geser also overlapped with other *Reitergottheiter* (equestrian deities), a series of war gods such as *dayičin tngri* and *sülde tngri*, usually pictured as riding in full battle-dress, which appear to be the product of native Mongolian and Tibetan elements.

Rinchen (1958) presents a complex web of Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian divine figures who had come to be associated with one another, appealing to the Chinese authorities as a means to control Buddhist minorities, Chinese settlers, Buddhist Mongols and Tibetans in Urga as well as shamanic practitioners throughout Mongolia and the Buryat territories in Russia. Of much note is the wealth of *Geser sang* that he assembles – prayers to the hero usually associated with burned offerings. These appear to have been a very widely spread tradition among both the Khalkha Mongols (Heissig 1966, 1978a-b, 2002b) and the Buryats in the early twentieth century (Dugarov 1999: 49-61; Viet 2002: 299-304). The *Čay-a* Geser ms. even contains one on its final pages (Rinchen 1960a: 549-56; Heissig 1983b). These cult prayers and burned offerings to Geser, or *Bogdo Looye* as he is often called in them, largely present him as a deity of war weakening and destroying the suppliant's enemies, protecting his armies and granting *kei morin* (numinous might) and *kisig* (good fortune) for military and sporting exploits – particularly archery (Rinchen 1958; Heissig 1966: 140-150; Dugarov 1999). In these prayers Geser is often associated not only with Guanyu, but also Jamsaran, Begtse and the Garuda (Rinchen 1958: 29; Dugarov 1999: 51-4). There is also a number of surviving *tölge* (prophesies), *jarlig* (decrees) and short sutras ascribed to *Geser Looye* (Rinchen 1958: 25-50), which mostly seem to fulfil didactic religious purposes.

However, Rinchen's work remains the basis of the majority of what is known of Geser as a religious figure prior to the Soviet Era. One of the most curious items Rinchen (1958: 20) mentions is a manuscript he saw at Gandan monastery in Urga, accredited to Geser, which was concerned with healing and apotropaic talismans synthesised from Tibetan, Buryat and Khalkha shamanic and Buddhist traditions. Sadly, however, it seems highly doubtful whether this amazing hybrid artefact still existed even in 1958, when so much had been destroyed during

⁹ However, Hummel's (1998: 68 n. 14) belief that Rinchen (1958: 10) contains the idea that some Mongols considered the Jebtsun Dampa a reincarnation of Geser's horse is completely erroneous. No such thing is mentioned at all in this work, and is not substantiated in any other work by other scholars. Rinchen (1958: 10) mentions also that his novel *Uriin Tuyaa: Tüükhen Roman. Guravdugaar devter* (1955: 233-239) discusses these incarnations in detail. I have yet to acquire a copy.

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Choibalsan's purge of religion in the 1930s. Rinchen himself, when writing his 1958 article, was largely reliant on his own memory and anecdotes gleaned from others in attempting to reassemble the nature of Geser as a religious figure.

At some points Rinchen's article is understandably aggressive and self-righteous because Soviet Era scholars in the 1940s and 1950s had stripped Geser of all religious aspects in order to preserve him as a purely secular proto-Marxist figure of populist satire (Poppe 1926: 3f; Kozin 1935: 7-34; Damdinsüren 1957: 19-29, 166), and in the process had deliberately ignored massive amounts of evidence to the contrary. Rinchen's "En Marge" article ends with a "Postface" concerning M. Davajab, a young shaman from Khövsgöl *aymag* in Mongolia, whose *bagshi* (teacher) traced their spiritual lineage back to a 19th c. Buryat couple from Irkutsk who had migrated to Mongolia and become shamans dedicated to Geser in order to appease the spirits of some bandits they had killed. The final words of the article read: "*mon informateur, âgé de 31 ans, a été emprisonné à trois reprises pendant les dix dernières années, car la pratique des rites chamanistes est punie d'incarcération*" (My informant, aged 31 years, has been imprisoned three times in the past ten years because practising shamanic rites is punished with incarceration). Yes, people could go to jail for worshipping Geser, but they still kept doing it anyway. Other Gesers, religious Gesers, continued to exist "*en marge*" (on the margins), even if in order to create the Soviet Geser of Buryat identity these and their history had to be blotted out.

And yet in comparison with these traditions the Geser represented in the Mongol Script corpus is a strongly satirical figure – he often takes on the forms of lamas, old men and orphan children to outwit and mock monsters and khans. Igor de Rachewiltz (2017: 17) is only too correct to have described the 1716 Mongol Geser as follows:

While the seven chapters of GK are suffused with Lamaist culture, this is not the predominant influence in the Mongolian narrative, which relies more on the profane, entertaining value of semicomical human-like situations, flavoured with tricks, deception, magic and picaresque interludes, the emphasis being on the bizarre, unusual, and unexpected.

However, Poppe went much further than this. He created the idea that lamas universally loathed Geser by misinterpreting the fact that certain portions of the Tibetan Tsongkapa lineage regarded their founder, Pe-har or Naichun, to be from the land of Hor, that of Geser's archenemies (Poppe 1926: 3). This was based upon taking the words of a single lama in Ulaanbaatar in the 1920s out of context. Hor, or Sharaiyol in the Mongol and Buryat Geser epics, is a very general Tibetan term for peoples who dwell somewhere to the north of Tibet and can sometimes even include

the Mongols. There is very little evidence for this connection ever influencing lamas to actively persecute Geser.¹⁰ Rinchen (1958: 3) later corrected Poppe's myth with a great deal of examples of the celebration of Geser in Buryat and Mongol Buddhism, yet the myth continued to live on and was actively perpetuated during the Soviet period (Ulanov 1957: 161-2, 1968: 20; Sherkhunaev 1969: 55; Shoolbraid 1975: 20). The reason simply seems to have been to retain the old ideal that Geser was an anti-religious populist figure. Even Roberte Hamayon (1990: 185; 2004: 297, 2014: 3) has regularly repeated this myth, seemingly without realising that it is based in Soviet Era ideology. Indeed, in Buryat academic sources primary evidence of lamaic persecution of Geser is extremely sparse.

Are there any actual examples? In Zhamtsarano's (n.d. 137-41) obscure unpublished work *Konspekt Uligerov* (*Conspectus of ül'gers*), which Poppe (1941) and Neklyudov (1984) cite, there is an anecdote that the Buryat folklorist's uncle had seen some lamas burn a Mongol script Geser manuscript at the Aginsk *datsan*. Yet, this anecdote claims that this was done because the *datsan* was dedicated to the god Jamsaran, who supposedly is the enemy of Geser. This is not true: in Mongolia, prior to the Purges the war god Jamsaran was widely connected with Geser (Rinchen 1958; Heissig 1980: 100). Moreover, this undated work of Zhamtsarano's, probably produced some time in the 1930s, is seriously troubled by two very bizarre and seemingly false claims. One is that the manuscript that was burned supposedly contained an episode called *Teme Ulan Khan* that only Zhamtsarano had ever seen before, which he claimed was contained in the original *Tseveen* ms. (Rinchen 1960b).¹¹ In spite of the legend that this

¹⁰ Even in modern times opposition to Geser that might at first seem to be attached to the Pe-har and Hor tradition may not be what it appears to be. For instance, Tibetologist Geoffrey Samuel (2002: 179-0) describes how he once met with some Tibetan lamas in Chandragiri, Orissa who thoroughly opposed Geser, considering interest in the hero to be a waste of time and a Chinese plot. This seem to have more in common with matters such as nineteenth century synthesis between the god Guanyu and Geser in Tibet and Mongolia by the Qing dynasty to consolidate rulership and the more reappropriation of Geser and his brother the Chinese government in North Eastern Tibet in the past twenty years than anything to do with the Hor tradition at all (Karmay 1998: 470; Samuel 2002: 185-6).

¹¹ On this bizarre "lost chapter of Geser" theory see Neklyudov (1984: 173-4, 196-7), Damdinsüren (1986 intro 6-7), Setsenmunkh (2004: 125-6). The full title for this was *γaḡar tulam-a ḡoḡdur-tai temegen ulaḡan xaḡan* (The Red Camel Khan with a Mane That Reached Down to the Ground). All Zhamtsarano ever tells us about it, was that it was apparently very similar to the Galkha Nurman episode in Manshuud's Geser (!) This is curious as the episode in question is simply the very common Angdulam episode (Heissig 1983: 6 system ch. XIX). It is one of the few very close parallels between Manshuud's Geser and the Mongol script corpus. In his introduction to the *Tseveen* Mongol Geser MS Rinchen (1960b) claims that the *Temegen Ulaḡan* chapter was lost when Kūriye/Urga at the time – but in Khyakhta (Rupen 1956). Rinchen (1960b) also claims that he himself went in search of reciters who might know the episode, and that he heard a version of it, but forgot it. This is all very suspicious. These are the only testimonies of this lost story ever existing. Moreover, as to how Zhamtsarano's uncle would have been able to recognise a copy of the story (being burned!) is puzzling seeing that no one else seems to know anything else about it. Curiously the name Teme Ulaan Khaan *does* appear in a Buryat folk tale taken down by Khangalov ([1968-6] 2004: II. 44) as the name for the father of Geser's wife Tūmen Zhargalan,

“lost chapter” was destroyed when Urga was invaded by the White Russians in 1919 (somehow leaving the rest of the *Tseveen* ms. intact), there is no room for a missing chapter to have ever been there if one looks at the manuscript closely.¹² As to how Zhamtsarano’s uncle could have spied a copy of this otherwise unattested rarity being burned when no one else would have recognised it or ever mentioned it, seems very dubious.

Moreover, as was outlined at length in the previous chapter, this is the same unpublished *Konspekt Uligerov* paper that Poppe used both in this 1941 article and his “Chronology” essay to claim the existence of a “secret diary” belonging to the Janja Quntuγtu, in which the early history of Geser among the Mongols had apparently been recorded. As argued there, there is no evidence that such a thing ever existed. It may seem disrespectful to claim that Zhamtsarano simply made things up, no one else has ever seen either of these texts, though Poppe (1941) and those after him seem to have endorsed the existence of both of them for anti-Buddhist reasons, simply on Zhamtsarano’s say-so. While Zhamtsarano had originally endorsed a Buddhist “Pan-Mongolism”, by the early 1930s and the purge of Buddhist lamas that had begun to take place, let us not forget, the emphasis was already on distancing Geser from Buddhism.

However, perhaps the only example of lamas supposedly suppressing the *ül’ger* tradition among the Buryats is cited by Tudenov (1958: 34) in relation to the Khori Buryat *ül’gershen* Badma Tsybikov, who in 1905 explained regarding his *ül’ger Bolod Khuuray Khübüün* that he had not told it for some thirty years due to a “*religioznyi zapret*” (religious ban) inaugurated by lamas.¹³ Even if this single uncorroborated example is true, such a Buddhist “ban” would have exerted almost no influence on the Western side of Baikal and does not refer to Geser specifically at all. It may have likely been simply an effort to discourage the “old religion” – Buryat shamanism. Rather, what seems to be of paramount importance is how this single source in Tudenov was utilised in order to legitimise Soviet Era ideological narratives by immunising Geser against religious infection (Ulanov 1957: 161-2, 1968: 20; Sherkhunaev 1969: 55; Shoolbraid 1975: 20).

but nowhere else. One might theorise that Zhamtsarano (n.d: 137-8), in his preoccupation with finding a single *polnota* (complete) version of the Geser cycle, simply invented the story about these lost chapters. The fact is that there is no “complete” Geser – no Mongol script ms. contains all the episodes, though a two volume “complete” set of material including both the 1716 ms. and the Lun Pu Shih ms. was published in Beijing in 1956 and then again in 1989.

¹² Initially it might appear that a chapter, chapter XIV, is missing from the *Tseveen* MS of Geser - but see *Tseveen* ms. 1960 ed: 325, where the scribe has written chapter XI instead of XIV by accident. Even weirder, Zhamtsarano also claims that there was another story in the *Tseveen* ms. entitled Qongolday Qara, which no one else – not even Rinchen - has ever mentioned again. Rinchen’s (1960b) story about Zhamtsarano throwing the ms. over the wall emphasises that only *one* chapter was missing (*nigen bylyg ter keb-iyer yrigdeǰkyi*).

¹³ The primary source given by Tudenov (1958: 34) for Tsybikov’s ban is IV AN SSR, sektor *Vsotochnyx rukopisey*, Arkhiv n. fond 62 No. 2, page 325.

In the same way Ulanov (1968: 78) and later Sherkhunaev (1969: 55), in her biography of the Unga Geser reciter Petrov, connects one of Geser's enemies, the *mangadkhay* Dan'yal Shara (Golden Yellow) with the biblical prophet Daniel. Thus, Geser is seen to have been shaped by proletarian opposition to Orthodox Christianity. However, there would seem no basis whatsoever to this idea. The meaning of the term *dan'yal shara* in Buryat is “*soversheno zhyoltyy*” (deep yellow) (Cheremisov 1973: 186 entry: dan'yal) *Dan'yal shara* is also used to describe the colour of bows used by heroes (*AG*. line 1914; *Yerensey* line 1468). The idea is little more than one more piece of Soviet agitprop. Nonetheless, Roberte Hamayon (1990: 185; 2004: 297; 2014: 3) has continued to repeat the prophet Daniel link without questioning it.

The most important fact here seems to be “reversible forgetting” of the religious nature of Geser. The sudden “remembering” of this forgotten fact was utilised by Buryat scholars to survive a political crisis. With this, of course, is paired the other, perhaps even more central “forgotten” fact – that the Geser epic tradition was not a common piece of proletarian folklore, that it was dying out and barely known by the Buryats of the BMASSR. It had been an “invented tradition” produced by academics under imperative to find a national epic and mass-produce a national culture. Thus, it is very obvious that the *dispositif* of “national epic” was very contradictory, as is epitomised in Lenin's *caveat* with which this chapter began: epic is proletarian, *but* there are feudal and religious elements. This situation could be manipulated by those seeking to condemn enemies, settle personal quarrels and survive show-trials – even if it meant attempting to show that one had never believed in a project on which one had been working for nearly a decade.

With the testimonies and questioning of Bel'gaev, Baldano and Galsanov the damage to Geser had been done in the May 1948 “trial”. In order to survive they had blamed one another, denouncing both their own and others' work. “This is not our epic”, so Bel'gaev had said; “Geser is not the people's epic” (*narodnym eposom*), so Galsanov (*ibid.* 19) had declared. Throughout all this perhaps the most curious matter is that G. D. Sanzheev had not been invited to speak, though he would take part in the 1953 redemption of Geser (Khadalov and Ulanov ed. 1953: 7-24). He had rapidly risen to becoming an important linguist and folklorist in Leningrad, so perhaps his absence was not an act of deliberate avoidance. After all, Kozin too had not been asked to appear. The “trial” of Geser was a local matter, so one might say – the outcome of Kudryavtsev's ongoing efforts to dismantle imagined remnant undercurrents of “bourgeois nationalism” and “Pan-Mongolism” among the intellectual classes of the BMASSR.

However, it was not lack of popular knowledge of the epic that condemned Geser, nor its rarity within the bounds of the BMASSR, its disputed originality when compared with Mongol and Tibetan variants, its disputed dating, nor the religious elements or even its possible links with Chingis Khan. Each of these indeed played an important part in delegitimising the epic. In the end it was the “fascist” connection with Poppe that truly condemned Geser as a symbol of a sinister plot concocted by nationalist intellectual elites. This was the theatrical “master plot”, which, as argued came into being as an emergent property of the trial as a means for those present to shift the blame and vindicate themselves.

As baseless as this “master plot” was, it was more than enough to prevent the scholars and propagandists under scrutiny at the meeting from being imprisoned and killed. Pan-Mongolism, eleven years after Zhamtsarano was imprisoned during the Purges, remained a spectre haunting the Buryat-Mongol intellectuals, and Kudryavtsev was keen to make sure that it kept on haunting them. Once Galsanov, Baldano and Bel’gaev had confessed then the rest of the narrative fell into place. Following Galsanov’s testimony, Ye Ya Gurchich (the head of radio in the Republic) is quick to announce that that he was always on side with Kozin who said that Geser was an 18th c. Mongolian product that mythologised Chingis Khan. “I always stood against this,” he claims, in opposition to “the enemy of the people” Poppe, who insisted the Buryat-Mongol version was ancient. And so, just as Poppe was enemy of the people, and Zhamtsarano and many others had been before him, so too became Geser.

Chapter 4: Redeeming the Hero

In this chapter I now turn to the years between the May 1948 “trial” of Geser and the official redemption of the hero in 1953. As I will show, what redeemed Geser was a movement in Soviet ideology away from suspicion about nationalism and “Pan-Mongolism” towards fear of internationalism and cosmopolitanism under the 1948 Zhdanov Directive. By 1953 the “national cultures” *dispositif* could be twisted by scholars such as G. D. Sanzheev towards the idea that anyone who claimed that the Buryat Geser was not a proud, unique product of Buryat culture and had been borrowed from other peoples, was a “rootless cosmopolitan”.

While Geser was condemned much earlier than the “Crisis of Turkic Epic”, the drive to root out “cosmopolitans” had been at its height under Stalin in 1948-9, the period in which Geser was totally anathema. In the 1948 “trial” no such matter had arisen. Thus, the logic of the redemption of Geser, taking place in the month before Stalin’s death, was a remnant of late Stalinism turned against its earlier forms. Nonetheless, more than anything, Geser, including the hero’s religious and feudal aspects were redeemed, quite simply because the importance of the “national cultures” *dispositif* was now waning. National epics were no longer of great importance in the construction of a new proletarian identity for the Buryats.

1. After the Denunciation.

The disowning of Geser that began in 1948 meant an active denunciation of what was taken to be the pre-Soviet past of Buryat identity for the sake of the future. Melissa Chakars (2008: 129 cf. 2014: 170) catches the essence of the ritualistic nature of the denunciation and its meaning superbly:

By condemning Geser, participants were in fact arguing that modern Soviet Buryats were not religious, class based, ruthless, violent and anti-Russian. Instead they were atheist, class-free, peaceful and a friendly nation among many others in the Soviet Union. Censoring Geser and all he represented was a way to purify the Soviet Buryat nation of important aspects of its unacceptable traditional past. Although a very demeaning experience for many intellectuals, Geser’s denunciation worked to advance the soviet modernization project for the Buryat nation at the time.

As enemy Geser was now more important than ever for what it meant to be Buryat. To be Buryat meant *not being like* Geser and the religious and feudal traditions to which he was seen to be inextricably attached. Ts. O. Ochirov, head of propaganda in Buryatia condemned the figure for

his associations with Buddhism in a number of *Kholkoz*es in Ivolginsk and refuted the idea that he was simply an innocent folk-hero expressing popular desire for freedom (NARB f. P-1.op. 1, d. 5158 p. 2, 15; Bazarov 1995: 123-7). The politician Ts. Tsybuduev decried Geser as a feudal “khan” and repeated the line about Poppe being a fascist all along. The other great Mongolist of the era, Aleksandr Kozin, received a similarly short shrift for his interest in similar subjects and was publicly derided in the magazine *Kul'tura i Zhizn'* (Culture and Life, 21 September 1948) and *Buryat Pravda* (18 December 1948 cf. Damdinsüren 1957: 36).¹ Others simply said that because Geser was a mythical figure, the Buryats would be better off without him and books on the hero were removed from public libraries (Chakars 2008: 129-32, 2014: 170f). Khamaganov (1951: 32), who had started the whole *furor* about Geser and the *orod-mangad*, would write in his 1951 report on the matter:

The idealization of the pre-revolutionary past, the identification of pre-revolutionary and Soviet patriotism, the notion of Buryat people as a single and indivisible class in the feudal era is a weapon of struggle for antinational purposes. Geser is distinguished [by] strong anti-Russian sentiment, the main idea of Geser is simply the education of the working masses into the spirit of voluntary submission to the khans and feudal lords.

One important figure in all this, whose name was mentioned several times in the previous chapter, was the Buryat poet Maksim Shulukshin, who was sentenced to ten years in prison for nationalist anti-Soviet activities including his supposedly “bourgeois” interest in the “feudal” Geser (Basaev 2013 pt III). Shulukshin had indeed been involved in the early processes surrounding the “consolidated Geser”, but his downfall came before Geser’s, in 1946.

On the 25th of November 2013 Shulukshin’s nephew, Vladimir Baraev, wrote a fascinating article titled *Antigeseriada* for the Russian news site *Proza.ru* on the details of his uncle’s life. Shulukshin was only thirty-two when he was imprisoned in the Jidalag work camp in 1946 on false charges of laundering the funds of GIYaLI, and thirty-six when he was shot while escaping from custody in 1949. As both Baraev (2013) and the scholar Boris Bazarov (2005a) in his book on the “Shulukshin case” have stated, these charges seem to have been the result of a personal jealousy on the part of the secretary of the BMASSR Kudryavtsev, because of Shulukshin’s close connections to the then secretary of the Central Committee in Moscow,

¹ As Damdinsüren (1948: 36 n. 3) tells us, this same article was published in a shorter form in *Literaturanaya Gazeta* (Literary newspaper) on the 26th of March 1949 and then again in the book *Protiv izvrashcheniy sovetskoy ideologii* (against the perversions of the Soviet ideology) the same year.

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Georgiy M. Malenkov. However, the problem was that Shulukshin, while in Jidalag, was wont to utter “Pan-Mongolist” sentiments:

On June 26, 1947, Shulukshin declared in the camp: “We do not have socialism right now. When I will be the second Chingis Khan, even then at heart I will be a Communist ... The peoples of the East live under the aegis of whites. I see that whites are increasingly putting their white "I" over the world ... And if so, I will basically act as a counterbalance as a Pan-Mongolist.” The words about Stalin, Zhdanov, Genghis Khan and Pan-Mongolism immediately reached Kudryavtsev. I can imagine how he rubbed his hands with pleasure, making another report to Moscow: "You see, I was right when I spoke of the plot of the Pan-Mongolists.” How uncle Max grieved me. Why did he, knowing the realities of the camp, trust in “reliable people” who had the guts to betray him?

However poetic or ironic Shulukshin’s words were, in October 1947 he was sentenced again to another ten years because of his Pan-Mongolist outburst. Just over a year later Shulukshin was shot while attempting to escape the prison camp Taishetlag. However, Baraev never believed this to be the case because N. I Zugeev, also involved in the Geser text project - and a relative of Baraev and Shulukshin - told him that he had heard a different story: that Shulukshin had been shot while on route to the camp due to special orders from Kudryavtsev. Many years later during the *Geseriada* festivities on the 29th of June 1995, Baraev thought that it was time to set the record straight and published an article in the newspaper *Buryatia*. However, he soon got a call from the granddaughter of the guard who had “stamped and delivered” Shulukshin to the camp unscathed. Indeed, Shulukshin had escaped along with several companions, and when this was found out, an order was given to “shoot them like rabid dogs”. They were indeed found and shot, so the granddaughter claimed her grandfather had said. Nonetheless, the life of Shulukshin remains a fascinating one – related to the history of Geser tangentially - but epitomising the ruthlessness of Kudryavtsev’s rule in the BMASSR. So Baraev concludes:

The fate of Kudryavtsev proved to be sad. Becoming a secretary of the city committee in the Urals, he brought the factories but the workers went on strike. He was dismissed from office, and he was demoted to the chief of the militarized guard of the plant. At the same time, he was miserable - his eldest daughter Tatiana was mentally ill. Learning about this, Nikolai Ivanovich Zugeev smiled bitterly: ‘The spirits of our ancestors did not forgive Kudryavtsev's atrocities in Buryatia’.

By 1951 the previous head of the BMASSR, Semyon Ignatiev, had become a very important man in Moscow. He was head of the Komsomol for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Minister for State Security of the USSR, and in 1952 became Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee (Chakars 2008: 130; Basaev 2013 Pt III). In March 1951 the Central Committee issued a statement titled “On the shortcomings and mistakes in the work of Buryat-Mongolian Regional Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) (*O nedostatkakh i oshibkakh v rabote Buryat-Mongol'skogo obkoma VKP (b)*),” after which Kudryavtsev was immediately removed from his position as Secretary of the CPSU in the BMASSR (Baldano 2014: 34). He was sent to head the Astrakhan Obkom, and thereafter, as Basaev said, misfortune befell him and he was dismissed soon after. His replacement was Aleksandr U. Khakhalov, who would remain the head of the BMASSR until 1960. As A.A. Yelayev (2000: 242) writes:

For the first time since 1937 the ethnicity of the head of the regional party of the republic was changed, which had a definite influence on the development of social and ethnocultural processes in Buryatia. In particular, the change of leadership of the republic influenced the fate of the epic Geser: in April 1951 at the request of the regional party committee and at the direction of the Central Committee The VKP (b) discussed the issue of its character in the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences USSR, and then at the joint scientific session of the Institute of Oriental Studies and Buryat-Mongolian NIIKE in Ulan Ude.

This dismissal of Kudryavtsev and the redemption of Geser that followed are certainly connected with one another. However, as to whether the political leverage of the local Buryats, especially those who wanted to redeem the epic, was influential on his dismissal would seem rather unlikely. Sergey Basaev (2015a pt III) seems to write as though Geser was a major factor that led to a successful action by local intellectuals against the “*zloy noyon*” (vicious noyon [lord]) in a Manichaean battle of good and evil over the Buryats: “in 1951 a number of Buryat activists addressed a letter to the “good noyon” (*dobromu noyonu*) Semyon Ignatiev with a request to protect (*s pros'boy zashchitit*) the Buryats from Kudryavtsev”. Yet Skrynnikova et al (2004: 71) are more likely correct when they write that: “It would be more logical to explain Khakhalov’s victory in his confrontation with Kudryavtsev in the context of the struggle between different groups, of the Soviet party-state elite, and not as a change of policy in ethno-national territories.” Influencing Ignatiev may have indeed helped get rid of Kudryavtsev, but the

redemption of Geser seems to have only been a coincidental outcome of this and not a driving force. He simply seems to have made too many enemies, both locally and in Moscow.

2. Redemption.

On the 19th of June 1952 the presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences wrote a series of dispositions to the Buryat-Mongol Research Institute for Culture (BMNIIK – BMNIIKE until 1949) seeking their help on matters of Buryat culture. Among these was about the need to produce a critical study of Geser, which was couched in the need to prepare a second edition of the first volume of the official “History of the BMASSR”. For this BMNIIK was instructed to gather experts from across the USSR by October of that year to study Geser and determine the epic tradition’s value. All preparatory work was to be done by the start of September.

This may seem strangely urgent for a subject which had only four years prior to this been condemned, removed from libraries and seemed basically to have been forcibly erased from Buryat public libraries and academic study. Geser was feudal, most likely a mythological version of Chingis Khan, and was in no way “unique” to the Buryats, so had been concluded in May 1948. However, in April 1951 there had already been a discussion at the Academy of Science’s Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad, in which it had been argued that Geser was not Chingis and contained a “populist character” (*narodnyy kharakter*) and that the Buryat Geser tradition was “quite unique” (*vpolne samobytnyy*). Information on what took place at the 1951 meeting is scarce.

However, a book entitled *O Kharaktere Buryatskogo Eposa “Geser”* (On the Character of the Buryat Epic “Geser”) was produced from the proceedings of the “scientific session” that finally to take place in Ulan Ude from the 2nd to 5th of February 1953. Thus, it seems uncertain whether the redemption of Geser had already basically been decided in April 1951 and the 1953 session is simply a ritual redemption, undertaken and published for the sake of ideological purity and public awareness. Perhaps this was not the case at all, and that the 1951 meeting had merely opened up the *possibility* of considering what Geser meant to a second airing after the 1948 condemnation. The introduction to the 1952 disposition from the presidium openly declares that “the presence of two totally opposing points of view hinder normal scientific work in this area. The time has come to discuss this question”. It would very much seem as though at least the ritual of a proper academic redemption of the mythic hero was required. Let us look closely at the proceedings from this “scientific session”.

The scholar G. D. Sanzheev is the main speaker in the 1953 session. As was outlined in chapter two of this thesis, he had been instrumental in the construction of Geser as the Buryat

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national epic in 1940-1. He (1953: 8) begins the “scientific session” by quoting Joseph Stalin’s 1952 speech from the 19th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR on the 14th of October 1952. This was the last public speech that Stalin was to give before his death, and would have been very fresh in the minds of most attendees. In it Stalin discusses the nationalities question in accordance with the *Direktov Zhdanova* (Zhdanov Directive, also *zhdanovshchina*: Zhdanovism), which held from 1946 to 1953, when it was abandoned following the death of Stalin. This “directive” initiated a profound turn in Stalinist ideology away from fostering internationalism towards “communism in one country” and encouraging nationalist communisms through the world. Stalin claimed that the world had undergone a profound change:

Earlier, the bourgeoisie, as the heads of nations, were for the rights and independence of nations and put that “above all”. Now there is no trace left of this “national principle.” Now the bourgeoisie sell the rights and independence of their nations for dollars. The banner of national independence and national sovereignty has been thrown overboard. Without doubt, you, the representatives of the communist and democratic parties must raise this banner and carry it forward if you want to be patriots of your countries, if you want to be the leading powers of the nations. There is nobody else to raise it.

If the bourgeoisie were no longer the nationalists, then the communists would be. “National cultures” becomes an outright invitation to the support of a “national bolshevism”, so one might say. One should emphasise that the “scientific session” on Geser took place in February 1953 but a month before Stalin’s death in March of that year. Thus, in a way, the redemption of Geser takes place on the edge of the collapse of Stalinism and the “national cultures” drive. Sanzheev (ibid. 8) utilises Stalin’s argument and turns it back towards the question of national epic:

The politics of the reactionary, imperialistic bourgeoisie against national independence cannot help but find its own reflection, even in the area of science, literature and art. The politics of the denial of national sovereignty and the national independence of the people is accompanied by the destructive effect of pseudo-scientific principles, which drive the specific qualities of national cultures towards the denial of their existence. Amidst all this comrade Stalin has said that every nation, all of them equally, whether large or small has its own unique qualities, its own “specifics”, which exist only in it and which no other nation possesses. These unique qualities, specific traits of a nation, find their manifestation also in its language and epic.

Instead of a battle against “Pan-Mongolism” Geser now becomes the field for a battle against the “ideology of bourgeois cosmopolitanism.” The enemy is those who claim that Buryat culture is simply the product of intercultural exchange and borrowing. This was a common theme in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the USSR under the Zhdanov Directive. Already in 1946 Stalin had declared that:

Recently, a dangerous tendency seems to be seen in some of the literary works created under the pernicious influence of the West and brought about by the subversive activities of foreign intelligence... The positive Soviet hero is derided and inferior before all things foreign and the cosmopolitanism that we all fought against from the time of Lenin, characteristic of the political leftovers, is many times applauded.

This instigated a scapegoating and purging of intellectuals deemed ideologues of “rootless cosmopolitanism” (*bespochvennyi kosmopolitizm*, later from 1948 *bezrodnyi kosmopolitizm* – kinless cosmopolitanism). This hunt for “national nihilists”, “leftovers” and “Zionists” was, as most historians now agree, extremely anti-Semitic in tone, and largely targeted Jewish intellectuals.² The hunt for the “cosmopolitan” continued on into the early 1950s. Comparative literature and even the idea that cultures had borrowed from one another in their development were denounced as the work of “rootless cosmopolitans”, and any comparison between the folklore and epics of the peoples of the USSR had to be grounded in the Marxian belief that this was the result of merely their similar stages of economic development (i.e. a monolithic “feudalism”).

In Sanzheev’s (ibid. 9) speech the 19th century scholar of Russian literature, Aleksandr Veselovsky (1838-1906), is mentioned several times. This was because of his strong influence on Soviet philology through his emphasis on comparative literature. In 1947 Stalin had personally denounced Veselovsky and those influenced by him. Veselovsky’s retrospective crime was to have put too much emphasis on European influence on the history of Russian literature. To Stalinist eyes it looked as though the Russians had never created anything of their own. The folklorist Viktor Zhirmunskiy and others influenced by Veselovskiy were targeted,

² On the anti-Semitism of the “rootless cosmopolitan” drive see especially Azadovskii and Egorov (2002: 66-80). See Korychenko (2001: 314-9) on the development of the term “*bezrodnyi kosmopolitizm*”, from its early intimations in 1943 in the work of Aleksandr Fadeev to Zhdanov’s embrace of it in 1948.

and many publicly admitted that they had made mistakes for believing in “comparativism” and cultural “borrowing” and were officially redeemed (Korychenko 2001).

And yet in the May 1948 meeting about Geser, Veselovsky and cosmopolitanism had strangely not come up. Instead the new “master plot” of the hunt for cosmopolitans only appears as a weapon for redeeming the Buryat Geser as “national culture” in the last month prior to Stalin’s death. This followed a very different pattern to the condemnation of the “national epics” in the USSR. As Van der Heide (2015: 219-20) emphasises, the “Crisis of Turkic Epics” was deeply connected to the Zhdanov Directive, because the Turkic epics often seemed very similar to one another in content and led to comparisons by scholars. The epic cycle of *Dede Korkut*, for instance, belonged to both Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, for instance, thus interfering with the ideal of distinct nationalities with their own national cultures and epics. Thus, the “master plot” was that nationalistic “Pan-Turkism” was paradoxically the product of the “rootless cosmopolitans”!

However, by the time the “Crisis of Turkic Epic” took place in 1952-3, the Buryats were already working towards redeeming Geser as a unique product of the Buryats over against the possibility of accusations of “Pan-Mongolism” from detractors. Thus, the Buryat trial and redemption of Geser offers a very different parallel history of the changing *dispositif* of “national cultures”. There seems to have been no conscious recognition of influence between the two staggered crises of Turkic and Buryat epic. Rather, they were both similar reactions to the same paradoxical Stalinist ideologies – the imperative to produce a cultural nationalism, but also the intense paranoia about nationalism, the culture of the past and “cosmopolitan” cultural comparison.

Sanzheev (1953: 9) addresses the problem with the accusation that those who study Buryat-Mongol epic are not well versed enough in Marxism-Leninism, and thus are open to “cosmopolitan” theories of people like Veselovsky (p.9) about intercultural influence. But it is the Mongolist Vladimirtsov who is primarily to blame for Sanzheev because of his theory that epic originates from the aristocracy and that the aristocratic hero is then used as a collective symbol of the people for their aspirations. Sanzheev (ibid.) denigrates this heavily, and even goes as far as to claim that the idea had been big in Nazi Germany and now, in the 50s, in imperialistic Britain, though no examples are given. The linguist Nikolay Marr, who had been disowned by Stalin in 1950, is also termed “Anti-Marxist” by Sanzheev for his influential theory that language is not merely the province of the people but is produced by class. To Marr

(1927) language had only emerged when primordial class structure emerged, and thus was inherently tainted by this.³

Sanzheev, had spent most of the past fifteen years since his foundational 1936 publications on Buryat folklore becoming one of the most influential figures in linguistics in the USSR. He had himself taken part in Stalin's 1950 *Marxism and the Problem of Linguistics Debate* in which Marr's ideas had been publicly denounced and abandoned and received official praise by Stalin in *Pravda* (29th June 1950) for his ideas concerning the evolution of dialects. Sanzheev (1953: 11) thus repeats his claims that under Marr's model one cannot help but absorb that which belonged to the "culture of the primordial upper classes". So too does G. N. Mikhaylov (*ibid.* 41-2) later engage in this same pejoration of Marr. Moreover, the Mongolist Kozin is once more ritualistically castigated by Sanzheev, as he had been during the 1948 "trial" of Geser and subsequently in *Kul'tura i Zhizn'* (Culture and Life), for his belief that Geser, Jangar and the *Secret History of the Mongols* had all influenced one another and been born out of a shared pool of legends about Chingis Khan (*ibid.* 12).

Sanzheev's (*ibid.* 14-5) answer to this is to emphasise the idea of authorial intent in literature, whether it be Shakespeare and Gogol or Buryat folklore, which are all elevated to the same position. With folklore, however, it is difficult to find the authorial intention because "these works in their independence from the intention of a controller have a quite different tone to them". In spite of the fact that there are obvious feudal aspects inherent in Geser and the Turkic epics, epic is a product of the people but, "passes through various social milieus" (*podadaya v razlichnye sotsial'nye krugi*). However, unlike in Marr, this is an act of pollution of the original authorial intention. There are both feudal *and* populist aspects in *ül'gernüüd* such as *Alamzhi Mergen* and the Khalkha Mongol *Khan Kharankhuy* only because they were originally the products of the masses living under feudalism (*ibid.* 15-22).

This is very different from the early opinions ventured by Sanzheev in his introduction to *Alamzhi Mergen* (1936a). Here he had claimed that the root of the Buryat epic hero was to be found in the figure of the shaman – as magic-worker capable of transferring from the world of men to that of animals and gods at will. In *Po Etapam* (1936b) Sanzheev had endorsed the far more Marxian-friendly theory that the heroes of all Buryat epic were represented as simply

³ Marr had some very strange theories such as that prior to language all communication had been gestural and that the future world communist language might also have to be the same (Thomas 1957). He also believed that all languages originated from a primordial "Japhthetic" Ur-language. However, his most influential idea, which enabled him to rise to influence in the USSR were his observations (often apt) that the ideas of European linguists and anthropologists were inherently imperialistic. This notion ended up influencing the ideas of Edward Said through Anouar Abdel Malek (Tolz 2011: 83, 101; Brandist 2015: 18).

tribal champions who defended and protected the people. Lenin's *caveat* about all cultures containing both democratic as well as feudal elements is of course the paradoxical core of the "national cultures" *dispositif*, as I have pointed out many times in the past two chapters. The fact is that it is difficult to tell the difference between the aristocratic hero *as* a symbol of popular aspirations – a character invented by the people to punish wicked rulers and religious figures- and simply celebrating the figure of the hero and his feudal and religious context *in itself*. It is because of this that Geser and the Turkic epics eventually found themselves in crisis.

Thus, Sanzheev claims that Geser represents the "apotheosis of worldly existence" (*apofeozom mirnoy zhizni*). To this he adds in Buryat: *deede ezen ugy, dergedee daisan ugy* (no master above you, no enemy beside you). This is not a common Buryat proverb nor line from any variant of the Buryat Geser or other epic that I am aware of, and instead simply seems to be a generic communist slogan akin to the old "No gods, no masters". Nonetheless, as was discussed in detail in the previous chapter, Geser certainly possessed a long history as a salvific and millenarian figure. Sanzheev seems to simply take the presence of such elements for granted without any discussion on the matter. More than anything this seems to reveal the ritualistic nature of the 1953 "scientific session." It was not a debate – it was a public performance of redemption in which Sanzheev's proximity to Stalin and his use of the "rootless cosmopolitan" ideology could be utilised to reintroduce the value of Geser as a symbol of popular salvific aspiration shorn of aristocratic "pollution".

Galsanov (ibid. 25-40), who, five years previous had been one of the most important people in the condemnation of Geser, also takes up this same position as Sanzheev. He argues that folk-epics are, at their core, about the aspirations of the people and their desire for freedom, love of homeland and friendship with other peoples. What is most interesting is that in Galsanov's paper the first notable reference to the work of a then very young Tsendiyn Damdinsüren (ibid. 31) appears - in the form of his doctoral thesis titled *Istoricheskii Kornii Geseriady*. This would later be published in 1957, and today remains the most influential study on the Mongol, Buryat and Tibetan Geser variants ever written. What is important for Galsanov, and the subsequent speaker G. N. Mikhaylov (ibid. 44-54),⁴ is Damdinsüren's

⁴ Mikhaylov's speech is perhaps the simplest defence of the idea that Geser is populist and anti-feudal, but the whole thing is curiously flawed as though he has little awareness of the material or is simply deliberately ignoring it for the sake of performance. He begins (ibid. 44) with the idea is that oral Geser epics of the Buryat reciters are truly populist, because the Mongolian written Geser corpus, as a product of lamas, is filled with feudal and religious contamination. Thus, the Buryat Geser becomes more genuine. He notes (ibid. 59-60) Geser's transformation into a donkey by the monster Lobsogoldoy disguised as a lama reveals anti-religious sentiments and the Sharablin khans who invade Geser's homeland while he is away adventuring epitomise the figure of the evil aristocratic ruler. These are very odd choices because both of these episodes occur widely in the Mongolian Geser corpus as well as the Buryat *ül'ger*. Nonetheless this does not stop him from then arguing that the Buryat

central argument – that Geser is not Chingis Khan, as Kozin and others had claimed, but a real historical figure: an 11th century warlord called Gosilo (Tib.Go-sras), who, like the mythic Geser was strongly connected with the regions of Northern Tibet such as Kokonur.⁵ Damdinsüren (1957:106-8, 127) then attempts to connect the origins of the Geser legend to a Tibetan poet called Norbo Choybeb, mentioned as the author of the Tibetan original of the Mongolian *Ling Geser* MS, who claimed to be a close relative to the hero through Geser's brother Jasa. Although there is no real historical connection between this Gosilo and Choybeb and the other parallels (most of them obscure etymologies) that Damdinsüren (1957: 204-12) offers are very weak, the possibility that Geser was Gosilo remains vague but intriguing. However, for Galsanov at the 1953 “scientific session” Geser requires much more study, but no longer appears to be the anti-populist, feudal figure he had been five years ago. Galsanov's previous core argument – that the Buryat people did not know about Geser at all (as well as his Poppe as Hitlerite spy narrative) do not register a mention whatsoever. This is not at all surprising, because the redemption of Geser here is entirely ritualistic and no one involved in the 1948 “trial” is ever blamed for their part in it.

Another speaker is Aleskey. I. Ulanov, who had been in self-imposed exile from Buryatia since 1949 for fear of repercussions for his connections to the Geser project. His paper is very different from the others. It displays a complex theorising and orderly approach to the problems of the Buryat Geser. “The roots of oral epic folklore emerge in dim antiquity”, Ulanov (ibid. 70) claims, as he runs through history of the Buryats as hunters until the 13th century, then as herdsmen, and then the arrival of the Khongoodor in the 17th century. In accordance with Sanzheev's (1936b) model, Ulanov (ibid. 72) splits the Unga epics from the Ekhirit-Bulagat on the basis of the presence of khans in the former stories (such as the Sharablin Khans) and the presence of matriarchies in the latter.⁶ Ulanov (ibid. 101-3) then delivers a series of nine points in defence of the Buryat Geser epics:

Geser cannot be a mediaeval product from the age of Chingis Khan, because mediaeval people did not have such “republican ideas” (though he never says how old he think it might actually be) and that the figure of Geser's uncle Sengelen (who occurs widely in Mongol variants) is called “noyon” as a mark of respect because he's old, not because he is literally a lord.

⁵ Potanin (1893.I.348-349) appears to be the first to notice the similarities between Gosilo and Geser and even found some remnants of the former in Tibetan oral culture in the late 19th c. See also Stein (1959: 275f).

⁶ Ulanov (ibid. 84) claims that the Unga epic region, already filled with nomadic herding peoples, received Geser from the Altai in the 17th century, and only later did the Ekhirit-Bulagat storytellers adopt the hero and his narrative. This may well be the first attempt at providing a detailed speculative chronology of the development of the Buryat Geser.

Chapter Four

1. Geser is about the battle for a happy life, and the fight for good and truth against evil. All epic heroes do such things, but Geser is outstanding.

2. Geser is about the fight for survival against the forces of nature. These are represented by wolves and *mangadkhay* that personify aspects of nature such as fire (ie. Geser's battle with the monster Gal Dülme Khan).

3. Geser is about the love of one's homeland and the specificity of its natural surroundings and seasons.

4. Geser is about the fight against invaders of the homeland – the *mangadkhay* and sharablin khans come to steal the hero's home, wives and livestock.

5. Geser is thus also about military invaders such as the monster Sherem Minaata and his army. This point is simply an elaboration of 4.

6. Geser is about dealing with traitors such as Geser's uncle Soton and the hero Agsagalday in Manshuud's version who betrays Geser to help out a *mangadkhay* who promises him riches.

7. Geser is about the people's battle against Lamaism. Often evil *mangadkhay* turn into lamas to try to trick and attack Geser, revealing the epic's populist, anti-religious sentiment.

8. In the Unga Geser the narrative is all about the good khan who has his people's interest at heart and repels enemies. This sounds a lot like what Vladimirtsov had said, but Ulanov is sure to modify it in the next point:

9. Geser should not be viewed as some god fighting abstract Buddhist evil. He protects the people from bad khans and thieves. Geser is a product of feudal society, so therefore the idea of the "good king" was as far as they could take their aspirations for a better world. The mythological content in Geser is not at all magical or religious – it is simply the aspirations of the people for a better life here on Earth.

These nine points are perhaps the clearest summation of the ideology of the Stalinist Geser during this entire *dispositif*. He is a militaristic figure produced out of primordial Buryat nationalist aspirations for a better life on Earth. The religious elements are folded back neatly into simply proto-Zhdanovite ones. But in truth very little had changed about the "official" value of Geser as Buryat national epic since the start of the 1940s when this project had begun. The "redemption" of the hero simply reasserted this once again as valid, and Geser as the product of a distinctly Buryat "deep time". This was even if perhaps the most obvious problem that the "trial" of 1948 had identified was simply that Geser was not a common popular hero

or epic tradition in the BMASSR. By 1953 this problem had been entirely forgotten along with the “fascist plot” of Poppe and the condemnation of the hero by Galsanov and others.

In short, it was as though between 1948-53 nothing had happened. No one in the 1953 collection of papers from the “scientific session”, *O Kharaktere Buryatskogo Eposa “Geser”*, is present to play even the devil’s advocate *against* Geser - the touted “two totally opposing points of view hinder normal scientific work in this area” that BMNIIK’s disposition had spoken of. The whole thing is a performance by academics and propagandists for a foregone conclusion – that things would return to as they had been.

3. The Anticlimax.

As the next chapter discusses in detail, it would be Ulanov who would carry the torch for geserology during the second half of the Soviet Era. Very little would principally change between his nine points and his attitude to Geser in 1989. The fact is that the 1953 “redemption” was in many ways a paradoxical success and anti-climax. Thereafter, instead of some great mass-cultural “national epic”, Geser would simply become something academic and relatively unimportant for the rest of the Soviet Era. Sanzheev’s tarring of Geser’s detractors as Veselovskiyite “rootless cosmopolitans” was more than enough to redeem the hero of course. Nonetheless, this was more of a ritual than anything. The truth is perhaps closer to the fact that Geser had been *allowed* to be redeemed quite simply because authorities no longer had any interest in the epic tradition’s possible positive or negative ideological value. The bond between epic heroes and nation-building was rapidly fading. All appeared to be going better for Geser than it had ever done before by the mid-1950s. In fact, perhaps things were going *too well*. After the scientific session The Writer’s Union of the BMASSR declared that Geser was now acceptable again. In 1955 BMNIIK published a plan to actively promote studies of Geser (Chakars 2008: 234). With Khakhalov in power Geser was no longer condemned, but no “jubilee” happened either. There did not seem to be any interest.

In 1959 the Russian version of the “consolidated Geser” would finally be published, coincidentally just in time for the 300th anniversary of the Buryats’ “*dobrovol’noe vkhozhenie*” (voluntary entry) into the Russian state. The date being commemorated, however, was obscure – seemingly the 1689 treaty of Nerchinsk, but imaginatively extended back to 1659 for the sake of what amounted to little more than a political stunt. The government of the USSR spent a great deal of money on this event, including on the commissioning of a spate of new official historical works mythologising the idea of a long “*nerushimaya druzhba*” (indestructible friendship) and

“*dobrovol’nost*” (voluntariness) behind the invented 1659 date (Zalkind 1958, Tsybikov 1957, 1959). Yet, as A. V. Tivanenko (2012: 4) in his recent book on the history of the problem of when exactly the Buryats became part of the Russian Empire has said: “there were few who were interested in supporting archival documents from the 17th century. They took the intellectuals and historians at their word.” On the 3rd of July 1959 a plaque set in stone, signed by the high-ranking CPSU figures K. Voroshilov and M. Georgadze, was installed on the front of the Soviet Ministry of the BASSR building to commemorate the invented anniversary (ibid.). The year before the word Mongol had been ritualistically removed from the BMASSR’s title, as though the sinister spectre of Pan-Mongolism was still a going concern. The BMASSR became the BASSR, ever more tightly bound to identification with Russia, rather than the rest of the Mongolic world. Into this highly charged atmosphere of invented jubilation *Geser: Buryatskiy Geroicheskiy Epos* emerged silently, unutilised. The epic was no longer an important tool for political authorities.

However, at the same time as the creation, condemnation and redemption of a Soviet-friendly Geser had been taking place among the academic and political elite in the BMASSR, very radical changes had taken place among the Buryat Unga Geser *ül’gershed* themselves. This was the emergence of what Shoobraid (1974: 33) terms the “new epics”. As the Great Patriotic War was raging, some of the famous Buryat *ül’gershed* turned their skills away from traditional subjects such as Geser towards modern themes such as the celebration of Stalin and the heroes of the war. Although in recent years there has been increasing interest in the creation of a “national culture” of Soviet Buryat literature during the 1940s-60s (Khomosoev 1997; Chakars 2009), the “new epic” phenomenon has received very little attention. These “new epics” were not something particular to the Buryats alone, but was mirrored by similar efforts in Yakutia, Armenia, Kazakhstan and elsewhere in the USSR where oral epic traditions were remnant and could be hollowed out to celebrate new Marxism-friendly themes (Shoolbraid 1974: 33). Geser, a messianic figure who comes to Earth to save mankind from suffering, could be radically retooled to describe the secular millenarianism of Communism and its culture heroes.

One of the most important and prolific figures involved in this curious change was the Geser-reciter Apollon Toroev (1958; Sharakshinova 1959: 211-216; Dugar-Nimaev and Zhalsaraev eds. 1959). Toroev created poems in which Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin replace Geser as a world-saviour. Although he is now largely forgotten, during the 1940s-60s Toroev was perhaps the most famous Soviet Buryat poet and storyteller. Numerous collections of his work were published in Russian (1941, 1946, 1948, 1962) as well as Buryat (1954, 1955, 1957).

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However, of greatest interest here is Toroev's *Lenin Bagsha* (Lenin the Teacher), which was composed in the Buryat language as an oral epic based on traditional formulae in 1937-9, and in 1940 was written down by folklorist M. N. Melkheev, translated by Irkutsk poet I. S. Lugovskoi and published in *Voctohnaya Sibirskaya Pravda* (18th May 1940). Sadly, the original Buryat version does not appear to have been preserved.

Toroev begins his epic with a description of the primal pre-revolutionary world into which Lenin is born. The ancient invocation of the primordial heavens, earth, world mountain and world sea of traditional Mongolian epic instead become an evil sunless world of oppression awaiting a saviour: "This was long, long ago, but everyone could see and knew: the earth and livestock and the forests – the *noyons* had taken them all for themselves... and that is how it came about that the labourer was little more than a beast of burden." Lenin is born "marked with a lofty destiny, with a wonderful mind and heart, and the vigour and the eye of an eagle". Our "wise, young baatar", much like Geser and other heroes influenced by Buddhism, goes to a sacred mountain, a secularised world mountain so it would seem, to gain wisdom and truth. In this case it is in order to discover the magical "golden book" of Karl Marx, presumably *Das Kapital*, where "in the books, in the infinite pages, a voice rang out more powerful than thunder over the entire Earth". Marx and his works have been rendered of divine status as though Lenin is coming upon some "book of fate" belonging to the Buddha or Tengeri gods, in which all knowledge of the future is kept. Moreover, the "great teacher's" enemies are described wonderfully – as serpentine, bestial – like the *mangadkhay* of Geser:

The khans like beasts,
The mounted police like snakes,
The evil-thinking servants
Gnaw on the body of the people like wolves,
Drink the people's blood like gadflies
(Sharakhshinova 1959: 215-216 trans. Shoolbraid 1975: 33-35)

Like Geser, Lenin is celebrated as a divine cosmic entity, protected by the forces of nature and accompanied with animal companions. He has the world on his side:

Flying through the universe,
The eagle serves him as messenger,
It brings letters for him.

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The bear protects his sleep,
The stag draws him through the taiga.
The taiga renders him food,
The tiger serves him as steed.
The falcon through all the universe
Bears his words on his wings,
The free winds he calls together,
He summons the mighty storm (ibid.)

All of this leads to a final showdown, where, instead of some enormous *mangadkhay* from Geser like Sherem Minaata or Arkhan Shüttkher, Lenin battles with the spirit of capitalism itself, a three hundred-headed monster composed of *noyod*, holy men, khans and the tsar. Like Geser, Lenin is victorious in saving mankind from suffering. This strange fusion of Buryat mythological imagery and Marxism may seem very odd indeed, but was not uncommon.⁷ But why should this very different spheres of values and symbols have been so easily compatible for poets in this era? As with Dorzhi Banzarov's revolutionary Geser and the Mongol lama whom David-Neele met, Geser had already been connected with the wish for a coming liberation from oppressors. So too, as was touched upon in passing in chapter two, some Pan-Mongolist Buryat thinkers like Agvan Dorzhiev imagined a fusion of Tibetan Buddhism and Communism. Such phenomena were not alone. Emanuel Sarkisyanz (1955) and Andrei Znamenski (2011) have illuminated the fact that from Russian Civil War to the 1920s the Bolsheviks utilised a great deal of Buddhist, Christian and Islamic prophecies concerning future salvation and liberation in order to encourage the spread of Communism. Indeed, the potential for turning Geser into Lenin was there long before *Lenin Bagsha*. Toroev simply seems to have found it again, most likely by sheer accident because of the similarity of soteric themes (see: Ratkiff 2017).

As well as Toroev, other Geser reciters turned to similar topics, though perhaps not quite so grandiose in most cases. Papa Tüshemilov (RO BF AN SSSR inv. no. 1695 L. 6) and Paramon Dmitriev (*ap.* Sherkhunaev 1986: 43-4) each wrote songs about Lenin and also the Red Army battling Hitler. Bazhei Zhatukhaev (1970), another Unga Geser reciter, created contemporary songs with military subjects such as *Pesnya o generale Baldynove* (Song of

⁷ Melissa Chakars (2015: 158, 163) lists several programs from BASSR state television from as late as the end of the 1960s on the veneration of Lenin by Buryat poets. One details a 1945 story from Aginsk in which Lenin is described as being like the golden sun rising from the darkness. Sadly, I have not seen either program. Much more work on the fascinating mythic Buryat Lenin needs to be done.

general Baldynov) and *Pesnya o snaypere Tulaeve* (song of the sniper Tulaev). Platon Stepanov (1943, 1953) composed a *Pesnya o Lenine* (Song of Lenin), and a song celebrating the soviet capture of East Berlin. Tüshemilov (Sherkhunaev 1986: 180) would describe this change of content with the words: “song carried me into the new way of life of our land”. Simultaneously, Geser was both forgotten and rewritten by the Buryat *ül'gershed* as they turned their skills in the Buryat language to Russified Marxian subjects. Thus, by the time Geser had come to “trial” and was rejected as a religious and “feudal khanic” figure, in many ways his replacement, using many of the same old symbols and tropes, had already been realised. And yet, now, seventy years later the “new epics” are a genre almost wholly forgotten. No one wants to hear poems about Lenin saving the cosmos anymore. The replacement and forgetting of Geser has itself been forgotten.

As this crisis and the *dispositif* of “national cultures” draws to a close one may see the extent to which the links between *Buryat-becoming* and *Geser-becoming* could change within the period of just over a decade. In 1940 there had been an “urgent need” for a national epic and to use it to invent a national culture. However, this became increasingly of lesser importance until the forgotten project was condemned as reactionary, before finally being redeemed for being nationalistic. Seventy years on Stalinist ideology may seem very paradoxical, and for understandable reasons often the recipient of “reversible memory” – a strategic forgetting by Buryats. And yet the repercussions of this period continue down to this day. The suturing of Geser and the Buryats together, especially through the “deep time” myth that Poppe and Sanzheev provided, has not gone away. Later *dispositifs* have simply taken it up and reshaped it to their ends.

DISPOSITIF 3: 1989-1995,
The Geseriada,
The crisis of the Post-Soviet
Transition

“The spirit of Geser himself travelled with us”

– Bair S. Dugarov on the ending of the journey of Geser’s Banner in Oka in June 1995 (Kapustin, *PB*, 21st June 1995, “2. *Prazdnik v Gornoy Oke*”).

Chapter 5. The Return of Geser

In the second half of the Soviet Period Geser became a subject of relatively little importance outside a small circle of Buryat folklorists. Yet on the 29th of June 1989, during the closing years of the USSR, it was from amongst this milieu – geserologists and the Writer’s Union of the BASSR- that there suddenly erupted a desire to revive popular interest in the epic and its hero. An invitation for a number of geserologists to address the Union on the topic of Geser became a meeting to plan to lobby government authorities to celebrate the long-overdue millennial jubilee for Geser in the 1990s. In this Poppe’s old “deep time” dating of Manshuud’s epic became a matter of abject importance in affirming the necessity of commemorating Geser.

Renewed interest in Geser appeared at just the right time. Following Mikhail Gorbachev’s declaration of the new policies of *glasnost*’ (openness) and *perestroika* (economic renewal) in 1986, things rapidly began to change in the USSR and its satellites. In November 1988 the Estonian SSR became the first of the republics to declare sovereignty. By May of 1989 Hungary began dismantling its section of the Iron Curtain, by summer Poland’s new Solidarity Party had begun dismantling communism, and by the end of the year the Berlin Wall had fallen in the GDR and the government had resigned. The “autumn of nations”, as this period is occasionally called, had begun, though the USSR would not officially end until November 1991.

The BASSR was not unaffected by this thaw. In March 1988 an “informal political group” interested in Buryat cultural “*vozrozhdenie*” (rebirth) and the “*vosstanovlenie*” (reconstruction) of the pre-1937 territories of the BMASSR was formed under the name of “Geser”. It was but one among several groups during Perestroika calling for a *negedel* or “*yedinstvo naroda*” (unity of the people), though, as V. A. Khamutayev (2008: 99) notes in his book on Buryat nationalist movements in the 1980s-2000s, none in the bureaucracy or administration at the time had any interest to “grant this noble, and most importantly, at that time, feasible idea – to reunite the ethnos in the example of the Germans.” While many other peoples ended up with their own state, the Buryats did not.

Nonetheless, in 1989 the intentions behind the millennial celebration of the hero do not seem to have been any more ambitious than an international conference, the publication of a few books, several “folkloric evenings” and informing the public about the Geser tradition through pamphlets and newspaper articles. However, as the USSR collapsed this all changed. Instead the man who had convened the 1989 event, the Buryat poet Bair Dugarov, began instigating five years’ worth of summer cultural festivals to celebrate the jubilee and Buryat

identity, the *Geseriada*. In this chapter I explore how the June 1989 meeting and a subsequent September 1989 “folkloric evening” birthday event for Manshuud Emegeev take place in a curious liminal zone. In 1989 one still finds Soviet Era language and ritualistic protocols of academic testimonials required for garnering governmental support. By 1991 this had begun transition into a brave new post-Soviet *dispositif* of international openness, economic precarity and the ethnic self-awareness of minorities. A minor academic project was swept up into the post-Soviet search for the restoration of Buryat cultural identity. I will explore that in the following chapter.

1. Geser Studies.

At the end of the previous chapter Geser had been redeemed, but only perhaps because the hero and his epic were now regarded as unimportant for the creation of a Buryat “national culture”. The side-effects were two-fold: Geser studies could flower into a discipline in its own right, but that the “living” epics simultaneously passed away at a rapid speed as Buryats willingly abandoned their language and culture for Russian in order to advance their social status. And indeed, it worked. Buryats in the second half of the Soviet Era developed an impressive presence in Russian language academia, in both the humanities and sciences (Chakars 2008; Bernstein 2013). As I have already mentioned, in the late 1920s Moscow began making Buryat language media a central concern for propaganda and education as it did with all other major ethnicities in the USSR as part of the *korenizatsia* program. However, by the 1960s radio stations were beginning to face difficulties in finding enough fluent Buryat speakers to fill out mandatory programming quotas (Graber 2012). By 1990 the Western Buryat languages, those of Ust'-Orda and Irkutsk in which the most famous *ül'gershed* recited their heroic oral epics about Geser, were recognised by UNESCO as “nearly extinct” (Janhunen and Salminen 1993-9: “Buryat”).

Thus, while the Buryat languages declined, academic approaches to Geser and Buryat folklore opened up, increasingly becoming a literary” study of material which had been recorded in the first half of the century. By the end of the 1950s the Khalkha Mongol scholar Byambyn Rinchen could write his scathing “En Marge du Culte de Gesser Khan”, which I looked at closely in the previous chapter, and publish it on an international level without political repercussions. So too could Tsendiyn Damdinsuren publish his monumental *Istoricheskie Kornii Geseriady* without difficulty. All that was needed on Damdinsüren’s (1957: 37) part to defend its legitimacy against the old spectre of Kozin’s (1940, 1948) that Geser was really Chingis Khan and Vladimirtsov’s (1923) notions that Geser was a product of the feudal classes, was simply cutting and pasting Lenin’s now generic statement that all cultures

contained democratic and socialist elements.¹ Damdinsuren's thesis, as has already been mentioned in chapter four, was that Geser stemmed from the 11th c. Tufanian warlord Gosilo (Tib. Go-sras). There were no religious aspects to the hero for Damdinsüren – like Poppe and Kozin he deliberately ignored them out of old political habit, in spite of what would appear from his contemporary and friend Rinchen the next year.²

Between the end of the 1950s and the fall of the USSR many books were published on the Buryat Geser, but for the most part they were simply philological exercises without a great deal of originality. Most important of all was that in this period the *ül'gershen* Paramon Dmitriev's Geser (1953), as well as Pyookhon Petrov's (1960, 1968) and Manshuud's full tripartite cycle (1961-4) were all published in parallel Russian and Buryat editions. In 1969 Mikhayl Stepanov, who had previously worked with Semyon Lipkin on producing Russian translations of poems, published a version of Petrov's Geser for children, *Karayushchiy Mech Gesera* (The Punishing Sword of Geser). So too did the scholar N. O. Sharakshinova composed a number of books on the epics of Ust'-Orda (1958, 1959) and one of the philology of Geser (1969), while S. P. Baldaev (1959, 1960, 1961) also published collections of epics he had been recording for the past twenty years. Yet, as emphasised in chapter two, much of his and others' Unga Geser material and Unga epics in general have never been published.

The most important thinker in the small circle of Buryat geserologists in the second half of the Soviet Era was undoubtedly Aleksey. I. Ulanov, who, as the reader might recall, had gone into voluntary exile from the BMASSR after the 1948 condemnation of the hero, and who reappeared as the most eloquent defender of the epic and its ideological value in the 1953 "scientific session". Ulanov's 1957 *K Kharakteristike Geroicheskogo Eposa Buryat* (On the Character of The Heroic Epic of the Buryats) reiterated Sanzheev and Poppe's delineations of Unga, Ekhirit-Bulagat and Khori epics in accordance with their Marxian historical conception of "*po etapam razvitiya*" (development in stages). Aside from this Ulanov mostly concentrated on literary analysis: genre and style (1957, 1963, 1974). Yet in his 1974 *Drevniy Fol'klor Buryat* (Ancient Folklore of the Buryats) he argued that the origins of Buryat folklore were archaic, originating most likely in the first millennium CE in an "*aktivnost' kollektiva*" (activity

¹ One should also curiously note that Marx and Engels along with Lenin appear in a short pre-emptive section of the book's Russian bibliography but Marx and Engels are never cited or quoted in the work (Damdinsüren 1957: 280). Perhaps this seemed like a necessary "protection" to Damdinsüren in order to appear that he was "politically correct" on a subject which had recently been so closely associated with ideological wrong-headedness.

² In the "Postface" to "En Marge" Rinchen (1958) explains that the paper was originally written in 1956. Even though Damdinsüren's book did not reach print until 1957, its contents were known as early as 1953 in the form of his thesis. Rinchen as a close friend of Damdinsüren *must* have known about it, but does not mention Damdinsüren once in his paper. This is very curious.

of the collective) – communal singing and dancing that told the story of the birth and feats of heroes and natural phenomena (the stars, fish, the Earth, game) in which the people was actually empowering and worshipping itself (p. 153).

Ulanov's theory sounds like a quite typical cross between Marxist collectivism and Emile Durkheim's anthropology, a perfectly typical conception for the time and quite ideologically sound. Only later did the single *ül'gershen* emerge, so Ulanov imagined, most likely after the Khori and "steppe Bulagat" Buryats had taken to cattle herding around the twelfth century as part of the Mongol Empire. The modern *ül'ger* was a product of the primitive "forest peoples" and the already feudal steppe Buryats coming together. Thus, the Eastern and Western Buryats as a whole were involved in the birth of the modern tradition. The *ser daralga*, or chanting of the audience at certain points in the epic thus became something primordial, a "magical function" from the primordial days when *everyone* was an *ül'gershen* (Ulanov 1970: 67; 1974: 65).

In his efforts to avoid Vladimirtsov's (1923) theory that epics were the produce of the ruling classes, one might say that Ulanov (p. 151-2) represented the emergence of the modern genre of the *ül'ger* as a kind of "fall". Thus he can rhetorically ask: "Were there always Buryat *ül'gers* like those which were written down in the 19th and 20th centuries? Of course not" - the myths of the Buryats and those of other Mongolic people have ancient shared roots (*drevnyie korni...odinakovy*) (p. 151-2). Although Geser is not the main subject of the text, and it seems clear that Ulanov regarded him as a late edition to Buryat culture, perhaps later than the 18th c., compared with the zoomorphism, naturalism and "matriarchy" inherent especially in the Ekhirit-Bulagat epics, Ulanov (p. 157-8) thus finds in these elements a "*besmertnoe tvorenie*" (an immortal creation) because it is really all about a "worldly happy creative life on Earth" (*za mirnuyu, schatlivuyu tvorcheskuyu zhizn' na zemle*) and celebrates human feats and courage. Such sentiments are not very different at all from what Ulanov had articulated during the 1953 "scientific session" on the hero. They combine archaism and Sanzheev's developmental theory with the vision of feudalism as a fall from which humanism could be a recovery. Geser still remains a soteric figure.

In comparison with Ulanov, M. P. Khomonov (1976: 56-61) was to go much further. Whilst he also retained the idea that the Ekhirit-Bulagat epics were archaic and filled with matriarchal elements (ibid. 24, 44), he suggested that Geser had come to the Mongolic peoples during the second half of the first millennium CE. Khomonov's rationalisation for such an increase on the usual six-hundred-year figure was simply the presence of the deity Khormus Tengeri in both the Buryat and Mongol Geser epics. Khormus/Tyurmas/Qormasda, who

appears as Geser's father, seems to clearly take his name from the Persian Zoroastrian supreme deity Ahura Mazda. To this link Khomonov added a theory that Geser was in fact the ancient Persian ruler Kersaspes, or perhaps even the Persian demon Kasur (he doesn't decide on which). The presence of Ahura Mazda in the Mongolic Geser epics is most likely a distant remnant from mediaeval Mongolian and Turkic Manichaeism (Schmidt 1836: 3-5), but there is little to suggest that Geser came attached to him.³

Similar ideas to Khomonov's were also later outlined by Sergey Sh. Chagdurov in his *Proiskhozdenie Geseriady* (Origin of the Geseriad 1980), in which Geser was in fact another ancient Persian ruler, the mythical Kai Krosroes from the epic *Shah Name*. Another was the Mongol Koreologist Baldandorjiyn Sum"yaabaatar's (1974) that the title Geser Khan shares an origin with an obscure title meaning "ruler of all" mentioned in Chinese chronicles for Korean rulers in the first century BCE, which he tentatively reassembles as *kösil/kösir*. Armed with this and other theoretical etymologies, Sum"yaabaatar then concludes that the ancestors of the Koreans and Mongols both once lived in Tibet, but as to when this might have been remains very unclear. These eccentric conceptions have not survived the test of time and do not seem to have ever garnered supporters any more than Khomonov's, though even in 1989, at the very end of the Soviet Period and on the edge of Geser's revival one can still find Khomonov restating his theory in his *Mongol'skaya Geseriada* (1991: 9ff), side by side with the mandatory references to Engels, Marx and Lenin in the endnotes (p. 15).

2. The Dating.

In light of the relatively small and uninfluential nature of Geser during the second half of the Soviet Era, for interest in him to reappear in 1989 might seem an unexpected occurrence. The chairman of the communist party of the BASSR from 1977 to 1987, Vladimir B. Saganov, could still in the early 1980s condemn Geser as a symbol of the "feudal khanic" past (Khamutaev 2008: 157). Yet, by 1989 the "autumn of nations" had, as was noted at the start of

³ Ahura Mazda entered the Mongol pantheon due to the Buddhist Uyghurs who, in turn, borrowed his name from nearby Manichaeans to translate the Sanskrit Indra. Thereafter he remained the common term for rendering a generic patriarchal deity from Buddhism such as Indra or Tibetan brGya-byin (Stein 1959: 148). For instance, one might note that Qormasd is hailed as the father of Chingis Khan in the *Erdeni-yin Tobči* (A18, p. 55). See the Mongolian prophecies endorsed by the non-descript "Qormuzda" and another god Esrua in Alice Sarközi's (1992: 43-59) *Political Prophecies in Mongolia in the 17th-20th Centuries*. Most interestingly, the use of the name Qormazda/Qormuzda Tengeri is found only in the beliefs of the Western Mongols, Tuvans and Buryats (Van Deusen 2006: 45). On the Buryats in particular, Waida (1996: 222) notes a Buryat myth involving a flower growing contest between the sons of "Ormazd Tenger". The flower story is of Buddhist origin but has been seemingly adapted to the older Buryat pantheon. Nonetheless, there would seem no grounds for assuming that Qormazda had come already attached with Geser due to Persian influence upon the Turco-Mongolian peoples during the first millennium CE.

this chapter, begun to stir up aspirations towards cultural revival and the reunification of the old territory of the pre-1937 BMASSR. However, the academic geserologists, who, on the 29th of June 1989, met with the Writers' Union to garner support for finally celebrating the millennial jubilee of Geser appear to have had very little to do with political groups such as "Geser".⁴ The only exception is perhaps VARK (*Vseburyatskiy Assotisiya Razvitiya Kul'tury*) – the All-Buryat Association for the Development of Culture. When I interviewed Dugarov in early July 2016 he emphasised that VARK had been of some importance in the early 1990s and in garnering support for the later Geseriada festivals. It also contained members such as the folklorist Sergey Chagdurov, who was present at the 29th of June 1989 meeting. VARK, like many of the other groups at the time sought to preserve traditions and unite the Buryats into a single state and people. However, VARK did not yet exist in 1989. It was the product of an October 1990 meeting of the BASSR government concerning the new leader Leonid Potapov's decision to open up the question of the "*nepravomernost*" (illegitimacy) of the "*raschelenie*" (dismemberment) of the BMASSR in October 1937 (Khamutaev 2008: 111). What then took place at the June 1989 meeting? Dugarov (1998) tells us that:

In June 1989, the Buryat Writers' Union hosted a meeting in which scientists, representatives of creative unions, the ministries of culture and public education, as well as representatives of the Ust-Orda and Aginsky Buryat Autonomous Areas took an active part. Leading folklorists such as the doctors of philological science A.I. Ulanov, N.O. Sharakshinova, S.Sh. Chagdurov, and the candidates of philology M.P. Khomonov, Ye.O. Khundaeva and others put forward and substantiated the idea of celebrating the 1000th anniversary of Geser and in 1995 holding an international conference called "The Geser Epic: The treasure of the peoples of Central Asia (Materials from this meeting were published in the collection *Geseriada: Proshloe i Nastoyashchee*, Ulan-Ude, 1991).

For the most part, Dugarov and those who met to discuss Geser in June 1989 simply seem to have been the product of the same keenness at the time to renew Buryat culture. Beneath the surface of Buryat folkloristics there appears to have been a profound interest by academics and writers to restore Geser to the central image of Buryat culture and identity, which now found itself an opportunity. Because Dugarov and the geserologists acquired government backing for

⁴ In Khamutaev (2005, 2008) very little is said about Geser, nothing about the *Geseriada*, and B.S. Dugarov, Ulanov, Chagdurov and others involved in the project do not appear at all except in a long generic list of those Buryats in the 1980s-2000s who have had a profound interest in Buryat culture and its preservation (2008: n. 56 p. 31).

their project by gathering the endorsements of a number of famous writers through connections made by the Union of Soviet Writers connected to the Writers' Union of the BASSR, they managed to achieve their goal. More precisely, they would end up exceeding it when a proposal for permission for several "folkloric evenings" would, in 1991, at the hand of Dugarov, become the *Geseriada* festivals. When I asked Dugarov if there had been any difficulty in garnering governmental support for either the initial "folkloric evenings" plan or for the *Geseriada*, he emphasised that some older people in the Writers' Union and in the BASSR's branch of the CPSU were still a little suspicious about Geser, but that younger people were keen to change things. Geser did not require a great deal of fighting to win out.

The most central part of the 29th of June 1989 meeting of the Writers' Union was the necessity of substantiating the millennial dating of Geser - the *Drevnie Kornii Geseriady* (Ancient Roots of the Geseriad). In the book *Geseriada Proshloe i Nastoyashchee* (*Geseriad Past and Present*), which was published in 1991 in preparation for the millennial celebrations there is an abundant selection of primary sources from the 1989 meeting and its intentions. As with the published 1953 redemption of Geser in *O Kharaktere* this book is a necessary piece of Soviet Era protocol to illustrate the important processes and reasoning behind academic and ideological decision-making. It presents a debate, but it is a ritualised and very repetitive one within very particular ideological parameters. We need to look closely at what can and cannot be said and the holistic purpose behind the collected text and materials.

The question of the dating of the Buryat Geser epic tradition begins with a statement titled "On the dating of the *ül'ger*" (1991: 45). This had been put together by Yu. I. Budaev of the Buryat Writers' Union from testimonies by the academics Ulanov, Sharkshinova, Chagdurov, Khomonov, Khundaeva and the archaeologist P. B. Konovalov. Here they unanimously agree on the millennial dating of Manshuud's Geser, Ulanov (pp. 53-4, 57-63), regarded as the most senior and important geserologist is the first to state his position, which is little different from what it had been in 1974: the Buryat "forest peoples" had already developed a heroic epic tradition by the end of the first millennium CE, which combined with that of their already feudal, herding Khori and "steppe Bulagat" relatives (*sorodichey*) over time. The others simply second Ulanov.

Sharakhshinova (p. 54), for instance, invokes her forty years of studying Geser simply to declare that Ulanov is "*prav*" (correct) about the millennial dating. Khundaeva (p. 55-6, 96-100), much younger than the others, declares Ulanov also to be similarly "*prav*" on the basis of the epic's primordial matriarchal elements – another perennial trope concerning the Ekhirit-Bulagat epics which I discussed in chapter two. Khomonov (p. 55) agrees with the others but

emphasises the need for more study and for an international conference to “answer the matter” on the dating properly (which Sharakshinova, p. 70 also concludes her paper). Konovalov (ibid.) wants to push the date back to at least the 9th-10th c. and see Geser’s origins in the battles for independence of Mongolic peoples from the Turks. Chagdurov (p. 54) has similar ideas but desires to build upon his own and Khomonov’s old theories concerning Persian influence through the Uigurs and Sodgians on the Mongols as early as the 6th c. CE in the production of Geser.

The scholars all admit that Damdinsüren’s theory that Gosilo is Geser is correct (even if none of them know Tibetan or anything much about the Tibetan Geser), but this provides the opportunity for Geser to have already been present in Mongolic oral tradition in a “deep time” prior to the first eleventh century mention of the hero (Ulanov 1991: 62). However, none of them, except perhaps with the exception of Chagdurov (pp. 76-87) and his long, unconvincing theory of a 7th c. migration of peoples from Amdo to Buryatia to become the ancestors of the Ashabagat Bulagats, seem to go as far as to claim that (proto)Buryats might have been telling stories about Geser already in the late first millennium CE. This of course was what Poppe’s sleight of hand in the “Chronology” essay seemed to suggest. Yet, what this seems to illustrate is that beneath Ulanov’s ideas, which the others agree with, Poppe’s theory was still alive. Curiously, from his 1961 introduction to Manshuud’s Geser, in which Poppe’s false reference to a 1206 reference to Geser is repeated, to *Proshloe i Nastoyashchee*, Poppe is not mentioned by name at all. However, when I interviewed Dugarov in July 2016 he emphasised the importance of Poppe in giving the folklorists the millennial dating.

But perhaps the most interesting thing is this – that at end of the declaration by the scholars (p. 56) there is a short addendum in which it is stated that the historian R. P. Pubaev and the candidates in philology G. O. Tudenov and B. D. Bayartuev were “cautious, doubting the exact date.” However, the reader is immediately informed that “they are not specialists in folklore. They do not study the epic of Geser, and naturally, they are not able to produce concrete facts that refute the prosed date” (*Oni ne spatsialisty po fol’kloru. Epos ‘Geser’ ne izuchayut, yestestvenno, faktov konkretnykh, otvergayushchikh predlozhenuyu datu, ne mogli privesti*). There is indeed something more than a little terse here. The others seem to have been so keen for a millennial dating, the jubilee, conferences and the chance to publish more material on Geser that the official geserologists had decided to form a unanimous decision. Only by doing so could they get what they wanted.

But there is a fascinating contradiction here – the millennial dating cannot be argued with, yet the very fact that it is disputable is required to legitimise the need to assemble an

international conference to solve the problem. Both of these contrary positions were required. And yet, the legacy beneath all this still seems to remain Poppe's "Chronology" essay, Manshuud's "deep time" and the jubilee that never happened. Should one then conclude this by proposing that the geserologists exaggerated the truth about the "deep time" of Geser? Perhaps indeed they did. Yet, at this point with the 1989 "folkloric evening" no proper *Geseriada* festival and ethos of the revival of Buryat culture had properly formed.

Later in the volume several pages are given over to endorsements of the millennial date and celebration of the epic from important members of local and neighbouring Writers' Unions made in July 1989 (pp. 105-6). The point seems to have been to garner as much support and agreement as possible. The event is a ritual orchestration of the request to have the jubilee, perhaps not so different from Geser's ritual redemption in 1953. There were other endorsers too (p. 56). Ts. N. Nomtoev, writer and "socialist hero of labour", two *kandidats* Sh. N. Tsyrenzhapov and A. V. Tumakhani and teachers from Ust' Orda and Aginsk, E. I. Mironov and the musicologist D. D. Dugarov all endorsed the jubilee and even suggested taking the proposal to UNESCO. A representative of the Russian branch of UNESCO, A. B. Tarelin, did end up attending the *Geseriada-95* event (*BÜ* 1995c), but UNESCO did not provide any funds or other assistance. As I will discuss in chapter seven of this thesis, the relationship between the Buryat Geser and UNESCO has been an anti-climactic one in the last twenty years, for all the efforts of scholars.

But what exactly were all these people asking for? Pages 107-8 supply us with a list of fourteen "Recommendations" made at the meeting that took place on the 29th of June 1989, of which Dugarov was the chairman. These include that in 1994 or 1995 the 1000-year anniversary of Geser should be celebrated, that BNTs SO RAN should hold an international conference on Geser, that Irkutsk Uni Press should be encouraged to publish two outstanding books by Sharakshinova and Chagdurov; that the Banzarov National Pedagogical Institute should publish Vasil'ev's Geser and institute a department of Buryat language learning for children. So too should articles on Geser be published by Ulanov, Sharakshinova and others to "propagandise" (*propagandirovat'*) the meaning of the epic to the general populace. Also, perhaps the most important matter is the final recommendation – that the main practical work for all this should be carried out *na initsiativnuyu gruppu* (by a proactive group) of intellectuals, writers and journalists.

Very few of these recommendations were ever fulfilled, except perhaps the millennial jubilee of *Geseriada-95* and some of the publications. Later in the book an even more ambitious "plan" for publications over the next five years made during the June 1989 meeting is given

(pp. 124-5). A number of the texts listed did eventually see the light of day, but often much later than was enthusiastically envisioned in 1989. The publication of Vasil'ev's Geser is planned for 1991 (but was published in the end in 1995); Boldanova's recording of Tüshemilov's Geser was planned for 1992 (but did not come out until 2000). For 1993-4 the plan was to publish Buryat *ül'gernüüd* taken down by Yumsunov, Khangalov, Zhamtsarano and Bazar Baradin at the start of the 20th c, but never seem to have been published. The same is true of the other plan for these two years – the publication of collections of *ül'gers* from the reciters Dmitriev, Zhatukhaev, Shanarsheev.⁵

What is most interesting, however, is that there is a plan for a “*svodnyy variant*” of Geser in both Russian and Buryat – though nothing is said as to whether this would be some new project or simply a republication of the old 1959 work. However, in the end, a new *svodnyy Geser* edited by Chagdurov did appear (see chapter 2), and so too the 1995 *Abay Geser Moguchiy* edition of Manshuud's, in both Russian and Buryat, though this last and important work does not seem to have been planned at this early stage. Nonetheless, perhaps Dugarov (1998: 103) is correct when he says that “During the five-year period of the Geseriada, from 1991 to 1995, a whole library of a sort was published. Considering the numerous newspaper and magazine articles in the Buryat and Russian languages, this surpasses in volume all that was written about the epic Abay Geser during the whole of this last century.” It is trivial and rather boring to say that academics love books, but one must admit that *this was* a central part of the plans for what later became the *Geseriada* and that much of it did come to fruition. Although much of Geser and Buryat epic is still locked in the archives, without the *Geseriada* a great deal more would most likely still be there.

Towards the end of the book (p. 122-3) there is included a November 15th 1990 decree from the Supreme Soviet of the BASSR that a festival called *Epos Geser – Sokrovishche Narodov Tsentral'noy Azii* (The Epic of Geser – the treasure of the peoples of Central Asia) will take place in 1995 and that between 1991 and 1995 preparations will be made to “...consider and approve the estimated costs, identify sources of funding, including centralised allocations of funding from the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR.” This is a little different from the series of *Geseriada* festivals that eventually took place in the *aymags*. The name would suggest an international celebration of the Geser traditions of other peoples beyond the Buryats. It is as though the government was confused and thought that the name for the 1995

⁵ There are also plans listed to raise money with Geser-themed calendars (!) alongside brochures on the famous reciters. Amongst these are also brochures on famous folklorists – including one on Ulanov who was still living of course.

international conference that had been suggested – *Sokrovische Narodov Tsentral'noy Azii* was the name of the *whole* festival.

The overall plan of events that was developed by November 1990 was as follows. In April 1991 the 125th Anniversary for Petrov and 100th for Zhatukhaev was to be held at the RNMTs (Regional National Multifunctional Centre) in Ulan Ude, and in June an international conference on Tseveen Zhamtsarano in honour of his 110th birthday. In June 1992 a 105th anniversary for Stepanov and 115th for Papa Tüshemilov, both once again at the RNMTs. This is repeated in April 1993 with the same treatment for Toroev's 100th and Dmitriev's 110th and in July an international "round table" conference for the 115th birthday of Bazar Baradin. For April 1994 Alsyev's 115th anniversary is added, with one more "evening of Buryat storytellers-*ül'gershed*". However, in the end only three of the reciters acquired "folkloric evenings" and these all took place in winter, when the *ül'ger* was traditionally recited.⁶ Most important of all, however is that all that had been marked out for 1995 at this point in 1989 was a July international conference on the "issues in the study of Geser". Thus far there are no sports competitions, Geser temples, "hitching posts" or Geser's Banner. There would be more folkloric evenings, conferences and the hope of publishing a few books, but that seems to have been the aspiration – a series of small, mostly academic, jubilee events over four years. Instead, it was because of the poet Bair Dugarov, who organised the evening, that the *Geseriada* would develop into something very different.

3. A Party for Manshuud.

However, first it is necessary to look at the first "folkloric evening" that took place three months after the June 1989 meeting and how it commemorated Manshuud Emegeev. Dugarov in 1998 would say out it:

The very first literary and folklore evening, which occurred as a prelude to *Geseriada*, took place on September 25, 1989 in the National Library of the Republic of Buryatia. It was dedicated to the 140th anniversary of the remarkable narrator Manshuud Emegeev, whose version of the epic *Abay Geser* recorded by Ts. Zhamtsarano, is the most archaic and original. This served as a starting point for academics to substantiate the 1000th anniversary of the Buryat *Geseriada*, as mentioned above.

⁶ These actually ended up being celebrated at very different times and far fewer in number: Pyookhon Petrov - in December 1991, Papa Tüshemilov - in December 1992, Maysan Alsyev's - in January 1995 (Dugarov 1998).

Several years earlier, before the *Geseriada*, in his introduction to *Geseriada: Proshloe i Nastoyashchee* Dugarov (1991: 8) gives us a slightly different and perhaps more melancholic image, quite simply because the Geser oral epic tradition no longer existed. To honour Manshuud's 140th birthday Timofei Taysaevich, grandson of Manshuud, and a number of other relatives, came out from Ust'-Orda. Yet none of these relatives were *ül'gershed*. As the reader may recall from chapter one of this thesis, Manshuud's nephew Khartu Khabdaev had been his only student. Sharakshinova's (1991: 14) article in *Proshloe i Nastoyashchee*, which she ends with the hope that:

Perhaps in time one of Khartu Khabdaev's children will start to sing the *ül'gers*. Currently in 1989, our society, thanks to its descendants, is widely celebrating the 140 years since the birth of our countryman, the outstanding storyteller-singer Emegeyn Manshuud. The Buryat people are proud of their gifted storytellers, their bearers of popular wisdom (*nositelyami narodnogo mudrost'*).

Sadly, it does not seem that Khabdaev's children ever did, though, as will be discussed in chapter seven of this thesis, there is an increasing number of young people today attempting to bring the *ül'ger* tradition back to life. Indeed, although it is highly debatable that the 1989 anniversary of Manshuud was being "widely celebrated" (*shiroko otmechayut*) by anyone beyond those gathered for the "folkloric evening", one can certainly appreciate the positive outlook that Sharakshinova and other academics at the time possessed. Without this the *Geseriada* festivities would never have been possible.

However, beneath the celebratory tone to *Proshloe i Nastoyashchee* there is a seeming sadness about the absence of the Geser epic as genuine living tradition. One wonders why Dugarov (1991: 8) tells us the trivial fact that "*k sozhaleniyu nikto nynye zhivushchikh ne slyshal ispolnenie eposa Geser iz ust Manshuda*" (Sadly nobody now alive has heard a performance of the epic Geser from the mouth of Manshuud). Manshuud had passed away in 1908, and, with the passing of Khabdaev in the early 1980s, not merely the chain of transmission of tradition between generations, but the memory of the living voice of this culture hero had now passed away. It is also mentioned that the event received a message from A. E. Numaa, a famous Inner Mongolian actress, who mentions the living variants of Geser in Mongolian, Tibetan and Buryat in China. This is curious because I don't think anything is known about existing Buryat Geser in China. It also quietly intimates the tragic fact that the "living" Buryat Geser in the USSR by 1989 was dead in comparison with *variantakh*

bytuyushchikh i seychas v Kitae (variants which even now still exist in China). What then was the performance that took place in honour of Manshuud if there was no Geser? Instead Tsyden Tsyrendorzhiev, “people’s artist of the BASSR” recited a Geser-themed poem, the words of which were written by the young artist, S. Sharapov, of the Buryat Drama Theatre. Accompanying them were the “people’s ensemble” of tradition Buryat folk music, *Magtaal*. Thus, Geser *was* present, but it was an “invented tradition”.



FIG 1.

Folklore-Literature evening for the 140th anniversary of the birth of Manshuud Emegeev. Pictured are the “people’s artists of the BASSR” Tsyden Tsyrendorzhiev, Sergey Baldaev and the people’s ensemble *Magtaal*. Image from introduction by Dugarov (1991: 7) in *Geseriada: Proshloe i Nastoyashchee*.

Yet there were also efforts to rekindle the *ül’ger* tradition in itself made at the time. As Dugarov recalled in 1998:

At that time the folklore festivals of the *Geseriada* were at the centre of attention. Of course so too those who continued the ancient traditions - modern *ül’gershed*: S. S. Sontohonov, R.E. Erdyneev, D.S. Dugarov and his students B. Gomboev, S. Bolkhosoev, A. Zandanov from the studio for the preparation of young storytellers at the Institute of Culture (now the East-Siberian Government Academy of Culture and Art [*Vostochno-Sibirskaya Gosudarstvennaya Akadamiya Kul’tury i Isskustva*]) in relation to the *Geseriada*.

I have attempted to retain Dugarov's word order in this passage because "in relation to the Geseriada" (*v svyazi Geseriadoy*) is a little ambiguous. Does this mean the festivals or does it mean the epic of Geser in itself, which is often called by this name? Were these living *ül'gershed* and the students they were preparing learning how to produce new Geser material or perhaps revive older material now only kept in academic texts? All five of the local *Geseriada* festivals from 1991 to 1995 were, when they took place, to contain performances by *ül'gershed*. The *Geseriada* of June 1995 included a "*konkurs uligershinov*" (Bur. *ül'gershedey mürysöön* - competition of *ül'gershed*). However, at no point does one find anything like the "old" Geser. That tradition was gone. New traditions needed to be (re)constructed.

4. The New Geser.

What was to be done about this? How might one hold "folkloric evenings", let alone the large *Geseriada* festivals without any *gesershed*? The answer was - with great difficulty and hard work. Following the completion of the 1992 *Geseriada*, *Buryaad Ünen* (1992b) announced that Aga, Irkutsk, Khezhenge and Muzhykha had no native "*edir ül'gershed*" (young performers). Thus, for future events teachers and students from Ulan-Ude "*yeke üürge beyeliүүлne*" (will play a big role) in order for there to be performances at the coming festivals. The musicologist D. S. Dugarov who has studied in China and with the Kalymks to learn *Jangar* is mentioned. A lot of students in the 1992 *Geseriada* were from the International School No. 1 in Ulan-Ude where he taught. The article ends with the cheerful question: "What are we going to do with this wealth of *ül'ger* performance that is being reawakened?" A silver lining had been found.

As will be explored in the next two chapters of this thesis there have been a great many efforts to utilise what tools are available to reconstitute a field of Geser-themed performance. However, just as Ulanov (1974: 122) had argued that in the "deep time" of Buryat history there had not been *ül'gernüüd* like those recorded in the 19th and 20th c, one must also acknowledge that those since the revival of Geser have simply taken a different form. The old skills of the Western Buryat *ül'gershed* of the 19-20th c., the great *gesershed* able to recite for tens of thousands of lines and days upon end, had passed away. Instead today Geser and other *ül'gernüüd* have been understandably influenced by the past century's production of "national cultures" and "national artists" and the interweaving of Buryat musical, theatrical and poetic traditions with Russian ones.⁷

⁷ Dugar-Nimaev (1991: 33-4) ends his essay for *Proshloe i Nastoyashchee* on Tseveen Zhamtsarano's recording of Manshuud's Geser with a curious example of its later influence on Buryat poetry: how the Buryat poet Nikolay Damdinov came across Zhamtsarano's publication of *Abay Geser Khübüün* in the 1970s. Damdinov

One should emphasise that the poet and actor Namzhil Baldano, only thirty-two at the time, found his way to being entrusted with the “consolidated Geser” project in 1941 because he had proven himself as a skilled converter of Buryat folk material to the stage. At the 1940 *Dekada* of Buryat culture in Moscow, which started the “consolidated” project, the first Buryat language opera *Enkhe Bolod Baatar* had been performed. Baldano had written the libretto for this. In 1959, the year the “consolidated” text finally saw the light of day, Baldano was also responsible for the libretto of the first-ever Buryat ballet, *Krasivitsa Angara* (Beauty of Angara) (Baldano 2014: 32; Babueva 2017). It was this just as much as his reinterpretation of the epic *Kharaasgay-Mergen* as a poem which caused Sanzhiev and others to choose him as the main composer of the Buryat text for the project.

During the *Geseriada* period a number of Geser plays and operas (Bur. *zhüzheg*) were performed. The most important of these were *Araday Baatar Geser Khaan* (Bur. The People’s hero Geser Khan) by “people’s poet” Nikolay Damndinov for the *Geseriada-95* in Ulan-Ude, which featured the famous Mongolian singer Jargalsaykhan and a number of other Russian and Mongolian opera-singers of note (BÜ 1995a). So too was there a play for children *Na Zemle Gesera* (In the Land of Geser), which included the treat of bringing several hundred rural primary school children to Ulan-Ude at government expense to see it (Kapustin, 1995c).⁸ Yet so too were there efforts to reconstitute *ül’ger*. In *Buryaad Ünen* during this period the poetry section occasionally seems given over to a newfound interest in Geser material to mark the events (e.g. Manzhikhanov 1992), but this seems to rarely occur again outside of this context.

There is also the important question of music and the nature of the reinvention of the public performance of the *ül’ger* itself. Manshuud sang his epics unaccompanied by music. Many of the Unga *ül’gershed*, Maysan Alsyeyev, Bazhey Zhatukhaev and Al’for Vasil’ev, sang while accompanied by someone playing the *morin khuur* (horse-head fiddle) (Khamiruev and Semyonov 2005). Others, such as Papa Tüshemilov, being unable to either sing or play, simply spoke the stories (Chagdurov 2000: 4). The most famous *ül’gershen-khuuramshi* (storyteller-

was drawn in by Manshuud’s imagery of the Tengeri gods holding their *khural* (meeting) upon the moon and stars. He utilised this in his 1977-9 *venok sonetov* (wreath of sonnets) originally written in Buryat but translated and published in Russian as “*Zvyozdnyy Put*” (Starry Path), which is coincidentally also the Russian translation for the program *Star Trek*. However, Damndinov was not writing science fiction – he was more interested in how the stars had always invited man’s awe and provoked the poetic and fantastical. See Andrei Rummyantsev’s (2012) reminiscences on the translation of these poems into Russian. More than anything this fact that the poems had to be translated out of Buryat for them to gain publication and acceptance says more about the situation of Buryat language as a viable means of artistic expression in the late Soviet Period.

⁸ On an amusing note, the Ballet and Opera Theatre on the second day of *Geseriada-95* was also taken over by a beauty-contest *Geserey Dagina*, which was won by twin teenage sisters from Aginsk whose father was the local middle school principal. One of the girls, Ayuusha, apparently spoke very good Chinese and English and was good at sewing (Kapustin 1995d).

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khuurist) in Buryat tradition is Chimit U. Budazhapov, who was born in 1885 in Ivolginsk and had an epic, *Bayan Borolzoy Baatar* recorded by S. P. Baldaev in 1945 (published 1960). He could play but could not sing and simply intoned the words to the *ül'ger*. His grandson, Ivan Dabaev, played *khuur* and recited a fragment of Geser at the *Geseriada-95* and for the 120th birthday celebration for Papa Tüshemilov in 1997 (Dorzhieva 2012). Dabaev is one of the few examples of a living performer who comes from an “unbroken” lineage and continues to perform today. In a recent interview (Sakhiltarova 2018) the now seventy-nine-year-old Dabaev recounts:

When I was a youngster, I loved listening to the stories of my maternal grandfather. He instilled in me a love for performance. My grandfather made custom *morin khuur* and balalaikas. Once I had an unpleasant accident. When I was sixteen years old, I fell off my horse and went to the hospital. For a whole year I did not go anywhere, my spine was severely bruised. At this time my grandfather made me a *morin khuur* and I started to play.

However, he only started publicly performing in the 90s after he had retired from his job driving tractors on a combine farm:

I retired and joined the *Magtaal* ensemble. I played *morin khuur* from an early age, but for some time I did use the instrument at all. I began to restore what I had previously known. Under the Soviet regime, nobody was interested in the *ül'gershed* and this art was forgotten.

Indeed, *Magtaal* was perhaps the only outlet for performers as the 1990s began. This was not only because there were so few people who still knew how to perform Buryat music and poetry. It was also because by the late Soviet Era these rare skills had become a sanctioned novelty, something which only existed for official folkloric performances and days of celebration to showcase the *image* of Buryat culture in exotic national dress and as a small orchestra rather than single performers. The “people’s ensemble” was a museum piece created by Soviet Era conceptions of Buryat culture as public performance, but it also provided a beginning for the attempts to rejuvenate Buryat culture that took place with the crumbling of the USSR through the “folkloric evenings”. Perhaps the most profound influence *Magtaal* has had is in the imagery surrounding the performance of *ül'ger* – something performed from a stage, in national costume for a theatre audience. As this was the only model available for what the

public performance of Buryat oral culture looked like, it became the basis for the recreation of the *ül'ger* in the 1990s and has never gone away.

This was a little different from how the old Buryat storytellers themselves lived and performed and were represented during the early Soviet Period and prior to it. The reader may recall Curtin's image of the farm-labourer Manshuud in his "filthy" *degel* and Petrov working at the local *kolkhoz* well into his seventies. Soviet biographers latched onto this fact, as is exemplified in Rannay Sherkhunaev's representation of Manshuud which was discussed in chapter one of this thesis, and utilised it to paint them as earthy labourers working for the common material good as much as by producing popular entertainment. The *rabochiy-skazitel'* (worker-storyteller), as epitomised by Manshuud, Petrov and Torojev was the ideal figure and much of this was down to the fact that Sherkhunaev was perhaps the most copious biographer of the Buryat *ül'gershed* during the Soviet Era. Dabaev may well be the last of these.

If the reader should consult the bibliography to this thesis, he or she will find not merely a great deal of short biographical books, but also a very long list indeed of short articles by Sherkhunaev (1964, 1966, 1968, 1969a-b, 1970, 1972, 1973, 1977, 1986-7 etc.) published in *Buryat Pravda*, *Znamya Lenina*, *Baykal* and other Soviet Era papers and magazines on these "culture heroes". In many ways Sherkhunaev was perhaps single-handedly responsible for creating the "cult of reciters" so one might call it. Rather than emphasising merely the hero Geser or the content of his epics, the reciters themselves in some ways came to be more important. The "official" list of them usually goes Manshuud, Petrov, Dmitriev, Torojev, Zhatukhaev, Ivanov, Tüshemilov, Stepanov, Torojev and sometimes Alsyjev and usually includes the same images of the reciters (*Sanktpeterburgskiy Blagotvoitel'nyy Fond* website; Khamiruev and Semyonov 2005).⁹ The pictures of the reciters are in many cases the *only* existing images of these men, such as Curtin's (1909: 89) photograph of Manshuud.

⁹ Shanarsheev is also occasionally included on the list for his *Shono-Baatar* (Khamiruev and Semyonov 2005). He claimed to have known Geser, but no variant was ever recorded from him.



FIG. 2.

Poster utilising Curtin's photo for Manshuud's 140th birthday celebrations in 1989: "Emegei-yin Manshud-un 140 jil-un oi-yin bayar" (Celebration of Manshuud Emegeev's 140 year anniversary). This poster was displayed at the event, and not as a form of advertising. Few Buryats would have known the old Mongol script at the time. Thus, it is more of a display piece for the attendees than anything. This poster was also included in the *Liki Geserriady* collection for Manshuud's 165th birthday celebrations in 2014. There is something very curious about this poster's attempt to conjure up the antiquity and "Buryatness" of Manshuud by using the old Mongol script, when Manshuud himself was illiterate.

Although Sherkhunaev seems to have begun this "cult" and the images with which it has been associated, it is M. I. Tulokohonov who seems to have been responsible for popularising them. His nearly identical introductions to the prominent 90's republications of *Alamzhi Mergen* (1991) and Manshuud's *Abay Geser* (1995) spend much less time talking about the epics in question and a great deal more on the prominent Buryat reciters, along with the mandatory division of Ekhirit-Bulagat and Unga branches of the tradition. On Khori epic little is said at all, and one should emphatically note that none of these "great men" have been Eastern Buryats. Yet, as was noted in chapter two, Baldaev and his associates took down variants of Geser from many more reciters, yet they have never become famous or their work published. Strangest, however, is the inclusion of Ivanov, Toroev, Stepanov and Zhatukhaev in this list of "official" culture heroes, when their Geser has never been published. Yet, as was detailed in the previous chapter, Stepanov and Zhatukhaev were also prominent producers of "new epic" and Toroev was regarded as perhaps the most important Buryat storyteller in the

Soviet Era between the 1940s and 1960s. It seems that only with rebirth of interest in Geser did these latter figures come to be squarely associated with being *gesershed*, rather than simply Buryat storytellers. Indeed, in the early 1990s Sherkhunaev (1991a-d, 1992a-b, 1993a-c) published a plethora of new biographical articles in local newspapers – four alone (1991a-d) to celebrate the anniversary of Petrov. However, as to whether these had much effect on the populace at the time or any staying power is a difficult, perhaps unanswerable question.

What Sherkhunaev was doing was in many ways typical of Soviet Era celebration of prominent “heroes of labour” and “people’s artists”. Yet this also laid the basis for a kind of collective ancestor worship to form. These figures, but in particular Manshuud, represented the soul of Buryat culture, its creative apex, while at the same time the content of these tales linked the Buryats with a “deep time”. The Herderian myth of the poet as the font of shared national culture could be overlaid on what remained at the fall of the USSR on Buryat veneration of the *akhamad* (ancestors). As Dugarov (1998) declares:

It is quite natural that this heroic legend, which existed practically throughout the Baikal region for many centuries, influenced the mentality of the Buryat-Mongolian people and the formation of its national identity...But the main thing is that the epic *Abay Geser* is an outstanding work of oral folk art, an expression of the moral and aesthetic ideals of the ancient Buryat society, a sort of encyclopedia of the ideals of the ancient Buryat society.

As one may note, this view of Geser as cultural “encyclopedia” has already been encountered through Ulanov, both in his speech at the 1953 “scientific session” and in his 1974 work on the antiquity of Buryat folklore. Geser could be understood as the essence of what it meant to be Buryat – everything was in there – one just had to find it. Officially, due to Ulanov’s influence, the Late Soviet Geser was all about collective work and humanist aspirations towards a happy life. But by the 1990s the “encyclopedia” of Geser was undergoing mutation. Geser for Dugarov especially now seems to have meant a key to unlocking the revival and remembering of the “deep time” of Buryat culture as a whole.

Thus, as Dugarov (1998) claims: “first and foremost, it was important to pay tribute to the memory of the outstanding storytellers – the *geshershed*, who brought the epic to us from the depth of centuries (*iz glubiny vekov*)”. He also announces that the millennial dating for Geser is little more than a “conventional sign of deep archaism (*uslovnym znakom glubokoy arkhaiiki*), a symbolic dating that presupposes the earliest origins of the oral-epic creativity of the Baikal storytellers in the context of the Central Asian ethnocultural space.” Re-establishing

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the Buryats through the *glubina vekov* of Geser and his “cult of reciters” meant that the rest of Buryat culture might be recalled and legitimised too. Manshuud and the primordial dating Poppe had given his epic formed the basis for this. So too, then, would Manshuud form the launching point for what was to come.

However, as I will argue in the next chapter, Dugarov does not seem to have been aware of just how large and important the *Geseriada* would become until its second major festival in 1992 – both for the Buryats and for the governments of the newly emerging Republic of Buryatia and Russian Federation. The latter became especially keen to utilise the events in order to construct international cooperation and an image of openness to the world after the isolationism of the Cold War.

Chapter 6. Reanimating Geser

As the previous chapter argued, in 1989 the plans to celebrate the forgotten jubilee for Geser “in the 90s” had been a relatively humble and academic affair, perfectly in keeping with the elite nature of knowledge about Geser in the late Soviet Era. This had taken place in a liminal zone in which the USSR was beginning to thaw, but in which the possibility of the union’s collapse was still unforeseeable. As the Buryats entered the 1990s, however, suddenly everything changed. A brave new world opened up and all that previously had been solid began to melt into air. Thus at once a newfound optimism for cultural revival meshed with extreme economic and social precarity and unpredictability. It was under these conditions, a new Post-Soviet *dispositif*, that the *Geseriada* took place.

By the late 1980’s the BASSR had developed an important place in the planned Soviet economy, mainly as a producer of raw materials (wool, meat, livestock feed) and a manufacturer of goods (glass, cement) including and especially products for the defence industry (aviation equipment, electric motors). However, almost 80% of what the BASSR consumed had to be imported from other Soviet Republics or countries in the Soviet Bloc and the technological level of BASSR manufacturing was generally quite low in comparison with other Republics (Vyacheslav 2011: 282-4). This put the BASSR in a very precarious position. On the 11th of September 1990 the USSR officially established its “500 days” program to transition towards a market economy. In November the next year a new RB (Republic of Buryatia), with the same territory and government as before was announced. Biltueva and Baldano (2006) aptly summarise the situation that followed for the fledgling RB:

The transformations that unfolded in Russia aimed at forming a market economy, sharply exposed the weaknesses and problems of the republic’s economy and led to a significant deterioration in the socio-economic situation in the region... If in the Soviet period Buryatia had occupied an average place among other regions of Russia in terms of the main parameters of socio-economic development, in the 1990s it was among the lowest.

With transition to a market economy defence contracts soon became rarer and it became costly to have to transport raw materials all the way to the BASSR just for them to be manufactured when Chinese consumer goods were already beginning to flood the market. In the period between 1992 and 1994 inflation struck the Russian economy hard and production fell drastically in the new Republic of Buryatia – there were roughly two times as many enterprises were listed as *ubytochnyy* (unprofitable) as was the average in the rest of the Federation. In

1994 production fell across the board and a loss of some 110 million rubles, or 64% of total profit, was recorded for what remained of state enterprises (excluding agriculture) (Vyacheslav 2011).¹ By the end of 1994, 15.5 thousand people in the Republic were unemployed and some 64 thousand, or 18% employed by state enterprises, were reduced to working part time or put on unpaid leave. Biltueva and Baldano (2006) summarise that “for the population of Buryatia, the economic crisis was expressed primarily in wage delays, unemployment, rising prices for industrial products, goods, paid services, high transportation rates, energy, and housing and communal services.” They aptly describe the situation as one of “deep systemic crisis” that no efforts by the government of the Republic, nor by the Russian Federation were able to improve. Newspapers became flooded with disgruntled workers airing their hopelessness and political protests became widespread. They add:

According to K. B. Mitupov, in the period 1992-1998 the standard of living of the population of the republic decreased by half and Buryatia was among the leaders in terms of poverty in the Russian Federation. Over 60% of the population of the republic had an average per capita income below the subsistence minimum. The lowest-paid categories of the population were employees of education and scientific institutions.... A university professor received a salary at the level of a cleaner, and an assistant professor was not able to buy books or write a paper; a novice teacher, an assistant was not able to support a family.

Thus, were the educated Buryat elite among the hardest hit. Nonetheless, the plans to celebrate Geser, to hold the international conference and to publish works on the hero continued without issue, even if academics went for long periods unpaid. Geser appears to have been granted an importance which in any other situation would have not been the case. Indeed, this sudden thrusting of the Buryats into a new world brought on an abrupt crisis of identity, but also the opportunity to revive, explore, remember and reinvent what it meant to be Buryat. Through the symbol of Geser the result was the *Geseriada* – five years of Buryat sporting and cultural festivals held in summer in five different locations throughout “ethnic Buryatia”, which

¹ Vyacheslav (2011: 283) writes that “It was in 1994 that the maximum decline in production was observed in Buryatia. During the years of reform in the republic only the fuel and energy remained stable. At the same time in 1994, relative to the level of 1993, the production of cellulose decreased to 11%, lumber - 51%, industrial wood - 59%, cement - 65%. Production in the machine-building sharply fell up to 37%.... In 1994, the production of food products decreased by 27%, and non-food - by 48%. The situation in the agricultural sector also became critical. Decline in agricultural production had already begun. In 1992–1994 it decreased by 36%. The reduction of production in all sectors of the economy quite naturally affected transportation, the volume of which significantly decreased during the years of reform. In 1994, the carriage of goods by rail decreased by 18%, by road - by 51%, aviation - by 52%. A significant rise in the cost of travel also led to a decrease in passenger traffic 16%.”

included Ust'-Orda and Aginsk that had been severed from the BMASSR during the Purges in September 1937.

How deeply tied to notions of a reunited Buryat state was this? Indeed, celebrating Geser and the revival of Buryat language and culture were prioritised by the new government of Russian Leonid Potapov that took power in the BASSR in 1990. The greatest extent “national” sentiment reached was the August 1990 admission that the “dismemberment” of the 1937 BMASSR was an “illegitimate” legal action under the Soviet constitution. This was reiterated again with the attempted secession of the Republic of Buryatia from the USSR in early November 1991, along with the declaration that the Buryats’ “voluntary entry” into the Russian Empire that had been celebrated in 1959, should remove the term “voluntary” (Khamutaev 2008: 68; Chakars 2008: 16). Talk of the *negedel* (reunification) of the old pre-1937 BMASSR, to include Aginsk and Ust'-Orda, were short-lived and the product of Buryat activists, but never the government themselves. The attempted secession and declarations seem to have simply been the musings of a “new” state trying attempting to assert its existence. A month later, at Christmas, the USSR became the Russian Federation and Gorbachev resigned his post to Boris Yel'tsin. In 1992 some 85% of the inhabitants of the new Republic of Buryatia voted to remain part of the USSR (Bernstein 2012: 11). Thus, it never left.

Nonetheless, the *Geseriada* was steeped in efforts to demarcate and reenchant a conception of shared “ethnic Buryat” territory – through the carrying of a “Banner of Geser” around these regions, the erecting of shrines and monuments to the hero, and attempts to connect his stories with various geographic landmarks. Nonetheless, I argue that this was a “weak” nationalism – a momentary celebration that never at any point developed any conscious plans of political *negedel* (unity). More than anything else, during this period Geser came to operate as a kind of “absent mediator”. The symbol of the hero, the “deep time” of Manshuud’s variant and the *ül'ger* tradition’s “cult of reciters” that was nursed by academics during the second half of the Soviet Period functioned as an *enabler* for a host of other symbols found to be inherently bound to *Buryat-becoming*: traditional song and dance; the “three manly sports” of horse-racing, archery and wrestling; the revival of language; the restoration of Buddhism and shamanism.

And yet, as was emphasised in the previous chapter, Geser as living epic tradition had long since disappeared and had to be created anew. Thus, in a curious sort of repetition of the 1940s, it was imperative once again to *propagandirovat'* (propagandise) the meaning of this “invented” hero to an unfamiliar audience. In this case the new invented meaning was that *through* Geser the rest of Buryat culture could also return and be remembered. In turn the new

governments of the Republic of Buryatia and the Russian Federation also became avid supporters of the *Geseriada* in order to utilise Geser a symbol of inter-ethnic and international friendship and openness following the collapse of the USSR. Thus, for a short time, the Post-Soviet transition seems to have been gripped by an intense optimism for the future of the Buryats and Russia in general through the symbol of Geser.

1. The *Geseriada*.

What was the *Geseriada* about? Marina Baldano (2014: 35) writes that:

In 1991-1995 the 1000th anniversary of the epic was celebrated. In all areas of ethnic Buryatia the ritual of raising the banner of Geser was conducted, along with numerous festivals, competitions of *gesershed*. One of the main organisers and ideologists of it was the people's poet of Buryatia B. Dugarov. The actualized world of the epic with all its ritual collective actions, beliefs, customs, uniting the clan, tribe and collective birthed in each representative of the ethnos a feeling of unity and cohesion. This certainly affected the process of the consolidation (*konsolidatsii*) of the Buryat people.

While Baldano's belief in Geser's leading to the "process of the consolidation of the Buryat people" from the perspective of 2014 may seem a little optimistic, the *Geseriada*'s instigator, Bair Dugarov (1998), seems to centre his attention on the how his efforts represented the strength of Buryat culture suddenly emerging under difficult conditions of cultural amnesia and language loss:

It is unlikely that the *Geseriada* would have become an important factor in the cultural life of the Republic of Buryatia and the whole Baikal region if the people did not support it, and if an instinct for the self-preservation of traditional culture had not been already working under conditions of partial, and sometimes threatening and total assimilation and loss of the basic moments of national identity: language, religion, and the original life ways (*iskonnoy sistemy vedeniya khozyaystva*). Thanks to the return of historical memory and the appeals to spiritual roots and sources, the *Geseriada* has acquired the character of a popular movement (*kharakter narodnogo dvizheniya*).

The operant force here is that of a threat and the need to find a return to lost original lifeways. This was not an uncommon desire at the time in the former USSR and Communist Bloc. As Martin J. Matušík's (1993: 69) book *Postnational Identity* notes on what happened in the

1990s, when those emerging from seventy years of communism realised that they had in many ways become “post-traditional”:

One can appropriate what one already is in tradition. The “post-“ lies in the fact that one must appropriate oneself and one’s culture and tradition...in the present age traditional and national continuities are available only through sustained acts of self-appropriation.

Dugarov “sustained act of self-appropriation” was the belief that through Geser there would come a “return of memory” for something authentic and traditional. This, to him, was epitomised by the very first *Geseriada* festival of 1991 and its success:

Therefore, the *Geseriada* as a manifestation of ethnocultural self-awareness under modern conditions should be considered to begin with an event that occurred on August 17-18, 1991 in the village Khadaakhan in the Nukut district of the Ust-Ordynsky Buryat autonomous region, in the homeland of the great storyteller of the Geser epic, Pyookhon Petrov (1866-1943). As part of the 125th anniversary of his birth, a mass folklore event (*massovyy folk’lornyy prazdnik*) was held here at which the Banner of Geser was raised and consecrated, which became a symbol of the revival of folk traditions and customs, a symbol of the spiritual unity of peoples (*simbolom dukhovnogo yedineniya narodov*), who, due to historical circumstances (*v silu istoricheskikh obstoyatel’stv*), lived on the territory of three administrative units of the Baikal region - Buryatia, Irkutsk and Chita regions. The cycle (*krug*) of the Buryat *Geseriada*, which took place in five stages from 1991 to 1995, covered all territorial administrative units with a Buryat population.

In spite of this, it is interesting to note that coverage of the 1991 *Geseriada* was almost non-existent at the time. One might note the presence of little more than a short article in the Buryat language newspaper *Buryaad Ünen* a month after the event, entitled *Ül’gershenyn Türehen Nyutagta* (In the Homeland of the Ül’gershen). This was by A. Baldaev (1991) a member of the *Magtaal* folk group that had performed at the birthday celebration for Manshuud two years earlier. It would only be because of the ongoing celebration of these events that the first, retrospectively, would come to appear so important. In 1991 even Dugarov does not seem to have expected it to turn into very much. It was simply an extension of the “folkloric evening” idea, the celebration of Pyookhon Petrov in his home territory.

But perhaps the most interesting mutation of the celebration of Geser that emerged out of this was the “Banner of Geser” itself. What began as a flag to sanctify as part of an invented

shamanic ritual became much more important. The flag ended up being carried in a clockwise direction (*naran zübe*) of the sacred red flag of Geser - *Znamya Gesera* (Bur. *Geserey Tug*) - between thirty-three locations (a sacred number implying totality in Mongolic culture) in Buryatia, Ust'-Orda, Irkutsk and Chita between 1991 and 1995. As T. D. Skrynnikova (2003: 33) aptly summarises, this was a ritual series of “measures to fix (*zafiksirovat'*) the territorial-tribal community of Buryats ritually, which was done.” D. D. Amogolonova calls it a case of “spatial ideologemes” (*prostranstvennyye ideologemy*) about speculatively legitimising the “borders of the ethnos... as a counterweight (*protivoves*) to tribal disunity.” One might perhaps compare it to the old British “beating of the bounds” of the Church parish – sanctifying territory by circumambulation.

As far as I am aware, this ritual had no pre-existing parallel in Buryat culture. It was a geopolitical “invented tradition” created by Dugarov. Even the red flag used as the banner, though emblazoned with the hero's name in the Old Mongol script, and featuring the traditional images of the sun and moon, looks more like a communist era flag than the many-tailed sacred *tug* usually associated with the old cults of Chingis Khan or Geser in other parts of the Mongolic world (Heissig [1970] 1980: 99-101). Thus, when Roberte Hamayon ([1996] 1998: 60) notes in one of the few Western academic articles written on the *Geseriada* that one “cannot pretend that the [*Geseriada*] festival [was] a revival of tradition” she is of course quite correct. So too is Ortiz-Echevarria (2010: 78 n.1) right that the *Geseriada* has a “seductive implication of authentic Buryat culture.” Because of Buryat cultural amnesia and the severing of the old epic and religious practices the whole thing *was* an invented tradition using what was available due to urgent need, even if the idea of the “depths of centuries” was such an important part of its legitimation and is keenly believed by Bair Dugarov and other Buryat Geser scholars.

At five of the locations the flag visited – Khadaakhan (Ust'-Orda) on the 17th August 1991, Egetyn-Adag (Yeravninsk, Buryatia) on the 28-9th June 1992, Aga (Agsinsk *okrug* in Chita Oblast') on the 28-30th June 1993, Khr'yask (Mukhorshibir', Buryatia) on the 22nd of July 1994, and Khuzhir (Oka, Buryatia) on the 19-20th June 1995 – large festivals replete with musical and *naadan* (sporting competitions) and theatrical events took place. This was capped off by a colossal *Geseriada-95* celebration in Ulan-Ude on the 28-30th June where the hero was played over the three days by famous athlete Il'ya Garmaev. This last festival was organised to coincide with the large pre-existing Ulan-Ude *naadan* (sports festival) called *Surkharbaan*. The estimated costs for sporting events, costumes, theatrical scenery, transport and housing foreign guests calculated during a 16th December 1994 meeting for the 1995 events alone, which admittedly were the largest, came to some 1 milliard 172 million rubles (NARB fond

2028 op. 1 d. 94 pp. 75-8). This was a great deal of money at the time during the economically unstable mid-1990s in the former USSR, as one might imagine. However, I have not found any examples of anyone complaining about the costs or the project going over budget.²

In the same way I have found very little in the way of complaints about the celebration of the festivals - especially with regard to old Soviet attitudes against the hero. When I interviewed Bair Dugarov in 2016 he emphasised that getting the *Geseriada* off the ground was a little difficult at first in 1989 only because some still possessed an entrenched “ideology” against Geser – the government was run by old people from the Soviet Era who did not understand that the world was changing. However, by 1990-1 things had begun to change, especially with the new Potapov government which became an instant supporter of the idea of the jubilee and reviving Buryat culture.

Nonetheless, following the 1992 *Geseriada* in Yeravna a provocative article appeared in *Buryaad Ünen* by Ts. Dondogoy (1992). Dondogoy seems to suggest that not everyone was excited about the festivals or found the millennial date convincing, but that these were less important anyway compared with governmental efforts to celebrate Buryat culture:

What does this thing of ours mean? Do they really mean a thousand years? Yes, it certainly seems the case. Is it really necessary to claim that it's **a thousand years' old** [orig. in bold]? Why are we doing this festival of Geser? There are confused people who say this (*martahan khüniüüd biy hen*). But the paper *Buryaad Ünen* has been at the forefront of encouraging the marking of this 1000-year celebration and has published a rather great deal of material for it. The events (*üile kheregüüd*) for the celebrations of the birthdays of Manshuud Emegeev and Pyookhon Petrov now seem to have now passed under the banner of Geser's 1000-year anniversary. Because the great Geser *ül'ger* is an epic that has an appeal to a great many peoples [lit. is as borderless as the sea *dalay shengi zakhagiüy*], this festival is not merely about its 1000-year anniversary, but the idea of it being marked in **Mother Buryatia** (*Ekhe Buryaday orondo* – [orig. in bold]) and venerating the spirit of its people, so it would seem our Republic's government are striving their utmost to do (*ulaan garaar orolsohon bayгаа*). The path for the celebrations of Geser Bogdo has now been officially set. It has government support, has been endorsed by decree, and so anyone with ill wishes wanting to go back will have to desist (*khara khüsen sukharyuulzha shadakhayaa bolino*).

² On December 16 1994 1 USD was the equivalent of about 3500 rubles. Thus, the estimated costs would have been about US\$3334,857. However, during the first half of 1995 the ruble rapidly inflated, but declined in June so that by the end of June 1995 1USD was about 4550 rubles. The original estimate, if one were to theorise that *exactly* this much was spent in reality, would have been close to \$US257,412. This must have had at least some impact on the actual costs and budget of the events.

The fact is that in many ways there was no *Geseriada* until June 1992. At that time *Buryaad Ünen* suddenly came to be filled with pictures and write-ups about Yeravninsk both prior to and following the event (eg. *BÜ* 30th June 1992 edition; Dondogoy 1992). The other major event was the publicity stunt of the 27th of June being declared a public holiday in Ulan-Ude for the Banner of Geser to pass through on its way to *Geseriada-92*. N. Badmarinchinov (1992) gives a description of the events in Ulan-Ude with a wonderful image of geserologist A.I. Ulanov standing in the Square of the Soviets waiting along with many others who had got up early for the event, waiting for the banner to arrive:

Aleksey Il'ich Ulanov with his grey beard was standing there intently. After the war, at the end of the 40s, when he was a young man studying *Abay Geser*, in order to keep his life he had to flee Buryatia in the middle of the night. He is indeed fortunate to live to see Geser's holiday today.

The 1991 *Geseriada* was fairly small, a few hundred people; the later events would attract thousands because if there was one thing that these rural Buryat communities knew how to organise it was a sports and musical carnival, mostly the product of dedicated unpaid local volunteers, but topped up by some government funding. As in Mongolia, these summer *naadam/naadan* festivals have been common for centuries to rural communities and were continued under communism.

Linking the *Geseriada* to this well-established network of summer cultural events, staggered between communities, and presenting the whole as cultural revival was a masterstroke. This has been noted before by Roberte Hamayon ([1996] 1998 p. 61) in relation to *Geseriada-95* and Ulan-Ude *Surkharbaan* sporting festival. However, she does not extend this to consideration of the *Geseriada's* origins. Yeravna *made* the *Geseriada*, one might say. As noted, it seems clear from looking at newspapers from the time that if it had not been for the fact that Yeravna's sports carnivals were already well attended prior to 1992 then the *Geseriada* may have come to very little. Geser appears to have piggy-backed off the tradition *Buryaad Ünen* already had of making a major feature out of reporting the list of those who *khabaaldahan* (competed) in the Yeravna *naadan* (games). Making the local *naadan* into *Geserey naadan* (Geser's games) seems to have produced the required boost, along with bringing Geser's Banner through Ulan-Ude, to create popular awareness and enthusiasm. This is even if, perhaps, the *naadan* aspect of the 1991-5 years remained more important as ingrained

tradition than the symbol of Geser that suddenly came to be attached to it. Geser simply mediated these popular events and perhaps gained more from them than they did from him.

2. What Kind of Nationalism?

The major question is then whether this celebratory chain of *üile kheregüüd* (events, deeds) were a form of nationalism. If one closely inspects the language utilised in sources from the time, then the *Geseriada* would seem to be a rather “weak” nationalism indeed, if it was one at all. Buryat language newspapers simply state the idea that Geser belongs to “*bügde Buryaad zon*” – all the Buryat peoples - though there seemed to have been no conscious desire to keep the celebrations and Geser from outsiders. Instead the emphasis was simply on constructing a shared Buryat identity that never seems to even hint at state-(re)building intentions.

Much emphasis in the media from the time is placed on the handing over of *Geserey Tug* from one Buryat ethnicity to the next and just how far many representatives, sportsmen and performers were coming to engage in the various Geser celebrations throughout the regions (Dondogoy 1992; Dambarinchinov 1993; *BÜ* 1995b). The keyword is perhaps the frequently repeated “*khabaadahan*” (attended) or *khabaaldahan* (competed), which often comes at the end of long sentences of names marked out in bold print, whether they are local people, politicians, international scholars or sportsmen (Dondogoy 1992; Dambarinchinov 1993; *BÜ* 1995b; Rinchinov 1995).

Why then did Moscow spend several “milliard” rubles on five years’ worth of folk festivals for the Buryats? This remains difficult to answer.³ Many of the former Turkic ASSRs were also to celebrate jubilees for their epics in the 1990s. For instance, in 1995 Kyrgyzstan also held a millennial anniversary for its own epic hero, Manas (see: Laruelle 2015: 170-1). However, these states had of course achieved independence – Buryatia had not. The fact seems to be that the governments of both Buryatia and the Russian Federation found the expansion of the festival a useful tool in a period of uncertainty, hyper-inflation, privatisation and concerns about ethnic tensions. The official government line from both Moscow and the Khural

³ A Buryat academic who will go unnamed recently told me that he believed the *Geseriada* had happened because those in the RB government from the time were largely Western Buryats originally from Irkutsk and Ust'-Orda who wanted to celebrate the epic traditions of their *ül'gershen* as the totality of Buryat culture. When I asked him if anyone had written on this, he claimed that no they had not – all of this was “under the table”. While indeed there is a long history of unease between Transbaikalian and Cisbaikalian Buryats over positions of power in the B(M)ASSR/RB and so too the reappropriation of Geser as national epic by the BMASSR, I am unable to substantiate any of the scholar’s comments as a common theory from any other source. I would certainly be interested to hear more, even if this is a “conspiracy theory”.

(parliament) of Buryatia was that Geser was all about friendship *between* peoples and humanitarian values and not simply one ethnicity celebrating an exclusive folk hero.

To read the official letters written by President Boris Yel'tsin, Potapov and the state Khural to the people of Buryatia for *Geseriada-95*, one might think that it had relatively little to do with the Buryats at all. Yel'tsin's message for Potapov and the people of Buryatia, printed on the first page of the 1st of July 1995 edition of *Pravda Buryatii* is that Geser is all about rich cultural heritage and of course "*druzhba*" (friendship) between peoples, "a caring attitude towards the testaments of culture" (*berezhnoe otnoshenie k pamyatnikam kul'tury*). It's all about "ancient ideals of humanistic values" (*vechnykh idealov obshchechelevocheskikh tsennostey*) that mean "mutual understanding and the cooperation of peoples of diverse nationalities" (*vzaimopominaniya i sotrudnichestva lyudey razlichnykh natsional'nostey*).

The Khural of Buryatia's reply to Yel'tsin is printed beneath it and is uneasily similar, a seeming sign of generic agreement: "A caring attitude towards the monuments of culture, symbols of ancient ideals of humanistic values" (*berezhnoe otnoshenie k pamyatnikam kul'tury, simbolam vechnykh idealov obshchechelevocheskikh tsennostey*). The Khural also calls the Buryat Geser not merely the cultural wealth of the Buryats, but "one of the outstanding monuments of world culture". One might not expect governments, either local or federal to know a great deal about an obscure epic tradition risen from the dead by a small group of scholars. Thus, there is something a little curious about all this sudden enthusiasm for Geser.

For instance, at the opening ceremony of *Geseriada-95* A. Lubsanov, the mayor of Ulan-Ude declared that the three colours of the Banner of Geser (Bur. *Geserey Tug*), represented the three major languages of Buryatia (Russian, Buryat and Evenki, though the last of these has never been recognised officially) (Kapustin 1995c). In the same July 1st 1995 issue of *Pravda Buryatii* under the title "*Druzhba yest', druzhbe byt*" the speech given by the chairman of the Khural of the Republic, M. I. Semyonov, at the opening ceremony of the festival is also included. The speech is remarkable for its candour about Buryatia's current woes, but seems confident that the *Geseriada* and Geser in general might do something to heal them:

Sadly, in the past few years it has come upon us to endure a great deal of troubles and unhappiness. And one of the reasons is, surely, the case that from time to time in the souls of the people there sprouts up a thirst for profit, lying, greed and other low emotions. It is then to both your and my joy that there are still preserved living records of popular wisdom, such as

the “Abay Geser” epic, through which one might heal the soul and learn to differentiate true humanistic values from imitations, lies and the transient.

On same page there is also a message to the president of Buryatia, Leonid Potapov, from S. Shakhray, deputy to the chairman of the government of the Russian Federation and chairman of the organisation committee for the 1000-year anniversary, who announces that “One might hope to wish that the popular conceptions about the ideal of a just and beautiful life along with the great artistic power expressed in the *üliger* Abay Geser be embodied in reality.”

In the same way Potapov himself in an article at the time published multiple times, in both the Russian and Buryat languages papers, declares that Geser belongs as much to the Jews and Korean minorities of Buryatia as to the Buryats and Russian majority. Geser is all about friendship and the perennial struggle of good and evil (Potapov 1995a cf. Buryat trans. *BÜ*, 22nd June 1995). This is very curious. Potapov seems to have known a little about Geser, but perhaps not a great deal. Such declarations, however, seem to have been formulaic. Certainly, there seemed little chance of the *Geseriada* leading to Buryat separatism or stirring up violence against minorities. The Buryats were, after all, a minority in Buryatia compared with ethnic Russians. In fact, their areas of highest concentration remained Ust’-Orda and Aginsk, which had long been severed from the Republic by the “dismembering” of 1937.

It simply seems that international friendship was the new “politically correct” standpoint to encourage in a fragile, emerging post-Soviet Russia which was still yet to work out what it was all about. For instance, independently, one may note that the values of friendship, international concord and humanism were included among the “seven commandments” of Manas invented by Akaev, the president of Kyrgyzstan for the nation’s millennial jubilee for the hero in 1995, along with hard work, unity of the nation, national honour, protecting the environment and generosity/tolerance (Laruelle 2015: 172).⁴ This is more than a little ironic in light of the ethnic tensions Geser and the Turkic epics were accused of encouraging in the 1940s-50s, which was discussed in the third chapter.

Yet there was some recognition of the less than glowing history of Geser. In his opening speech for the *Geseriada-95*’s international conference on the hero, Potapov mentions the 1941 promise of the 1942 jubilee, but notes that the war got in the way and then in the post-war

⁴ Akaev went as far as to claim that Manas is the “Kyrgyz Bible” and compared the epic hero with Moses. Thus, the invented tradition of the “seven commandments” of Manas were intended, at least honorifically, *as commandments*. Akaev, after many Kyrgyz scholars, took Manas to have been a real person, the literal founder of the Kyrgyz state around 840CE. Thus, the 1995 millennial jubilee was intended as a far more nationalistic event than the celebration of Geser, a “refoundation” of the state. See Laruelle (2015: 172).

period it was declared “feudal-khanic”, but since the mid-1950s “there began a fruitful period of its new entry into the spiritual life of the people. May this never cease!” (Potapov 1995b).⁵ For the *Geseriada-95* Potapov also installed a small monument to Geser. This was a snow-white block of granite not far from the memorial to those who died in the great patriotic war. In time Geser and his 33 heroes will stand there, keeping the peace in Buryatia, so the correspondent Andrey Kapustin (1995c) informs the reader. However, it was not until the 29th of June 2006 that Geser’s statue was installed (no 33 heroes). The artist was Aleksandr Mironov. He refused any fee for doing it and simply donated it (Protasov 2016).

3. A Case Study.

The early 1990s in the Russian Federation, as has been emphasised, was a period of great unpredictability and simultaneously an era for new optimisms. Here I would like to look at a case study that might seem to convey a great deal of the hope and worry at the time, but also the newfound enthusiasm some Buryats seemed to have towards the revival of culture through the symbol of Geser. This begins with a 1995 interview by *Buryaad Unen* reporter T. Sambyalov (1995) with the Ust’-Orda Buryat farm labourer Leonid I. Nikolaev, who had been present at the 17th of August 1991 celebration of the first major *Geseriada* event to honour Pyookhon Petrov in Khadaakhan. He and a number of elders from Khadaakhan had followed all the other events since, including coming out to Ulan-Ude for the final colossal *Geseriada-95* where the interview took place.

Nikolaev proudly announces that his home region of Khadaakhan, on the Unga River, “*ünekhööröösh'e ül'gerey oron geeshe*” (truly is, as they say, the land of *ül'ger*). It had produced Pyookhon Petrov, Papa Tüshemilov and lots of other lesser known storytellers. So too was the early Buryat scholar Mikhayl Khangalov “one of its honoured sons” (*erkhem khübüüidey negen*). Thus it is “understandable” (*oilgosotoy*), says Nikolaev, that Khangalov had started his recording of *ül'ger* with the Geser epics of his home region. However, what is most curious is that while Petrov is perhaps the most famous son of Khadaakhan, he never exactly lived there. Khadaakhan had originally been on what is now called *Osinskiy Ostrov* (Osa Island) in the middle of the Angara River. However, in 1963 the island was largely flooded and its inhabitants who worked at the Ayuusha combine were relocated to the left bank in order

⁵ Before the fall of the USSR the “trial” of Geser remained a taboo subject. One might also note that at the end of the Soviet Period Bair Bazarov (1989: 70-80) wrote ten pages for the journal *Baykal* on the *sud'ba Gesera* (fate of Geser) that recounted the events of the 1948 trial. In 2005 (60-70) he included much of the same material once again in his book on the era of the Zhdanov directive unchanged.

to build the Bratsk hydroelectric power station. Nothing remains of the old Khadaakhan where Petrov lived today, but what is truly amazing is that the Buryats who were moved retained their culture and language when many other communities in Ust'-Orda and Irkutsk did not.⁶

So too does Nikolaev seem to integrate the figure of Geser into a nascent shamanic cult of the area's "*daydyn burkhad*" (local spirits). He describes the ritual of sanctification of Geser's banner that took place in 1991:

It was necessary to perform a cleansing in accordance with the traditions of our ancestors, to pray to the *genii loci* and make an offering to bring this amazing deed to a perfect realisation (*manay elinsegüüdey yoho zanshalaar aryuudkhakha, oron daydyngaa burkhadta zal'barzha, ene gaykhamshagta kheregey amzhaltay, tügelder tüges beyeliüilegdekhyn tülöö serzhem ürgekhe khubitay baihan khum*).

The idea of sanctifying and worshipping Geser through his banner or *tug* is indeed an old one. As Walter Heissig ([1970] 1980: 99-101) discusses, in many parts of the Mongolic world, especially in Outer and Inner Mongolia, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Geser had been worshipped by performing sacrifices to this *tug* in a similar manner to the cult of Chingis Khan. However, it is unclear whether such traditions involving Geser had ever taken place among the Western Buryats of Ust'-Orda prior to or following the 1991 event. Indeed, while Nikolaev and the people of Khadaakhan may have preserved old shamanic rituals and traditions from their ancestors throughout the Soviet Period, it is not mentioned whether Geser had ever been part of their local shamanic pantheon before this time.

Nikolaev also mentions proudly to Sambyalov (1995) that he had been asked to be a consultant on a documentary film on Pyookhon Petrov. He says of it: "*Ene fil'm bükhy urda üyeyn gesershedy gerelte duraskhaal bolon mündelöö gezhe hanagdana*" (This film seems to be about commemorating the history of the brilliant monument of the *gesershed* of the past). I have been unable to ascertain the name of this film, but some of the footage seems to have been utilised in the short documentary *Zemlya Gesera* made by teachers and students at Nukutsaya SOSh (high school) for the competition *Etnokul'turnyy Proyekt XXI Vekov* (Ethnocultural Project 21st Century) that was part of the Buryat Sagaalgaan new year festival event *Interaktivnyy Belyy Mesyats* (Interactive White Month). As of my submission of this thesis in late-2018 there is a version of this film available on *Youtube*, care of the Buryat language

⁶ See Lekhatinov's (2016) *Malaya Rodina*, a fascinating personal history of the Khadaakhan Buryats from the 1940s-90s.

teacher Ol'ga Zandynova (2013a), who has made a number of short film projects that involve Geser that will be mentioned in the next chapter. Nine minutes into the film some footage of the sanctification of the *Geserey Tug* at Khadaakhan is shown, in which the name of Geser is invoked repeatedly while some sacrificial milk is scattered on a fire and then sprinkled in the air and on the banner. Clearly during the immediate ritual Geser was important, though if before or after remain ambiguous.

Equally as interesting is the fact that Sambyalov (1995) asks Nikolaev what the main changes had been in Khadaakhan during this Geseriada period. The most important matter is that during this period the old *kolkhoz* (collective farm) system had been dissolved. Nikolaev talks about the ending of his own local "Primorskiy" *sovkhos* and the formation of an AOZT group (*khaamal tükheley aktsionere bülgem*) for working out what to do with the old collective. Rather than for the *kolkhoz* to be broken up into private shares and disbanded, those in Khadaakhan seem to have opted for running it as a cooperative. This was perhaps the most common answer at the time in Russia because of the instability of the economy (Humphrey and Sneath 1995: 54-5).

At first the transition was very hard, so Nikolaev recounts - there were lots of losses and the tax (*nalog*) on livestock was very high. And yet, over the past year (1994-5) things had begun to improve, many crops had been planted and they had enough money to construct a new "*sotsial'no*" (community) building. Nikolaev also proudly proclaims that in the village of Üngin Gol they have a folklore group, organise Buryat language teachers and try to teach the children local *yoho zanshal* (customs and traditions), songs and folktales. At their school the Buryat language has been "*tahalgaryaagüi zaagdazha baina*" (taught without discontinuity). Perhaps Nikolaev's story is almost a Utopian vision of living Buryat culture. At the time very few Western Buryat communities would have been like this. Today even fewer are. Nikolaev ends his interview by stating that he and the elders regularly pray to the *daydyn burkhad* that their children and the inhabitants of the land "*amar amgalan azhahuu*" (will live peacefully and happily).

Today Primorskiy is celebrated as one of the great success stories, a collective that did not "drown" in Perestroika and the opening up of the free market like so many others. It is run a "joint stock company" on the "Japanese model" with everyone responsible for their own plots (Irkikipedia entry: "*Nukutskiy rayon*"). Primorskiy now has its own slaughterhouse, produces honey, grows buckwheat and peas unlike anywhere else in the region and is locally famous for its high-quality bread and cakes (ibid; Sergeeva 2011; Martynova 2013). An article from 2011, proudly posted on the Irkutsk Oblast' government website announces that "the folklore

collective ‘Aduusha’ of the Culture House of the village of Khadaakhan and the youth choreographic ensemble ‘Angara’ came to the Festival of bread together with the ‘Primorskiy’ crowd, who were awarded gratitude by the Ministry of Agriculture of the Irkutsk region on the results of the holiday” (Sergeeva 2011).

It is curious indeed that the folklore collective, founded in 1989, still retains the name of the *sovkhos* from the days when Khadaakhan was on Osa Island. Like Nikolaev, Aduusha too travelled along the entire route of the Banner of Geser in 1991-5, performing at all the major festivals (*Pribaikale* 2014). A 2008 article from Irkutsk newspaper *SM Nomer Odin* seemed as equally amazed as the reporter Svetlana Kanina of *Okruzhnaya Pravda* been in 2004 at the influence of Aduusha on the local community, from teaching the young people to perform traditional greetings and poetic praise to their encouragement of a street-by-street *yookhor* dance competition each year (Gergesova 2008). So too does Gergesova recount that there are regular rituals performed by the collective, such as in honour of the sacred waters in Irkutsk for the local *Surkharbaan* festival: “the participants gathered near the Angara and worshiped local spirits and made wishes that children would be born, that cattle would be born, and that peace and harmony would occur”. Another article mentions that Aduusha are regular participants in in the *Yordynskie Igri* (Eurasian Olympics) and that in 2007 they were entered into the Irkutsk Oblast’ Book of Records (*Pribaikale* 2014). As of 2017 the *Tsentr Russkogo Fol’klor* lists among Aduusha’s *obryady* (traditions) the performance of a song about Geser’s birth, “*Geserey türelge*” (entry: “*narodnyy fol’klorny kolektiv Aduusha*”).

Almost nothing about Primorskiy’s success story seems to be known outside of the small local world of Irkutsk. It presents an excellent, untapped opportunity for anthropologists, historians and folklorists. I regret that I only came upon its existence by accident while going through old newspaper articles and thus was unable to visit it. However, the role played by Geser in its history seems to be not as important as the innovative community spirit of its people. Aduusha came into existence at the closing of the USSR, in 1989, the same time as the birthday celebration for Manshuud, which launched the *Geseriada*. One should acknowledge that the *Geseriada* took some strength from this community, without which it may have been an anti-climax, but overall it would appear that the community and the legacy of Petrov has outlasted this fleeting festival.

4. Geser and the Landscape.

While Primorskiy and Khadaakhan present a fascinating and perhaps unparalleled success story – a collective that managed to prosper and preserve language and tradition - very little remains today of the influence of the *Geseriada* in the places that it passed through- Ust’-Orda - Khori

- Yeravna - Kizhinga - Chita region - Aga - Mukhorshibir - Kyakhtinsky District - Gusinoozersk - Orongo - Baikal - Tunka - Oka. In fact, a map from the time *Marshrut Znameni Gesera* (Map of the Banner of Geser) gives a full thirty-three locations (see **FIG 1** below). No wonder that Dugarov and papers from the time claimed that just about every community with ethnic Buryats had been visited by the precession, whether it came on foot, on horseback or by car on different legs of the five-year journey. What did Geser have to do with these places? The truth is that in some cases the links between Geser and the locations chosen for even the five larger events were rather tenuous. In Buryatia's Yaruuna nyutag (Yeravninskiy rayon), the only real link with Geser for the 1992 *Geseriada* was a story Bair Dugarov found that the epic hero Babzha Baatar, said by local elders to be an incarnation of Geser (*Geserey khubilgaan*), had once lived on Bulgan Tala near Egetyn-Adag where the festival was to take place (Dondogoy 1992). Another was that the local Egetyn *dastan* had once possessed a copy of the 1716 Mongol Geser woodblock print (Galsanov 1992). The scholar Ts. Galsanov (ibid.) writes the following, as if to excuse the lack of *gesershen* "culture heroes" in Buryatia:

The famous *ül'gershed* Manshuud Emegeev, Pyookhon Petrov, Papa Tushemilov and others give the appearance (*mayag gershelene*) that originally (*ankhandaa*) the *ül'ger* of Geser Khaan was spoken as poetry. But at the end of the last century the written Geser had been greatly disseminated among the Khori, Aga and Selenge Buryats.

Emphasis on the local "Shara Geser" (1716 ms) was used by Galsanov to connect the coming June *Geseriada* in the region with a 155th anniversary celebration at the National Library in Ulan-Ude on March 19th 1992 for Schmidt's 1836 printing of the 1716 Peking Geser xylograph. Bair Dugarov ("*Mongol khele beshegey deezhe*") and Mikhayl Khomonov ("*Ulam Günzegei Shenzhelel Kheregtey*") also wrote articles in Buryat on the Mongol Geser to accompany this. On March 19 and later on the 22nd of June 1992 *Buryaad Ünen* published Buryat-language translations of parts of the first two chapters of the 1716 Geser by Semzhed Gurobazorova, who sent her "*gonorar*" (fee) to the local *datsan* to help in its rebuilding. On both occasions the newspaper itself also asked that if anyone had liked the story, perhaps they too should send some money to the *datsan* as well. One should not forget that at this time the hard work of reconstructing Buryat Buddhism and attempts to revive interest in the Old Mongol script were also underway. Both are emphasised in a biographical article in the same issue on Gurobazorova herself (1992).

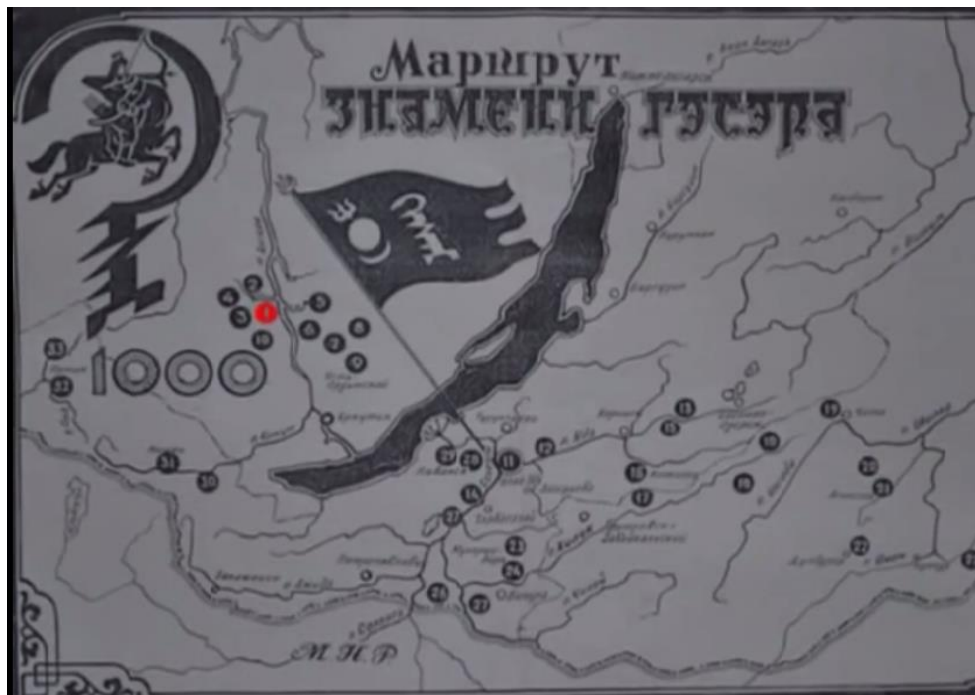


FIG 1.

Marshrut Znameni Gesera (Map of the Banner of Geser) from the 1991 celebration of Pyookhon Petrov in Khadaakhan, Ust'-Orda.

All thirty-three locations are numbered. Khadaakhan, number one, is represented in red. Image recovered from the documentary film *Zemlya Gesera* made by teachers and students at Nukutsaya SOSh (high school) for the competition *Etnokul'turnyy Proyekt XXI Vekov* (Ethnocultural Project 21st Century). It is unclear whether this map was originally published in a newspaper, handed out as a flier, or both.

In 1993 in the *toskhon* (village) of Aga in Aginsk, there were no local links to Geser at all and the celebration seems to have largely been about a representation of the Khori Nayman Esegte peoples receiving the hero's flag (Dambarinchinov 1993). As to the 22nd of July 1994 Mukhar-Sheber *Geseriada* in the small village of Khargaahata Huurin (Khar'yask) little seems to have been said at all and the majority of it is taken up by descriptions of local sporting contests for which the tiny village built an enormous stadium with a government grant (*BÜ*, 26th July 1994).⁷ As the aim for the festivals seems to have been to cover as much of "ethnic Buryatia" as possible, actual connections with the hero were in some cases not very important compared with cultural revival, so it would seem. Finding a location in southern Buryatia between Aginsk (1993) and Oka (1995) for an intermediary festival to take place in a ritual clockwise "fixing" of Buryat territory meant that tiny Khar'yask was chosen.

⁷ A little on this almost totally forgotten 1994 *Geseriada* can be found in this article that interviews Bat D. Bayartuev, who had attended all of the *Geseriada* festivals (Bal'zhinimaev 1995). The event does, however, seem to have been a good enough excuse for another academic conference on Geser, the proceedings of which were printed by the Ministry of Culture *Geseriada i deyatel'nost' uchrezhdeniy kul'tury* (*The Geseriada and the Performance of Institutions of Culture* 1994). In 2004 the small village celebrated its history using the massive stadium with a program of horse racing, wrestling and singing (*Org. Gos. Vlas. Res. Bur.* 1995).

As mentioned previously, the path of Geser's Banner was marked by placing *serge* (hitching posts) along the route – small poles with sky-blue *khadags* (votive scarves) tied to them. Dugarov (1998) says of them “It can be argued that the Buryat land itself keeps (*khranit*) the memory of Geser, its mountains and steppes - from the banks of the Angara to Onon, from the peaks of the Sayan Mountains to the lakes of the Yeravninsky, and this is evinced by memorable signs (*i ob etom svidetel'stvuyut pamyatnye znaki*) - the “hitching-posts” of Geser as a reminder to our descendants (*v napominanie potomkam*).” In spite of this it is very hard to find any mention of them at all today. So too is there nothing on the *Geserey Buusa* (Geser's dismounting place) Dugarov (*ibid.*) mentions, apparently erected on Baga Tolgoi near Ulan-Ude “...laid down and consecrated by Tibetan lamas in the presence of the public, representatives of Buryat communities and numerous guests”, except simply online copying and pasting of Dugarov's article. It has been forgotten.

However, there is some information that might be gleaned about another *Geserey buusa* mentioned by Dugarov: “a memorial dedicated to the 1000th anniversary of *Geseriada* was built on the Daraashyn Dabaan pass, one on the shore of Gusinoe Ozero (Goose Lake), and one on the main highway of the republic – the Kyakhtinskiy route connecting Buryatia with Mongolia and Central Asia.” This *Geserey buusa* is composed of a circle of thirty-three *serge* covered with sky-blue material, obviously connoting Geser's heroes. In its centre are three pillars covered with carvings of Geser and his heroes in a primitivist style, imitative of the rock art imagery of horsemen often encountered in Mongolia and Buryatia. These inner pillars are about four metres high. There are also several sacred boulders, including one with a prayer written in Tibetan in red paint. Nearby, outside of the circle is a sacred tree covered with *khadag* (votive scarves), as is traditional of Buryat sacred places located on mountains (see: Myasnikova 2012). T. D. Skrynnikova (2003: 33), reflecting on Dugarov's (1998) article, accurately notes that the hitching posts possess a two-fold action – one to “fix” the ethnic territory of Buryats, and another to use a liminal piece of geography, Daraashyn Dabaan, and a shared hero, Geser, as a symbol of inclusion and interaction with peoples of other nations.⁸

⁸ Although Amogolonova (2008b) does not talk about the “hitching posts”, she depicts the 90s celebration of Geser as the “Treasure of Central Asia” simply as a reinforcement of the dichotomy of Buryat identity – at once they are Russians, and simultaneously peoples of “Central Asia” – Mongols. I think that Skrynnikova (2003) is more correct – Dugarov's efforts were a very clever attempt to consciously achieve a two-fold goal of marking Buryat territory and building relations after the fall of the Iron Curtain, even if much of this was short lived and has now been forgotten.



FIG. 2.

Geserey buusa with the sacred tree in the background. Photo: Myasnikova (2012).

But what is most interesting is the choice of the mountain on which Dugarov had this *Geserey buusa* installed. The old Buryat name for it is Zuun Toyon, but it is far more commonly known by the Russian name Ubiennaya Gora (Slain Mountain). There are several very similar but contradictory stories as to how the mountain gained this name. One is that it was due to a 1689 battle when Mongol troops ambushed the Russian ambassador F. A. Golovin on his way to negotiate what became the treaty of Nerchinsk, which “officially” fixed the Buryats as Russian subjects. The Mongols were defeated in the battle because the Russians were reinforced by a local Cossack regiment (Shagzhin et al 2011: 46; Myasnikova 2012). However, in the nineteenth century one version of the story was that attackers were “Buryats” and not Mongols and that “since then they have been peaceful neighbours of the city” (Maksimov 1868: 589).⁹ The story is used to affirm the colonial taming of the Buryats before the treaty is even signed! This is quite interesting in light of the fact that the 1959 celebration of the 300-year anniversary of “voluntary entry” of Buryatia into the Russian Empire, an invented date loosely based on the 1689 treaty, was supposed to also be a jubilee for Geser that never happened. The Seleginsk regional government website’s tourist map curiously explicitly connects the 1689 ambush and battle with the name of the mountain, *pad’ ubiennykh* (field of the slain) under its section on the *Stoyanka Gesera* (Geser Monument). In fact the description only includes a single final sentence on the Geser monument itself: “on the pass there has been installed a ‘Geser

⁹ Eduard Dyomin (2003) corrects this to the Khalkha Mongols, quite rightly.

monument’, a specially decorated cult place (*kul'tovoe mesto*), traditional for Buryats” (*Admselenga* 2016).

Another version of the story is that the name comes from a rout of the five thousand Mongol soldiers of the Khalkha Tüsiyetü Qan Bayatur-Qung-tayiji following the siege of Selenginsk prison the year before, in January-March of 1688 (Kupryanova and Myasnikova 2007).¹⁰ Golovin and a mere 294 men with only six guns held off the Mongols for three months before the local Cossacks and a militia of Buryats, Russian farmers and prisoners from as far away as Irkutsk came and reinforced them and killed the Mongols on the hill (Danilova 2009: 52). It was apparently on this account that a sixteen-metre cross has been erected on the hill in 1997-8 along with a bell and placard to commemorate the event. This is *directly* across the road from the monument to Geser. The cross was erected by local historian V. A. Ivanov, who first built one out of scrap material in 1993, and later had a much larger one made by metalworkers in Ulan-Ude. According to Ivanov this was because of the battle after the siege: “At this very spot - on a field of one square kilometre - a lot of Selenginsk people were killed. Here they erected a monument, but now there is nothing left” (Kupryanova and Myasnikova 2007). The monument was supposedly a wooden cross, yet Ivanov himself claims to have put his original cross there due to the fact that the mountains seemed to “come together in this place as though they were a cross” (*ibid.*). The levels of symbolism are difficult to sort from one another.

Yet today Krestyn Dabaan (Pass of the Cross), a compound of Buryat and Russian words, may be a far more common name than Dugarov’s Daraashyn Dabaan (Final Pass). It is thus quite puzzling that Geser’s “dismounting place” should be located here when there is so much political history attached to this mountain. Dugarov’s intentions were to put it beside the road to link Geser with the rest of Asia in a symbol of peace and friendship. The fact that it was also traditionally a lookout for bandits preying on travellers and merchants using the Tea Road is also poignant. While the sacred tree covered in *khadags* strongly suggests that the mountain has been sacred to Buryats for a long time, there is nothing to suggest that it was ever connected with Geser before Dugarov or that it has ever had any sacred significance to Buddhism, in spite of the installation of a large marker in Tibetan that was installed by the lamas in 1995 along with the circle of *serge*. *Geserey buusa* is a geo-political “invented tradition” scrambling for room on a hill already overcrowded with symbols and events.

¹⁰ The Selenginsk government tourist map connects the cross with commemoration of this battle, but not with the name of the hill, which it reserves for the 1689 ambush.

5. Geser Park.

But perhaps the most significant attempt to install Geser in the landscape took place in the Oka region at the end of the journey of the Banner of Geser. Dugarov (1998) writes:

The final accord in the cycle of stories in honour of the anniversary of the legend of Geser was the construction of a temple of Geser (its architect D. Shagdurov, built by a brigade of Oka builders led by folk craftsman V. Sambaev and the people's artist of Buryatia L.D. Dorzhiev) in the Oka district of Buryatia. The temple of Geser is not erected in Oka by mere chance, for there is a whole cycle of stories connecting the *Geseriada* with the sights of the mountain landscape there.... Here, on the mountain slope, there is an ancient *takhil* - a place of sacred worship for addressing the deities and keepers of the mountains. Nearby there flows a *bulag* - a mountain spring in the upper reaches of which, as the legend says, on the hill at the foot of the Gurban Khairan mountains, is Geser's saddle (*sedlo Gesera*).

However, Dugarov does not go into the “cycle of stories” (*tselyy tsikl syuzhetov*) in detail here. In an article published on the 1st of July 1995 in *Pravda Buryatii* during the *Geseriada-95*, B. Dashibalov (1995), a *kandidat* in history writes that in the autumn of 1994 he and Bair Dugarov were shown around Oka by Andrey Zh. Dyrzhinov, a local man who was a correspondent for *Okinskiy Kray* newspaper. Dashibalov details how Dyrzhinov pointed out various landmarks which local legend connected with the hero.¹¹ Amongst these, and not mentioned elsewhere, are a Zun-Ara Khaday, east of Orlik village, where in that part of the mountain forest one might find Geser's stirrups and a Nuur Khooloy Khada, about four kilometres from the village of Sorok, which was apparently pierced by one of Geser's arrows. So too is there local legends about Khaan Uula being the location of the “petrified” remains of either Geser's sword or arrows.¹² But perhaps the most curious geographical associations with Geser in the Khuzhir

¹¹ Dashibalov (1995) also tells a story concerning the large rock Tegne-Shuluun in the nearby area of Shasnur. This rock is said to have been used by Geser as a counterweight to balance a large gold nugget he was carrying across the river. In another version of the story (Zimin 1995: 28; Khundaeva “Abay Geser the Mighty” blog), Geser used the mountain Turag-Shuluun and instead of a nugget it was the head of a *mangadkhay*. It would seem that Khundaeva's list of places connected with Geser is largely taken from Dashibalov's article. For instance, Khundaeva includes the place Oboto Tala in her list when it is clear that Geser is not necessarily connected with this place, simply that it is said that very large battles have been fought there and that remaining weapons and armour of soldiers are thus said to be found there. Dashibalov (1995) also included it on his list with no connection to Geser, simply that the weapons and armour might be “*takie, kakie nosil bator Geser*” (like those the hero Geser wore).

¹² One of the most confusing landmarks, however, is the touted petrified sword of Geser, a long thin stone described as 8m long and merely 12cm wide by Dashibalov (1995), who says that he was told about it by Klim D. Tuluev, director of the Davis project in Oka. Yet, the manner in which the sword is described seems to suggest that it is merely legendary: “two old men from Khuzhir have seen it”. Similarly, a local Buryat elder in the second volume of *Kray Gesera* (1996 II. 37) claims that “Khan-Uula...on its peaks is preserved the sword of

area of Oka are those of the volcanic crater beside the river Zhom-bolok, which had been associated with the ruins of the palace of Geser's enemy Gal-Dülme Khan as far back as the nineteenth century: "M. N. Khangalov writes that old people believe that in the Akha (Oka) area there are the remnants of Gal-Dulme Khan's palace that was burnt in old days. It was just here that Abay Geser Bogdo Khan with the help of nine celestial smiths made Gal-Dülme Khan's son burning hot. As a result, Gal-Dülme's palace melted and a heap of stones was left" (Khundaeva 2014 cf. Dashibalov 1995). In the battle with Gal-Dülme, Geser is said to have been wounded, resulting in the red staining of the crag Ulan Shuluun.¹³ Dugarov would indeed seem correct to have placed a temple to Geser here. Nowhere else has preserved such strong associations between the hero and multiple landmarks, however old such associations might be. The only exception to this is Uley Valley in Irkutsk, which will be discussed later in this chapter because of more recent attempts to tie its geography to Geser and tourism.

Because Dugarov's father came from Oka he seems to have had a very strong personal attachment to the area and the need to explicitly connect it with Geser. When I interviewed him in 2016 he emphasised this a great deal, having fallen in love with Geser at age nine because of his father's stories. For example, in the collection *Kray Gesera* (Territory of Geser), Dugarov presents the curious history of his father, Sonom Gomboevich Dugarov (1929-1993) and his relationship with the figure of Geser. This seems to have inspired the young Dugarov's own

Geser, and there are people who have seen it." However, tourist sites such as *Sibesea* and the *Minprirody* website of the Buryatian Ministry of the Environment site today regularly depict the sword as though it is simply there, and moreover, as 20m long! So too does a recent book on the "sacred places of Russia" name the sword without description and then proceed to describe a "petrified arrow" of Geser that is 20m long on the north-Western outskirts of Khuzhir, at the foot of Khan Uula mountain (Gorbatovskiy 2013: 138). This is also described as a "a mark indicating the treasures hidden by Geser under the mountains... a geoglyph" (ibid.) The author gives a picture of what appears to be a generic "geoglyph" and as to whether this is an actual picture of Geser's arrow seems uncertain. Having not seen the sword nor the arrow myself, and no pictures of either being available, one is likely to conclude for now at least that the sword at least is likely simply a local legend. Both Dashibalov (1995) and Khundaeva ("Abay Geser the mighty" blog), seemingly copying him, mention the legend that the peak of Khan-Uula mountain is one of Geser's arrows because of how it shines so brightly in the morning sunlight. Perhaps this had led to the sword/arrow confusion. Zh. A. Zimin in *Kray Gesera* (1995: I 28; Khundaeva "AGM" blog) also records the story that at the White Irkut river, not far from the greatest top of the Eastern Sayans, Mönkhü-Sardykh, at the borderline of the Akha and Tunka districts, Geser, pursuing a magical silver fox, made huge hole in the mountain wall with one of his arrows because it was an obstacle in his way. Together with his warriors Geser comfortably continued his pursuit through the hole. Zimin (ibid.) also states a legend that a mountain near Khuzhir, now called after the explorer and political philosopher Kropotkin, had been struck by an arrow from the *mangdkhay* Sherem Minaata when Geser deflected it.

¹³ The *Sibsea* website, in an unexpected scholarly move for a tourism page adds the following concerning Ulaan Shuluun: "It is interesting to compare such stories with those about Geser in Tibet. In the canyon Trangser Trangmar ("Golden and Red Rocks") around Kailash, there are stones coloured with a variety of mineral pigments. One can see "a stone in the form of a table, on which there remains the imprint of one of the horseshoes of King Geser's horse. Here there was a great battle between Geser and the forces of evil. The red blood of defeated demons mingled with the yellow earth and gave this gorge the name and appearance it now has." Clearly Geser's adventures are seen to be embedded in the landscape in many places. Much interesting comparative work might be done on this topic.

interest, and so too interest specifically in an “Oka Geser” which was otherwise unrecognised by scholars at the time:

In the words of my father was contained an Oka variant of Geser which he heard in his youth from Büren Gol storytellers. When he was on his holidays or had free time, my father was able to tell stories from time to time about his homeland, its legends and tales, about Agvan Dorzhiev, who came twice to Oka and about many other things that were close and dear to his heart. On one of those evenings I wrote down from my father with my child's understanding a fragments of Geseric story (*Geserova skazaniya*), which concerned the birth of the hero and his early deeds (Dugarov 1995: 8).

Dugarov then presents some of his father's *Geser Bogdyn Tuuzha* (Epic of Geser Bogdo), informing the reader that:

The author of this record (*ocherka*) is my father: Sonom Gomboevich Dugarov. In his time he appealed to the printing house in efforts to "get an answer to the question about the possibility of publishing it [the record B.D] in the years close to the millennial celebration of the Geseriada in the 90s, it now being a monument of native and world folklore". During my father's lifetime this manuscript remained without interest to publishers. But it turned out to be extremely consonant and meaningful with the idea behind this current *Kray Gesera* volume. This record is published in the same form as it was written, five years ago when the USSR still existed and our republic was still the BASSR. His favourite subject matter was the epic *Abay Geser*. This was wholly natural as in his childhood he not only came across storytellers-gesershed, but his home ulus is encircled by legendary places connected with Geser: Khan-Uula, Turag-Shuluun, Ulaan-Shuluun.

Dugarov, however, does not tell the reader whether his father ever told him about these landmarks or whether he only learned about them later through Dyrzhinov or study. When I interviewed him in 2016 he seemed adamant about the long history of Geser in Oka region, or Akha, as is its old Buryat name. Restoring the existence of an Okhinskiy Geser was already of great importance to Dugarov, even in the early 1980s when the poet wrote what seems to be his first academic article: “*Bytovanie Eposa Gesera U Okinskikh Buryat*” (The Existence of the Geser Epic among the Oka Buryats). In his published diary from 1982 one may read the following concern and a poetic couplet alongside it:

I can't finish the article on "The Existence of Geser among the Oka Buryats" at all. I've been through Sharakshinova, Ulanov and other authors.

The signs of Geser float in the sky
The quivering shadows of the gods roam the Earth
(Dugarov 07.01 1982, Thursday).

Clearly there was a profound drive to do this, even if it may have seemed an impossible task at the time. Academics had little to say about Geser and Oka, except (as noted in chapter two) Sanzheev's conception that the Oka epics straddled a gap between the Unga and Khalkha Mongol ones (Sanzheev 1936b). In the end Dugarov did write his article (see: Dugarov 1983). His early theory on the Oka Geser, presented there, was reassembled from but a few fragments belonging to this father. There was very little material to work with except for what Dugarov's father had told him and what he would later learn visiting the area from Dyrzhinov, from whom he later acquired a written copy in the old Mongol script of a *Geser sang* (cult prayer to Geser), which the local man's father had preserved (Dugarov 1999, 2001). Indeed Dugarov may well be correct to believe that it would follow that because the *sang* was present, so too must have chapters of the 1716 Geser also been present in Oka, through which knowledge of the Geser epic were disseminated.

It was as Khuzhir in Oka region that the events of the *Geseriada* came to the end with the construction of a temple here to the divine hero – it was the "final accord in the cycle of events in honour of the anniversary" (Dugarov 1998). Its architect was one D. Shagdurov and that it was built "in traditional native wooden style" by a brigade of Oka builders led by folk craftsman V. Sambaev and the people's artist of Buryatia L.D. Dorzhiev. What was erected as a final tribute to Geser in remote Khuzhir was actually quite small, a mere shrine to Geser, a *khram-besedka* (temple-gazebo). Dashibalov (*PB*, 1st July 1995) also states that there were two other possible choices for where the *Khram* could have been erected – one was near the mouth of the river Zhom-Bolok, the other on the left tributary of the river near a waterfall. But the one at the foot of the Gurban-Khayrkhan mountains was chosen because it seemed the most beautiful.

The little gazebo was constructed thanks to the efforts of the Davis Project. This was an ecological project in the early 1990s that took in the whole Baikal region. It was begun by the American George R. Davis in 1991 in close consultation with local Buryat and Russian political and community leaders, and ecologists such as Sergey Shapaev (see: Mandelstam

Balzer 1995: 139). One of its project leaders, the American forester Daniel Plumley, was tasked with a “subproject”- the idea of creating an “anthropological reserve” in Oka. Without this there would have been no “Land of Geser” or the plan to turn it into a national park and cultural reserve. In the second volume of Dugarov’s (1996: II. 20-1) *Kray Gesera* series a Russian translation of the speech Plumley gave at the opening of the *khram* is given. Plumley emphasises his Mohawk Amerindian ancestry and that he has only recently come to learn about the Buryat Geser because “there is no information in European books”. Most important, however, is the message that the project has not been forced upon the local peoples, but was designed by them for their needs: “The idea of creating a national park and Geser reserve originates not from Americans, but from the Buryats, Soyots and Russians. The plan for land usage was created for the needs of the people of Oka, not for the needs of Americans and not by Americans, so that it would be comprehensible for the people, the traditional inheritors of this territory and the preservers of its culture.” And with this, Plumley officially opened the *khram*.

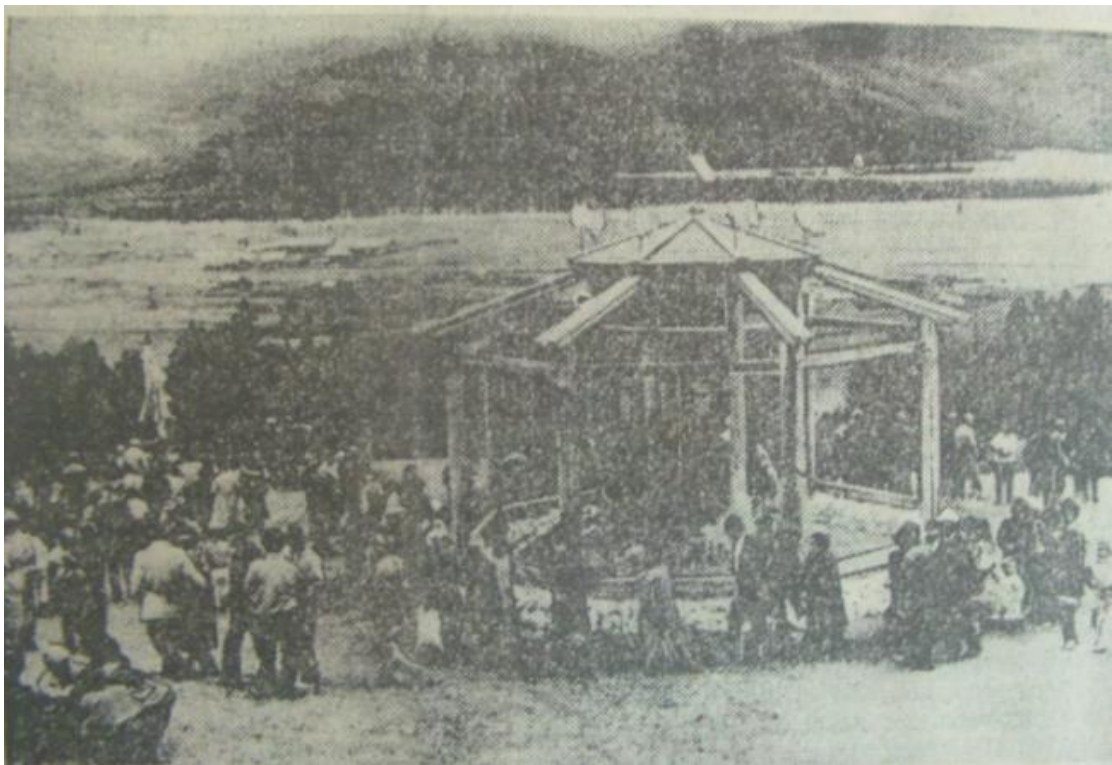


FIG. 3.

Image: Andrey Kapsustin (1995b) at the opening of the *khram*.

FIG 4.

The *Khram Gesera* today, BRIOP website “*dostoprimechatel’nosti okinskoy rayona*”. This is the only available current image I could find. Sadly, remote Khuzhir has not become a tourist destination of note.



However, Dugarov was not simply interested in bringing the Oka Geser and his father's unpublished work to attention. Instead the aim seems to have been the reawakening of Buryat culture through the lens of a growing ecological awareness that was beginning to be felt in Buryat intellectual circles in the early 1990s. In this the Buryats are imagined to have an exceptionalist position because they have preserved the synthesis of "spiritual and ecological principles" inherent in their native shamanic beliefs – the veneration and respect for the environment as sacred:

For example, in the Buryat variants [of Geser], in contrast to other Mongolian versions, the ideology of white shamanism (*belogo shamanstva*) or Tengrism has been preserved. Therefore, it was not by chance that when reviving old customs and rituals, emphasis (*aktsent*) was placed on the epic's sacred ecological ideal (*na sakral'nyu praekologicheskuyu ideyu eposa*) about the well-known unity of the Heaven and the Earth... Moreover, the concentration of places connected with the memory of Geser (*sosredotochenie pamyatnykh geserovykh mest*) in the territory of the Oka also caused the need to create a natural-ethnographic park-reserve here, "The Territory of Geser" (*Kray Gesera*), with its main object being the temple of Geser. This temple, erected in the style of native wooden architecture and synthesizing spiritual and ecological principles, is located not far from the village Khuzhir, on a hill at the foot of the Gurban Khayrkhan mountains.

The short and eclectic three volumes of *Kray Gesera* edited by Dugarov that accompanied the celebration of the new-found ecological awareness present a curious mix of strong desires to turn the remote and economically depressed post-soviet Khuzhir into a booming tourist destination for Buryat cultural and environmental literacy. Dugarov announces that “the creation of a natural-ethnographical reserve *Kray Gesera* in the Oka region constitutes the possibility of preserving one of the support points (*opornykh toчек*) for the local ecosystem under the sign of Geser, who personifies the synthesis of the spiritual and ethno-ecological, which began at the level of the sacramental” (1996 II. 14-5). Plans for educational signs to teach children how to “read the book of nature” in the new national park are elaborated (1996: 1996: III. 41-7); the area is celebrated for being home to the critically endangered snow leopard by ecologist T. Y. Taysaev (1995: I. 25-6). Even a collection of local children’s nature poems in Buryat is included (III pp. 46-50). So too are there fairly normal academic articles by Ulanov (1995: I. 43) transforming his understanding of Geser’s origins in nature worship towards the ecological, and Chagdurov (1995: I. 31-3) attempting to square Geser with ancient Iranian myth in relation to an unpublished “epilogue” to Baldano’s “*svodnyy Geser*”. Obviously Dugarov and some of the local people were immensely optimistic that the Geser National Park offered a new beginning in difficult times, but for most of the folklorist elite who had helped kick-start Geser, things seemed to continue as they had been.

However, because of the remoteness of Khuzhir, which only acquired its first road around the same time as the 1995 erection of the *Khram Gesera*, it only occasionally seems to gain visitors for its associations with Geser. It has not ever become a major industry. In July 2010 an educational psychology and anthropology class led by the famous Russian experimental educator and psychologist Aleksey S. Obukhov from the school Lyceum 1533 “Lyceum on the Don” (*Litsey na Donskoy*) visited the area to study its cultures, religions and early childhood learning.¹⁴ So too might one mention that in 2014 the Russian TV channel *Rossiya 1* made a series called *Zemlya Geroev* on native epic heroes in which there was an episode dedicated to the Buryat Geser. Although the show does not name any of the locations, at three minutes in the narrator can be seen walking through the *Khram Gesera* at Khuzhir and later in the program describing Ulaan-Shuluun but mistakenly claiming that Geser fought the

¹⁴ Most of the trip seems to have concerned the local Soyot ethnic minority and the Buryatian school system, but a report from the expedition declares that “a separate subject of the study was the study of sacral geography - places associated with the epic Gesar.” Ulaan Shuluun, Khaan Uula, the Geser Khram were all visited by the students, and a suggested topic for their research papers, among many, was “Territory of Geser: The Sacral Geography of the Oka Region of Buryatia” (*Kray Gesera: Sakral'naya Geografiya Okinskogo Rayona Buryatii*) (Obukhov 2010).

monster Sherem Minaata there instead of Gal-Dülme. As of 2017 the Novosibirsk package tour company *Sibir'Altay* was offering a “*Zemlya Gesera 2017*” expedition.¹⁵ Nonetheless, this is quite a small legacy compared with the optimistic intentions of 1995.

It also bears mentioning that very recently, on the 19-21st of July 2018, a *Geseriada-2018* festival centring around the “*eryn gurban naadan*” (three manly sports) took place in the small town of Ust'-Altan in Irkutsk's Osa region. On the front page of the local paper, *Znamya Truda*, the mayor of the Osa region, Vladimir M. Mantukov (2018) emphasises that *Geseriada-2018* was all about tourism and creating a “new brand” (*brend*) for Osa region under the flag of Geser as the hero's homeland – a clear harkening back to Dugarov. For the most part, *Geseriada-2018* appears to have been a curious case of a small festival attempting to renew a depressed rural area in Irkutsk by borrowing legitimacy from the *Geseriada* events of the early 1990s and trying to imitate them. Mantukov (*ibid*) indeed begins his article for *Znamya Truda* by connecting his event to the local celebrations of the reciters Petrov, Tüshemilov and others in 1992 and the “banner of Geser” crossing “ethnic Buryatia” via Obusa in Osa, but notes that afterwards “the name of Geser fell into a certain oblivion” and “the name of Geser was a little forgotten”.¹⁶ However, obviously there seem to be some in Osa who would like Geser to be remembered for culture and tourism.

¹⁵ On the tour's third day, a “free day” (*svobodnyy den*) one could choose to go on an excursion for 2500 rubles per person entitled “Mountainous Oka – Road to the Land of Geser” (*Gornaya Oka- Put' v Zemlyu Gesera*). They do however warn that the road is a “high-altitude road leading to the centre of Oka, the remotest area of Buryatia area. It is only 20 years old. For centuries, there was only an ancient horse trail” before informing the potential traveller that “residents of the Oka region proudly call their native area the Land of Geser, his '*toonto nyutag*' - small homeland.” Thus, it would seem that the “Land of Geser” remains for dedicated travellers only. One might also compare the Geser Park with the similar creation of a park built in honour of the millennial anniversary for the Kyrgyz hero Manas in 1995, though neither jubilee seems to have influenced the other. The *Manas Orda*, based around a Karakhanid Era mausoleum complex near Kümböz is taken to be the literal resting place of the mythological figure, who, so the Kyrgyz government maintains, founded the Kyrgyz state in c. 840-2 CE. In 2014, so Laruelle (2015: 171-2) tells us, nearly 150,000 people visited the “park”.

¹⁶ Most curious of all is that Toktonova (2018) seems to have borrowed liberally and without attribution from Bair Dugarov's 1998 essay on the *Geseriada*, which I explored in the previous chapter. This is very odd because it does not even fit the context of announcing the winners of the various competitions for the festival. The words “but, first of all, it was important pay tribute to the memory of outstanding *gesershins*, brought the epic to us from the depths centuries” do not continue on to describe the various *gesershed* who were celebrated in the 1990s or anyone else. Compare the two passages. Dugarov (1998): “It [viz the *Geseriada*] helped to manifest under modern conditions the ancient national sports competitions in their original form under the name “Eryn Gurban Naadan” (Three Manly Sports: archery, horse racing, native wrestling). But first and foremost, it was important to pay tribute to the memory of the outstanding storytellers – the *gesherchins*, who brought the epic to us from the depths of centuries.” Toktonova: “The *Geseriada* helped to manifest under modern conditions the ancient national sports competitions in their original form under the name “Eryn Gurban Naadan” (Three Manly Sports: archery, horse racing, and native wrestling). But, first and foremost, it was important pay tribute to the memory of the outstanding tellers- the *geserchins*, who brought the epic to us from the depths of centuries.” The Russian is exactly the same in both: “*Geseriada pomogla proyavit'sya v sovremennykh usloviyakh imeyushchim drevnee proiskhozhdenie natsional'nym sportivnym sorevnovaniyam v ikh pervozdannoy forme i nazvanii* “*Eryn Gurban Naadan*” (*Tri muzhskikh sostyazaniya: strel'ba iz luk, skachki na loshadakh, natsional'naya bor'ba*). No,

The idea of Osa remaking itself as the “homeland of Geser” might well seem like an attempt to imitate or even compete with Dugarov’s efforts in Oka in Buryatia in the 1990s. Like those, a major part of rendering Osa the land of the hero stems from local landmarks seen to be attached to the hero’s cycle (ibid.). The major Geser sites in Osa are the Uley/Ungin municipality’s mountains Udagtay and Orgoli, on which almost nothing has been written compared with the Oka region.¹⁷ In an article for the 27th of July edition of *Znamya Truda* on the sacred places of Uley Valley, Fyodor Toktonov writes about an excursion that was organised for *Geseriada-2018* on the 20th of July. In this “Geser tourism” is paired with an actual shamanic religious event by the local people in honour of the festival:

The location for the ritual (*moleben*) was not chosen by chance. There are several monuments in the area to the earthly life of the hero of the Geser epic. At the entrance to the Uley region the guests met Mount Orgoli – shaped like a truncated pyramid, covered in thin forest and furnished with a lot of *serge* (hitching posts). According to legend, the mountain was formed from the soil that Geser shook off the tip of one of his *khangay* arrows. Today Orgoli is a sacred place for newlyweds, because it is thought as granting blessings for a long rich life with lots of children. Another monument is “*khetel*” (Rus. name: Khutli), which in translation means saddle. It was formed when an arrow loosed by Geser pierced through the [Orgoli] mountain. Khutli is between two mountains Udagtay and Khorso-Ulaan. The chain of mountains forms a semicircle, said to have been made by the hooves of Geser's horse, which ends at the no less sacred mountain Taryaatyn Taban Kushuun. In the words of the epic: “In order to restore the human race and to punish all the wicked and evil, the army of Geser covered distances impossible for normal people.” Having met there, Geser and the monster Khara Lobsogoy decided that they would fight one another. For nine days they tirelessly fought. In the end Lobsogoy was defeated. As he fell he leaned his hand on the top of this mountain. From his five fingers there formed five gorges. Today this is the locality of Taryaaty. The sacred meaning

v pervuyu ochered' vazhno bylo vozdat' dolzhnoe pamyati vydayushchikhsya skazitel' yey-gesershinov, donesshikh epos k nam iz glubiny veko

¹⁷ On the Uley Valley and Geser Gungarov and Zhukovsakaya (2004: 266) inform us of a legend that the small Onshoo and Donshoo lakes were formed from hoofprints left by Geser’s horse. On mount Udagtay Geser shot an arrow at the *mangadkhay* Lobsogoldoy, which pierced and killed him. Geser recovered his arrow, and shaking the dirt off it, Mount Orgoli was formed (though there seems to be no connection between the name and the monstrous tiger of the Geser *ül'ger*). An elaboration of this myth about Udagtay appears in an article for Irkutsk newspaper *SM Nomer Odin* by Lidiya Gergasova (2013): “And where the five fingers of the monster fell, five hills formed and Taryaatyn-Taban-Khushuun Mountain appeared. At the site of the fall of the *mangadkhay*, one may still see his thirty-three vertebrae, in the form of larch trees that have grown there, which are now over a thousand years old.” Following *Geseriada-18* another article also appeared on p. 3 of the 10th of August 2018 edition of *Znamya Truda* on the sacred geography of Uley Valley by Anatoliy Shaltykov entitled “S Geserom Svyazanny Uley”. This largely repeats the information in Toktonov’s July article on the sacred places and their connection with Geser.

of the surrounding area is exacerbated by the nearby larches, which allegedly grew out of each of the vertebra of the stricken Lobsogoy. There are thirty-three larches. There are no trees older than them in the Uleyskiy forests. According to the legend, this place has its own guardian spirit (*khozyain*), who wanders all night around the groves... On this day the Uley locals were keen to organise an excursion to all these places and talk about them in detail. Udagtay is the most sacred of holy mountains to them. Here the Uley locals conducted a *taylagan* (offering), one of the oldest and most important rituals of the Buryats. Shamans from the Ekhirit-Bulagatsky district also came for the ritual. In such significant and sacred places there are powers present. Humbly, and with respect, they ask the spirits of their ancestors for a good harvest, health and well-being for the people. Just like many centuries ago a ram was brought to be the sacrificial victim. From the sidelines the ritual looked majestic and ominous (*grozno*). In the ritual the shamans ask the spirits of the ancestors for things such as rain, so that there will be an abundant harvest. Already during the ritual some good rain started to fall.

And indeed, according to reports, it continued to rain all weekend, though this did not interfere with the “three manly sports” too much. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that the Osa region is 70% forest, the Uley valley is not an “ethnopark” like Oka. As far back as 2010, in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, after consultation with the leaders of the regions of Irkutsk, one expert recommended that Osa should attempt to develop eco-tourism and especially ethnotourism based around Buryat folk art (Berezhnykh 2010). However, very little seems to have been done as of yet, though, as I will show in the final chapter, they do appear to have some very ambitious ideas about Geser tourism for the next couple of years.

Thus, although much of the *Geseriada* had a fleeting effect and has largely been forgotten, there are some legacies that have remained. While the “banner of Geser” passed through Khadaakhan and the life of Nikolaev and the success story of Primorskiy, in other places like Khuzhir in Oka and in Osa it left more lasting marks. All of this was the product of a small group of intellectuals who met in June 1989 to try to garner support for a few “folkloric evenings”, some books and a conference. However, the Post-Soviet crisis of identity and its brief *dispositif* of instability and optimism permitted Geser to become a meeting between the desires of Dugarov and others to reignite Buryat culture, the Buryat peoples (whether keen to partake in such a revival or merely a summer festival or two) and the governments of Buryatia and the Russian Federation looking for a symbol of intercultural cooperation and “humanism”. Geser acted as a mediator for these diverse desires and still continues to do so today.

DISPOSITIF 4: 2008-?, The Age of Globalisation, The Crisis of Dispersal.

*"They look up and laugh,
They down look and shed a tear.
Heaven persists without them,
The Earth awaits them below! "*

- *Lipkin and Baldano's "consolidated" Geser (1968)
announcing the descent of Geser's 33 heroes to Earth.*

Chapter 7: Digital Geser and the *Mankurty*.

In spite of the optimism of the *Geseriada* period, by the early 2000s another crisis was building for the Buryats, albeit a very different one from the sudden collapse of the USSR. Instead, this was a slow crisis of attrition brought on by the unabated loss of language and culture that had been present in the early 1990s and the ongoing effects of the economic hardships of that time, which Buryatia has never really recovered from. Here I look at how Geser has been a recurrent symbol in contemporary efforts towards political, linguistic and cultural revival over the past decade.

In 1992 a law had been passed to officially promote the Buryat language in the RB. However, the fact is that this has had relatively little impact on turning around language-loss. In 2002 a Russian-wide census enumerated some mere 368,807 “self-reported speakers” of Buryat dialects, within the Republic of Buryatia (Rosstat 2004). Yet, one must remain chary of even assuming the number of speakers to be accurate, however, as much of the “self-reporting” may in fact simply be a self-conscious appeal to ancestry and not actual speaking ability (Montgomery 2005: 231; Graber 2012: 126).¹ Moreover, after a large amount of planned Russian migration and settlement during the twentieth century ethnic Buryats had also become a minority even in the Republic of Buryatia, around 27% of the population, let alone in Irkutsk or Zabaykal’skiy Kray, where this is even lower.

A report for the news channel *Baikal ATV* (2018) in August declared that because the Buryat languages are losing an estimated average of seven thousand speakers a year (mostly due to old age), it is very likely that all of them will be extinct in thirty years’ time. Since 2014 the government of Buryatia has been spending thirty million rubles a year (\$US 460,000) attempting to develop Buryat language education in schools, but in the words of the Deputy of the State Khural, Arkadiy Tsybikov, in a recent interview: “In my opinion, the results of the national Buryat language program have not come through (*hanaanda khiirengii*). Nothing so far has changed for the better. The number of children able to speak Buryat is decreasing. Buryat language lessons are being cut in schools” (Gyndyntyrenov 2018). Tsybikov’s solution to the current problems is the need to create “*ündehen buryaad hurguulinuud*” (ethnic Buryat schools) in the manner of the model of the school system in Yakutia, where native language remains much stronger (Gyndyntyrenov 2018). At present, however, although such a proposal has certainly been suggested a number of times (*khedy khelegdeed daa*) and Tsybikov offers a

¹ Another matter is also the growth of Buryat-Russian “pidgin”. Little seems to have been written on this thus far that I have been able to find, but a basic introduction to the topic is given by journalist Aleksandr Makhachkeev (2018a) in a recent article for the online *BÜ*.

complex model for how many hours a week children of different age levels should study in language, this does not seem to be a government priority. Nonetheless, if there is a silver lining to this, it is that as such support has waned, support for regional dialects of Buryat have begun to grow. For nearly eighty years Khorî has been the official dialect of Buryat in the B(M)ASSR and Buryatia meant that the other dialects were often not allowed on radio, television and in written media. The results of this are now being realised, including by Tsybikov in his recent interview.² Only when threatened with extinction have the Buryat dialects begun to be “freed” from this hegemonic understanding of Buryat identity.

As I will show in this chapter currently it is often volunteer groups, whether online content creators and language teachers in their spare time, whether recipients of government grants or not, who are working diligently because of their personal passion to turn the fate of Buryat around. This situation is epitomised by the volunteer-based *Buryaad Soyol* (Buryat Culture), formed in April 2014 because of concerns about the current situation of Buryat language. Its early history, which also included operating as a publisher before this side of it was dissolved in 2015, was not without political complications.³ Nonetheless, it has remained a small but strong volunteer educational organisation, operating out of the *Dom Druzhby Narodov* (House of the Friendship of Peoples) in Ulan-Ude and a number of other locations and has a strong following on *Facebook* and *V Kontaktke* and is especially adept at using digital technologies to encourage ongoing participation and interest. A recent article on the website *Müngen Tobsho* (2018) reported:

² Arkadiy Tsybikov in his 14th of November interview with *BÜ*: “In the Selenge, Zede and Khyakta *aymags* we are destroying the native languages of the Songool and Sartuul people who live there. We are commanding (*barimtalnabdi*): ‘we’re all just one, learn the Khorî language, if you don’t, be without a language then.’ Let’s save the native languages of Selenge. Let’s make it law that one can learn one’s own regional language at school. Let’s print books for them... Children are doing poorly in their lessons. Why do they need the Khorî language? They’re losing heart because they have to learn the wrong people’s language, they’re just settling on Russian because of it” (Gyndyntyrenov 2018). In another recent article for *Buryaad Ünen*, Aleksandr Makhachkeev recently reflected on how the few Buryat-language television such as *Toli* and radio programs such as *Buryaad.fm* were now encouraging diverse dialects and that the paper was considering doing the same. He notes how radio project manager Zhanna Dymchikova had realised the liberating power of “speak in your own dialect! No dialect is better than any other!” and how “people are excited to speak out after long years. Many of our districts were locked out, speakers were simply not allowed on the radio and TV... You will not believe, [I have met] grandmothers crying, telling [me] how they were forbidden to speak their mother language!”

³ One might note that the previous leader of *Buryaad Soyol*, Bulat Shagzhin, left Buryatia and went to live in Moscow and then the US in 2016, claiming to be a political refugee from Russia due to political intimidation by government agents over *Buryaad Soyol*’s planned publication of a textbook on the history of the Buryats (*Nomer Odin* 2017). The head of the RB at that time, Vyacheslav Nagovitsyna, in February 2015, so Shagzhin claimed, had criticised the book and apparently had had letters sent to the Buryat State University (BSU) and BNT’s SO RAN asking that they not continue cooperating on it with *Buryaad Soyol*. This was shortly after the publisher had released an updated version of famous Buryat scholar Shirab Chimegdorzhiiev’s 1991 *Kto-My? Buryat-Mongoly* (Who Are We? Buryat-Mongols), which calls for closer cultural ties with Mongolia through shared historical legacies such as the Old Mongol Script (Shagzhin 2015; Basaev 2015b).

People come in abundance to the meetings of the *Buryaad Soyol* public group. Today it has become very important for them to be able to bring up problems, to speak in Buryat and converse with others. News about who was there, what they talked about and what took place is put online and people who were too far away to attend can happily hear news about their homeland. On the internet this was published in native language. Someone asked the artist Aleksey Gatapov: “I wasn’t able to attend that interesting meeting. So, what happened and how was the meeting?” He replied: “It was a good meeting. There were lots of people present and there was an interesting conversation about books and art.” The famous artist also remarked: “I’m really pleased that the number of young people wanting to preserve their Buryat culture.” With reports like this to read online, the number of those who come to the *Buryaad Soyol* group and take part in their activities is going to increase.

In November 2017 *Buryaad Soyol* was the recipient of a presidential grant to establish a centre for “preservation and popularisation of the Buryat culture, writing and language”. In 2018 it took on 140 students, but has not been able to take all those who are interested because it does not have its own facilities yet (Azhanova 2018).

Nevertheless, the current crisis is not simply the threat of the evanescence of language, but also that of Buryat political identity. The enduring economic hardship in Southern Siberia has meant that by the mid-2000s, not only Buryatia, but the regions of “ethnic Buryatia” – especially the two, small autonomous *okrugs*, Ust’-Orda and Aginsk, severed from the BMASSR in 1937 were struggling greatly and were highly dependent on government assistance. In 2000 the Russian Federal government had begun consideration of getting rid of “subject” provinces such as the two Buryat autonomous *okrugs* (Korytnyy 2009). In October 2005 talks between Ust’-Orda and Irkutsk on the issue began and a letter was sent to the Russian president who agreed on the matter. In April 2006 a referendum was held in which agreement with the proposal was close to 99%. On New Years’ Day 2008 it became part of Irkutsk.

A similar process followed between Aginsk and Chita *oblast’* in November 2006, which led to a referendum with a similarly almost unanimous outcome in March of the next year (Graber and Long 2009). Chita and Aginsk then joined to form Zabaykal’skiy Kray (The Transbaikalian Territory) on the 1st of March 2008. This dissolution of the *okrugs* seemed in many ways to mark the death of the thin political hopes of a few intellectuals in the 1980s-1990s that the pre-1937 BMASSR might be reassembled into a single Buryat state. Paradoxically, at the same time the idea of collapsing Transbaikalia, Irkutsk and Buryatia into a single Baykal’skiy

Kray (Baikal Territory) was floated, and continues to appear and reappear in the media.⁴ To some the idea appears sensible because all three regions are sparsely populated and depressed. To others there are concerns of whether the unification would simply make the economy worse or whether the new region would retain some semblance of the official Buryat identity the RB at least titularly continues to possess from the days of the USSR. Similarly, in early November 2018 President Putin signed documents that would transfer the RB from being part of the Siberian economic region to the Far Eastern District. Much debate ensued, with some avidly supporting the idea due to better economic programs for the depressed region with others taking up petitions against it because of concerns about increases in energy prices (*Baikal Daily* 2018 a,b,c). In short, the future status of the Republic remains an uncertain one.

How have Buryats reacted to the possibility of linguistic and political evanescence? By the mid-2000s something else was beginning to happen. The internet was becoming increasingly accessible, linking Buryats more and more to one another across the space of “ethnic Buryatia” and so too with the outside world in which English is the dominant means of communication. I call this new *dispositif* that of “dispersal” because the dissolution of old certainties and the institutions that previously (re)produced Buryat culture coincides with the new global digital era of “dispersed networks” in which knowledge, educational tools and even dangerous political opinions can be rapidly circulated, often for free. Without this the efforts being made today by volunteer groups, NGOs and grassroots festival organisers to make up for institutional decline would not be possible. What is unique about this *dispositif* is that it does not involve the deployment of Geser “from above” as a state-sanctioned symbol of Buryat identity by elites (regardless of local knowledge of the hero). Instead Geser now appears and reappears disparately and from below as a symbol of Buryat identity woven into diverse cultural, linguistic and political causes.

1. Geser Now.

The revival of Geser at the end of the Soviet Era began with a “folkloric evening” in September 1989 for the 140th birthday celebration of Manshuud Emegeev. Nearly thirty years later small events of this sort continue to be marked occasionally. On the 25th of April 2014 there was a joint 165th birthday celebration for Manshuud Emegeev and 135th for Maysyn Alsyev. However, the event in question was actually not named after either of them, even though they were vital parts of constructing it and its significance. Instead the event bore the title “*Liki*

⁴ For a good collection of positions on this matter since the mid-2000s see: *Aginskoe24.ru* (2017). See Korytnyy (2009) for an early defence of the feasibility of an amalgamation.

Geseriady” (*Faces of the Geseriada*) and for the most part was an exhibition of visual art connected with Geser – from the cover images of old academic books to more recent artists’ work.

Several Buryatian newspapers and online news sources published articles on the *Liki Geseriady* – mostly as an upcoming event and not reports on the exhibition (*Ulanmedia* 2014; *Administratsiya Republiki Buryatii* 2014; *Baikal 24* 2014; *Gosudarstvennaya teleradiokompaniya Buryatia* 2014). One television network granted the exhibition and birthday celebration an eight-minute spot as a news item (*Telekompaniya MIR-Buryatia* 2014). This included a short clip of the *ül’gershen* Ivan Davaev singing and playing the *morin khuur* (horsehead fiddle), and interviews with the organiser of the event Bair Gomboev, and Bair Dugarov. Continuity between the great Western Buryat reciters and the Buryat culture of the past and the present were emphasised in all news sources. But most importantly the events of the Buryat cultural revival in the form of the *Geseriada* festivals of 1991-5 and their legacy was liberally reiterated.

So too have there been other anniversaries that have continued to mark the *Geseriada* among academics. On the 24th of June 2016 I participated in an international seminar on Geser in Ulan-Ude for the 1020th anniversary for the Buryat hero – a number referring explicitly to the *Geseriada*’s ending with the millennial jubilee in 1995 - and a visit by Tibetan monk Getrul Jigme Rinpoche, an internationally famous teacher of the Ripa school of Buddhism.⁵ Most of the communication between the Buryat scholars and the Tibetans was carried out through a Russian-English translator who certainly found her hands full attempting to negotiate the fact that while Dugarov was quite happy to acknowledge that Geser came from Tibet and that he was based on Damdinsüren’s *Gosylo*, he believed adamantly that the Buryats possessed the oldest version of the epic. This was a little difficult, because it would have required explaining the chain of argumentation from Poppe and Sanzheev down to Ulanov and Dugarov, the “deep time” of the millennial Geser with its primordial warring families, its vestiges of matriarchy. Instead they disagreed to agree. Little is still known in Buryat scholarship about the Tibetan Geser; but so too do the Tibetans seem to know very little about the Buryat Geser. In 1995 Geser may have been celebrated as the “Treasure of the Peoples of Central Asia”, but nearly twenty-five years on there is still a great deal of intercultural difficulties in recognising this.

⁵ See this article on the international seminar: (Damdinova 2016). Some of the papers presented there can be found in the *Vestnik BNTs SORAN*, 2,26, 2017.

This situation is epitomised by China's claiming of Geser as its "intangible cultural heritage" when of course there are Buryat Gesers, Tuvan Gesers and a great many others. At the Fourth Session of the Intergovernmental Committee (4.COM) of UNESCO in Abu Dhabi, which took place between the 28th of September and the 2nd of October 2009 Geser was inscribed as the "intangible cultural heritage" of China (*ICH UNESCO "4.COM"*).⁶ In this the Gesers of the Tibetans, the Tu, and the Mongols were included because of their existence within the PRC's geo-political space (*ICH UNESCO "Geser Epic Tradition"*). Mongolia was dismayed by this and they and China politely agreed to "coordinate" when submitting reports to UNESCO from now on (*Tuva Online* 2010). Nonetheless, nothing was said about Buryatia.

When I interviewed Buryat folklorist Natal'ya Nikolaeva in June 2016, she informed me that a compact disk is said to have been sent to UNESCO, most likely in the 1990s, containing a collection of Geser material from the transcriptions of the great *uil'gershed*. There is indeed a compact disk of Geser material kept in the State Library of Buryatia, which would seem to fit the description. However, there is almost nothing extant on the Buryat Geser-UNESCO attempt. It is as though it didn't happen at all. People simply hadn't worked hard enough to build good relations with UNESCO, Nikolaeva told me. Folklorist Darima Burchina simply replied when I asked her about it: "No one talks about UNESCO anymore."

Moreover, the fact is that even after the 2009 Fourth Session of the Intergovernmental Committee (4.COM) of UNESCO in Abu Dhabi nothing appeared on this matter in Russian or Buryat. It would only be four years later that that it seems to have even been acknowledged. On the 8th of August 2013 the leader of the Russian political party *Spravedlivaya Rossiya* (Justice of Russia) Sergey Mironov announced in Ulan Ude that his party would work with the Russian Ministry of Culture to apply to UNESCO to have the Buryat Geser recognised. This was perhaps not an amazing policy to many people, but Buryat intellectual and blogger Sergey Basaev (2013a) wrote a long three-piece article in defence of this. Why? Quite simply, so it would seem, because of national pride: "Until now, Russia only has two items listed on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage... The Old Believers of Transbaikalia and the Yakut heroic epic *Olonkho*. If Geser is included in this list, then two out of three Russian list objects will represent Buryatia."

⁶ Simultaneously China also successfully claimed the Kyrzyz epic *Manas*, due to limited presence in Xingjian. In spite of the far stronger bonds between *Manas* and national identity in Kyrgyzstan compared with Geser in Buryatia (for instance, *Manas* is regarded as having literally founded the Kyrgyz state in 840 CE and all university students have to take a compulsory unit on *Manasology* by government decree), little complaint appears to have been raised, as Laruelle (2015: 171-2) notes. What is most stultifying is that when Kyrgyzstan celebrated its millennium of *Manas* in 1995, this was with full UNESCO support.

After a rundown of the condemnation and redemption of Geser in the 1940s-50s, Basaev presents the situation as a geopolitical fight over the hero between Russia and China (Mongolia is seemingly forgotten). The Chinese have the 1716 Peking xylograph of Geser he says, but what evidence do we have? He proceeds simply to list ten of the titles of the variants of Geser taken down from the great Geser reciters in the 1940s, and Manshuud of course, the “most famous” of them all, whose works are kept in Zhamtsarano’s *fond* in St. Petersburg. He asks: “Which of these epic works of Buryat folklore can be recognized as “intangible cultural heritage of mankind”? Will international status give impetus to cultural and scientific circulation of the epic texts of the Buryat *Geseriada*? Nonetheless, neither the Buryat Geser nor UNESCO seem to be mentioned by any blogger, newspaper or politician in the same sentence again since 2013. The UNESCO site claims that a report was filed on the 15th of December 2017 on the situation of the epic (*ICH UNESCO* “Gesar Epic Tradition”). But who knows whether the Buryat Geser might be mentioned in it, or, for that matter, the Geser of the Tuvans and many other peoples? If not, then in 2022 there will be another report anyway.

UNESCO recognition would indeed be very efficacious for Buryat Geser studies. When discussing this issue with Darima Burchina she lamented that because of UNESCO recognition the Yakuts have a large, very well-funded *Olonkho* study centre. Currently, without this sort of backing there is almost no money for the study and publication of academic books on Geser or Buryat folklore in general. In mid-2016 the folklorist Natal’ya Nikolaeva was working on a Russian translation of R. F Tugutov’s very early 1934 transcription of Geser from Pyookhon Petrov, which apparently is quite different thematically from the version Baldaev took down in winter 1940. She seemed confident that she would have its comparatively short (only 5000 lines!) finished by the end of the year. She was yet to start looking for a publisher. As of 2018 she still does not have one.

So too in 2016 had another prominent Buryat folklorist Yelizaveta Khundaeva finished the first English translation of Manshuud’s *Abay Geser* that had been transcribed by Zhamtsarano. As far back as 2012 she had started this project (see: Khundaeva 2012b). However, like a collection of Buryat fairy-tales a publisher had asked her to translate into English and then reneged on, thus far in 2016 she had no publisher for Manshuud’s Geser in English. In 2014 she had put some of her Geser translation online but had gained little interest (Khundaeva “Abay Geser the Mighty” blogspot). In the end *Geser: The Buryat Heroic Epic*, replete with a collection of translated essays on its mythology and history was published in 2017 as an eBook, available for a few dollars. This is indeed something of a depressing situation after a century of Geser studies.

But what is it for both of the variants of Manshuud's Geser to now be available in English, the "world language"? Khundaeva has not read Curtin's (1909) collection of Manshuud's tales and her attitude to the text – excusing the ideological changes that have taken place in the last century – could not be more different.⁷ She told me that:

Each line was translated tens of times if not more. It was very hard to translate each line for I had to take into account quite a few aspects... The difference of mentality, life style, natural habitat, environment, cultures, traditions, languages, just vision of life, cults and rites, customs and habits and what not.

Indeed, many of the terms used in the Buryat for traditional lifeways, from hunting to shamanism to animal husbandry, have no equivalents in English. But so too had studying Manshuud's Geser also increased Khundaeva's knowledge of Buryat, her first language, especially its complex and now rarely used terms of filiation – words for different sorts of family members and relatives:

What got me still more amazed was when I came across verses with new language phenomena... new representation of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in the Buryat language. Such phenomena are lacking in the other world languages. Then I learned a great deal of the terms of filiation of which I had a vague idea. I was charmed by how the specific and generic notions were presented.

However, there is not merely a "difference in mentality" between Buryat and English and the cultural lifeways that are attached to these languages. The fact is that today young Buryats, especially those who are urbanised and educated, are far more likely to know a great deal more about English and Chinese and the lifeways attached, than they are to know any more than a few words in their native language. English and Chinese grant access to a world of travel, study and employment opportunities, just as willing Russification did during the Soviet Period. Buryat does not grant that. Recently Khundaeva also published an eBook on conversational English for Russian speakers called *Brush Up Your English* (2018) – a very popular genre.

⁷ It also bears mentioning that an English translation of an Unga Geser variant appeared online years ago on the *buryatmongol.org* website of New Age shamaness Sarangerel Ochigin under the title "Abay Geser-Tibetan". This was my first exposure to the Buryat Geser, as far back as 2003, when I was in high school. In spite of this I am still unable to deduce which *ül'gershen*'s variant this is supposed to be and who translated it, as none of this information was included. Overall it is a typical Unga Geser epic and contains some marvellous translations and images. On the 15th of April 2015 the site was updated to include all "nine branches" of the epic.

However, she also has a profound “difference in mentality” to other Buryats in general when it comes to learning English. It is not simply in order to gain access to the world. In order to translate Geser as best she could she also went and learned Old English to read *Beowulf* to understand the history of epic in English (Khundaeva 2012a). This is thoroughly astounding – an unprecedented attempt to appreciate the nuances not merely of two languages and their cultures, but their epic traditions as comprehensively as possible.

Khundaeva has been retired since 2015. Even with funding from a body like UNESCO the sad fact is that currently there are very few Buryat academic geserologists left. Bair Dugarov and Darima Burchina are also retired now and with the exception of Natal’ya Nikolaeva there is no one to replace them. When I asked Burchina and Nikolaeva whether anyone in Irkutsk was studying Geser anymore they both said no. While the scholars of the BNTs SO RAN have been the ones who fixated on the epic, through thick and thin, from Baldaev and his associates going out into the winter snow on foot to write down epics for a jubilee that never happened, to keeping study alive through the second half of the Soviet Period and leading the *Geseriada* of the 1990s, there were always scholars like Sherkhunaev in Irkutsk as well. This is apparently no longer the case. The living scholars on the Buryat Geser can very, very easily fit in a single room.

But what is the official stance of the government of Buryatia towards Geser? A press release for the 2014 *Liki Geseriada* event the *Gosudarstvennaya teleradiokompaniya Buryatia* (State Tele-Radio-Company of Buryatia) reads:

The aim of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Buryatia, in the conception of its project concerning the function of the Geser epic, is the restoration of [the epic’s] cultural code. Particularly important is demonstrating the actual nature of the epic tradition as something beyond merely museum exhibits and also the thematic lines of the heroic epic of *Abay Geser*... It is two decades since the moment of the enactment of the rejuvenation of the *Geseriad*. Since that time the *Geseriad* has exerted an influence upon the instruction of children and school pupils in the spirit of preserving it for posterity and future generations - in artistic projects, inclusion in the cultural sphere and education, [all] encouraged by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Buryatia.

In spite of the claim, twenty years on from the *Geseriada* Geser exerts almost no influence in formal education in the RB. I was recently informed that the old “consolidated text” of Geser

is on the Buryatian school syllabus, but only as an option for students interested in some extra reading and nothing more.

Nonetheless, there are some very creative Buryat language teachers who, out of their own interest and desire, are attempting to produce amateur media such as animations to encourage interest in the hero and Buryat culture among young people. One prominent example is Ol'ga Zandynova and her *Buryaad Kheleney Bagshanaray Blog* (Buryat Language Teachers' Blog). Here she attempts to introduce the Buryat language into other parts of the curriculum such as multimedia animations made by students – “*Podvigi Abay Gesera*” (The Feats of Mighty Geser 2013b) and “*Rozhdenie Vselennoy v Epose Geser*” (Birth of the Universe in the Geser Epic 2015b). To Zandynova (2013c) one way of looking at the titanic battles between the hero and monsters in Geser is as natural phenomena, such as the volcanic landmarks in Oka taken to represent Gal-Dülme's palace, which were discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. Zandynova takes this further, imaginatively utilising Geser for teaching physics. For example, she treats the monster tiger Orgoli that tries to suck up Geser and his men from 90km away as though it were a hurricane:

I calculated that if Geser and his thirty-three heroes had an average weight of one hundred and twenty kilograms, then the gravity would be 4080 N, and the work of drawing them into his mouth by a monster for 90 miles would be $367200000 \text{ J} = 367200 \text{ kJ} = 367.2 \text{ MJ} = 3.672 \cdot 10^8 \text{ J}$.

There is something wonderfully eccentric about using Geser to teach physics. Nonetheless, these efforts remain small and disparate – attempts to navigate the waning of the institutional support that was once granted to the study and (re)production of Buryat culture through NGOs and the internet. Perhaps the most promising possibility that has recently been pitched is that by the secondary school teachers, D. Ts. Nanzaday and N. B. Bandeeva (2018), for VARK (The All-Buryat Association for the Development of Culture) to create a website about Geser for teaching Buryat language and culture. A basic structure for the site is given, including information on Geser, his “cult of reciters” and the millennial jubilee of 1995, which, one might note is accredited solely to the efforts of VARK for having achieved. A simple introductory lesson for students is supplied as a demonstration, in which a “videocassette” is shown to students of the performance of the “fifth branch” (?) of Geser by an *ül'gershen* called P. Barlukov, who was the youngest to perform at *Geseriada-95*. No more recent material is included, but at very least the possibility of creating a resource like this for high-school students

would seem highly valuable. It is unclear whether the site is to be produced simply by volunteers for VARK, or whether it would require some form of government funding.

There are far grander media projects too. When I spoke to Darima Burchina in 2016 she had an interesting imaginative solution for popularising Geser among children - that with the popularity of films such as *Kung Fu Panda*, perhaps a Geser cartoon might be a very good idea. Serendipitously, in late 2018 a Geser cartoon feature is actually in production. Current news on it claims that it will be in Buryat (with a Russian version also being cut), computer animation, 40-60 minutes long, and concerns Geser's battle with the monster Arkhan Shütger. Director Oleg Yumov informs the media company *Vostok Teleinform* (2018) that:

At first, [we] thought about making a cartoon of the whole of Geser, but this was unrealistic, since there are nine branches and each branch corresponds to a fully-fledged movie. Then [we] decided to reduce it to three branches and finally decided to just do the middle - the third branch - where Geser is fighting the demon Arkhan... In animation, the main person is of course the artist, whom the team had been looking for for a long time. We searched among local artists, but then we went to Mongolia and found a wonderful young artist who understands 3D animation. He invented about 15 images of characters for us.

On the 20th of September at a fair showcasing local NGOs in Ulan Ude, visitors were able to put on suits with motion-capture sensors in the hope that their body might be used as the basis for an animated character for the film (Sosnina 2018). However, as Sergey Stepanov, an animator on the project, stated: "The plan is to release the cartoon plan by the end of this year. There is still a lot of work, and the money is running out. According to preliminary calculations, the animation needs more than two million rubles." We must simply wait and see. If the cartoon is a success then perhaps other "branches" will be made.

The current *dispositif* presents fragile new opportunities to make up for the decline of old ones and at the same time the endurance of groups such as VARK. Because of the mythological content of Geser and his long attachment to Buryat culture as a symbol of its "deep time" he is an extremely fertile, useful and exciting symbol for expressing Buryat creativity – even if UNESCO may not acknowledge this "intangible cultural heritage" within the near future.

2. Activist Geser.

It is also very much possible for Geser and his history during the 20th century to be utilised as a nationalistic symbol by online Buryat political activists. As Khamutaev (2005, 2008)

catalogues in his history of Buryat national movements in the 1980s-2000s, Buryat cultural revival and reunification groups like VARK, “Geser” and others did persist into the late 1990s and early 2000s, but with little public interest and recognition. They remained a kind of afterthought of the moment in 1990 when Leonid Potapov and others had decided that the “dismemberment” could now be an open question. Nonetheless, a generation of younger activists, who were far savvier to the new possibilities of the internet began to emerge in the early-mid 2000s. One of the keenest of these was Yevgeniy Khamaganov, who with others began to organise human rights groups such as *Erkhe*, and the online forum “*Sayt Buryatskogo Naroda*” (Buryat People’s Site), which played an important role in Buryat activism at this time including efforts to encourage voters in Aginsk and Ust’-Orda to keep their independence. Nonetheless, in both cases close to 99% of the vote went in favour of the dissolution of the *okrugs*. Some activists claimed that the vote in Ust’-Orda was rigged and that they were victims of harassment and intimidation by the Russian government (Jacobson 2010a,b; Sweet and Chakars 2010). Suppression of political activists is not unknown in the Russian Federation, and, as I will discuss below, has risen to the fore in a number of cases concerning Buryat nationalism in the past decade.

The key symbol of shared Buryat identity used by activists attempting to prevent the dissolution of the *okrugs* was not Geser, however, but a “Pan-Mongol” one: Chingis Khan (Hamayon 2010; Nowicka-Rusek and Zhanaev 2014: 381-94). Yet, it was also very much possible for some Buryat intellectuals to attempt to link the dissolution of Ust’-Orda and Aginsk with the political history of Geser instead. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Yevgeniy Khamaganov’s opinion blogs as editor for the news site *ARD* (Asia Russia Daily). Much of what Khamaganov (2015d, e) was writing around this time, November 2015, seems to have been in the vein of Western Buryat self-determination over against Buryatia, which he frequently views as corrupt, cowardly and having abandoned Buryat tradition. This in many ways is typical of a certain sort of long rift between the Western and Eastern Buryats, which the reader might recall from the first chapter also troubled Zhamtsarano’s plans for a united Pan-Mongolism. In a century, while many things have changed, some things have simply been updated for the times.

In the 17th of November 2015 piece “*Ust’-Ordynskiy Otvet na Buryatskom Voprose*” (Ust’-Orda response to the Buryat Question), Khamaganov begins with some self-conscious “*sarkazm*” regarding Western Buryat folksongs that “I cherish tribalism, so to speak” (*leleyu, tak skazat’, traybalizm*), but this sarcasm is rapidly cast off in favour of an all-out attack on the history of the Khori Buryat intelligentsia for working with the Far Eastern Republic “they laid

a mine of Pan-Mongolism” (*zalozhili minu panmongolizma*) and then when the Irkutsk Bolshevik order fell apart, they took over it: “they took the opportunity to take revenge” (*pochuyali vosmozhnost’ vzyat’ ravansh*). Khamaganov between the sarcasm typical of bloggers paints the outline of a Buryat history in which inter-tribal revenge and jealousy takes centre stage instead of Russian influence. The political history of Geser is then added to the mix:

But after the war, a sort of castigation of our lofty heritage erupted (*formennoe bichevanie velikogo naslediya*) - that of the epic Geser. Let me remind you of that it exists in Ekhirit-Bulagat and Unga variants. It was a kind of act of revenge (*svoeobraznyy akt mesti*) by the Khori Buryats. Some “wise man” (*umnik*) whispered to the then first secretary of the regional committee of the BMASSR, Aleksandr Kudryavtsev, that Geser was a bourgeois-nationalistic work, and that its evil monsters- *mangadkhay*- are Russians. The “feudal khanic” epic was defamed (*oshel’movan*), the popularisers of Geser - Afrik Bal’burov (Alar), Aleksey Ulanov (Bokhan) - that is, the natives of the places where the variants of Geser had been recorded, were the ones who suffered persecution. The journalist and rector of GIYaLI, Maxim Shulukshin (Kachugsky) landed in a Gulag, where in 1949 he was killed, allegedly while trying to escape.

In his attack Khamaganov utilises a curious term, *mankurt*, which he juxtaposes with *mangadkhay*. Mankurt comes from the famous Kyrgyz novelist Chingis Aytmatov’s story *I Dol’shee Veka Dlitsya Den’* (And The Day Lasts Longer Than a Century). The *mankurt* is a kind of fantastical slave that has lost all of its memory. To Aytmatov (2004: 140-1), such a creature is utilised in order to emphasise belief in its impossibility as “the most difficult and inconceivable of atrocities”, for it is much easier to kill a man than to destroy his mind and memory, which “remains his only possession, departing along with him and not ever accessible to others.” Thus, to Khamaganov the *mankurt* becomes a symbol of those who have forgotten what it is to be Buryat, analogous with those Khori Buryats who denounced Geser to Russian authorities on the basis that the hero’s monster enemies were Russians. The *mankurt* thus becomes a symbol of willing cowardice and forgetfulness. Under the subheading “*Mangadkhay i Mankurty*” he writes:

The names of those who persecuted Geser - Khotsa Namsaraev, Tsenden Galsanov. For the sake of justice (*spravedlivosti radi*) - the same “wise man” who whispered to Kudryavtsev about the *mangadkhay*- Russians, was Mikhayl Khamaganov (not a relative of the author for ARD, if that). It was perhaps quite easy to find *mankurts* and collaborators among the Buryats at that

time. What then can we say about today? For me, the litmus test was in 2006-2007, when the Ust'-Orda and Aga autonomies were liquidated (*unichtozheny*) in succession. Since then to myself I have defined the levels of the so-called "Buryat elite" in relation to what degree each went along with this at the time (*po tomu, kto kak sebya vyol v to vremya*).

The cleverness of Khamaganov's opinion piece lies in the way in which it turns around the Stalinist language of denunciation and puts it back on perceived traitors to Western Buryat heritage. It lists those who attempted to prevent the dissolution of the *okrugs*. The ex-president of Buryatia, Leonid Potapov, is listed in a group of his own for having done nothing while pretending that he had a useful answer by proposing the united Baykal'skiy Kray that would include Buryatia, Irkutsk and Zabaykal'skiy Kray into a single administrative region. Finally, it comes to those who simply gave in and those "who actively contributed to the destruction; they betrayed and harmed their fellow people (*travil svoikh soplemenikov*)". Khamaganov then claims that he will not name such people, as they would be able to sue him, yet he promises that "the time will come, and their names, one way or another, will become known to all. These direct and obvious enemies of the people still hold posts and money" willing to do anything for power. Thus, the reappropriation of Soviet-style denunciation ends, the condemnation of Geser woven into a perceived history of betrayal.

On the 16th of March 2017 Khamaganov, only thirty-five, tragically passed away. Most news sources, including the local newspaper from his home region, stated that he died while being resuscitated from a diabetic coma (*Znamya Truda*, 24th March 2017, p. 7). However, some critics of Putin's government, both in Russia and abroad (Khan 2017; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2017), questioned this claim because of Khamaganov's vocal support of Buryat nationalism and human rights and as editor in chief of *ARD* (Dugarova 2018). Indeed, the spectre of Pan-Mongolism would appear to have survived as a real danger in the Russian imagination, as is evinced by the charging of Irkutsk Buryat man Vladimir Khagdaev under part 2 of article 280.1 of the law of the Russian Federation in March 2016 – for "public calls for separatism via the internet" for blogging that a Pan-Mongol state should be created.⁸ It seems that the new world of global communication and connectivity can all too easily produce

⁸ Khagdaev seems to have had quite a checkered past and was also accused of the possession of marijuana when he was arrested, though this was later dropped (Sologub 2017). In April 2017 he was given a three-year suspended sentence (*Ovd-Info* 2017). The documentation of the initial charges may be viewed at *Ovd-Info* (2016). On the way in which chatrooms and social media encourage Buryats (as with many other peoples) to develop imaginative personas and say things they normally wouldn't in public see Humphrey (2009).

a new space for old nationalisms and territorialisms to be reasserted, both those of existing state power and online fantasies.

The possibility of a cover up of state-sponsored violence was given credence to many by the fact that previously, on the 12th of July 2015, Khamaganov had been severely injured outside his apartment in Ulan Ude, resulting in damaged vertebrae and brain-trauma and the theft of his phone and wallet (Khamaganov 2015c). He was discovered the next morning and taken to hospital. The political organisation *Yabloko*, of which Khamaganov was a member, were quick to condemn the incident as a political attack, even before he had said anything himself (Mitrokhin 2015). However, the situation did become suspicious when police were slow to investigate the incident as an assault and instead attempted to get Khamaganov while still in hospital to sign a form declaring that the accident was due to him having become intoxicated and fallen from the roof of his garage and had “*popytalsya izobrazit’ Ikara*” (tried to imitate Icarus) (Khamaganov 2015c). Khamaganov, possessing little memory of the incident, ended up declaring that it was likely that he was attacked due to having metaphorically (and literally) “crossed the street” by making enemies in the Ministry of Internal Affairs because of his political activism (ibid; Cf. Ivanov 2015). To his friend Radzhana Dugarova (2018), there seemed a deliberately vicious vengefulness to the fact that Khamaganov’s incident had falsely been put down to drunkenness when he had been campaigning against the sale of alcohol at news kiosks at the time.

Following this Khamaganov left Buryatia for his home-village in Ust’-Orda. He did not return to Ulan Ude until the 27th of February 2017. He was dead less than a month later. Some rumours suggest that he had been attacked as early as the 10th of March, was hospitalised, and died a week later from his injuries (ibid). Indeed the “diabetic coma” is curious because he did not seem to anyone to have displayed any symptoms of diabetes (ibid.). Whatever the truth behind this (one hopes that it will emerge in time), there seem few Buryat bloggers of Khamaganov’s calibre to replace him.

3. Spoken Geser.

However, the era of “dispersal” and globalisation of communication has also brought some very positive things with it for recharging Buryat culture on a grassroots and international level. In 1994 a small gathering of ethnic Buryats called *Altargana* was held in Mongolia’s Dadal *sum*, the birthplace of Chingis Khan. It was much like the typical summer *naadam/naadan* festivities which were discussed in the previous chapter and which were so important for turning the *Geseriada* celebrations into popular events. Over the next decade *Altargana* began to grow – it slowly became a mobile, biennial Pan-Buryat cultural festival, taking in the Buryats

of Russia and China and others globally, as well as those in northern Mongolia. In Russia VARK has been one of its biggest supporters and organisers for events through a series of *filiaty* (affiliated societies) in Buryatia, Irkutsk and Zabaykal'skiy Kray (Kharanutov 2016). In 2014 the festival was held once again in Dadal, in 2016 in Ulan-Ude, and this year, 2018, it was held in Irkutsk.

One of the perennial events of *Altargana* is the competition of epic reciters, or *konkurs uligershinov* (Bur. *ül'gershedey mürysöön*). *Altargana* uses rounds of *konkurs* (competition) in local rural communities. Those who win at the local level, proceed to the regional level and then finally to the *Altargana* festival itself. The *konkurs* model is a remnant from the Soviet Era's emphasis on children showcasing artistic and musical talent through competition, but its survival nowadays in Russia is invaluable to connect with Buryats on a grassroots level and develop interest in culture.⁹ Folklorist Natal'ya Nikolaeva told me that she had been in middle school in a small rural area in Irkutsk in the 1990s when the *Geseriada* had taken place. It had been very exciting and her school had organised the students to perform in a *kokurs uligershinov*, which, she claimed had been one of the main influences that led her to become a folklorist. As the reader may recall from chapters five and six, the training of new *ül'gershed* to perform in *kokursy* for the festivals was accounted of great importance in order to make up for the severing of the “living” oral Geser traditions during the Soviet Era.

The rebirth of Buryat culture in the *Geseriada* years reshaped the *konkurs* to include the *ül'ger* as a central competitive category when previously *ül'gershed* had not been a competitive form of performance. Today at *Altargana* it is exactly that: “the participants of the competition demonstrate their musical and singing abilities in order to handle difficult technical tasks, ornamental chants, melodicy, melodic ornamentation, recitative tunes, and vibrational embellishment” (Sakhiltarova 2018). I would venture to suggest that without the *Geseriada*, today there would be no *konkurs uligershinov* at *Altargana*. In spite of this Geser is not a prominent symbol of Buryat identity at *Altargana* and the festival does not consciously borrow any legitimacy from the *Geseriada*. As with the *Geseriada* era, it seems to be phenomena such as the “Three Manly Sports” of wrestling, archery and horseracing and traditional song and dance such as the *yookhor* that symbolically bind the Pan-Buryat identity that flourishes for a

⁹ Similar local educational competitions continue to exist as well as *Altargana* today. As Aleksandr Makhachkeev (2018a) reports for *BÜ*, since 2014 *Buryaad.fm*'s competition for children entitled “*Ekhe Khelen – Manay Bayalig*” (Mother Language – Our Wealth) been running in the rural regions of Buryatia. Like many events based on the idea of a “*konkurs*”, local children engage in regional rounds first, and, if successful can go on to compete in inter-regional level such as recently took place on the 19th of October at Ivolginskiy Datsan, where recitation in language, traditional Mongolian writing, dancing and woodwork were among the events.

few brief days every two years at *Altargana*. And yet, still there are hints of Geser if one knows where to look.

I was lucky enough to be able to attend and interview a number of reciters and organisers of the *konkurs üligershinov* of Ulan-Ude's *Altargana-2016*. Surprisingly, it was not wise old bearded men telling stories at the Buryat Republic's "Ül'ger" Puppet Theatre (*Buryatskiy Respublikanskiy Teatr Kukol 'Ül'ger'*) where the event took place. It was children and teenagers and a couple of young adult professional musicians attempting to rekindle an aspect of Buryat tradition which even twenty-five years after the *Geseriada* still remains rare. The reorientation of the competition towards young reciters has been the brainchild of Nina Garmaevna. In 2010 no young people were interested, so she recounts, so she created a competition called *Ugaym Erdeni* (Jewel of My Ancestors) and age categories for performers under seven and one for teenagers in order to provide ongoing mentoring and continuity so that young people will desire to learn and keep learning and performing. *Ugaym Erdeni* is separate from *Altargana* but the two reinforce one another to pave the way for young performers to learn about their cultural traditions and grow their skills. Without the former, the latter would likely be very short of contestants indeed, as was the case as recently as *Altargana-2014* there were not enough young people to warrant a children's category (*Baikal Daily* 2014).¹⁰ As Garmaevna enthusiastically expresses in an interview from a 2015 *Ugaym Erdeni* competition, which was also held at the "Ül'ger" Puppet Theatre (Nimatsyrenova 2015):

We, grateful descendants and heirs of the great singers-storytellers should make every effort to perpetuate the memory of them, pay tribute to them, pass on this marvellous baton of traditions of performance... We ask you to support young storytellers who are only taking the first steps on an incredibly difficult, but wonderful path towards comprehending the performing traditions of the great storytellers for which the Buryat land is famous.

By 2016 there were already many talented young performers who had been nursed by this system. One I met with was the exceptionally talented Rodion Shantanov, only sixteen at the time (and both his parents only thirty-two!), from Bayanday *aymag* in Irkutsk. Sat on a fur rug, dressed in a fur hat, Rodion had the audience enchanted with a heroic *ül'ger* on his own invention based on the tale of *Shono Baatar*. He didn't sing – he simply told a story with

¹⁰ This is in spite of the fact, as the article (*Baikal Daily* 2014) notes, that in 2013 in Osa there had been a competition of young *ül'gershed*. As no details or names are given in relation to this, it is very hard to deduce if it was connected with the early efforts of *Ugaym Erdeni* or was simply a local event.

elaborate gestures. It was entrancing. Rodion told the typical sort of story – a hero goes out to tend his animals and a *mangadkhay* monster appears. But the name of the *mangadkhay* was Sherem Minaata, one of the traditional enemies of the Buryat Geser.

Rodion won his category at the event, and, unsurprisingly, had a long history of winning theatrical competitions, including A Pan-Artic Area Challenge, where he came first, and the Caucasia International Friendship Competition, where he came second. He wanted to be a theatre director when he grew up so that he could return home to his village and become a “cultural worker” to work with young people to teach them about traditional performance. Rodion became interested in *ül’ger* when he was about eight years old, when someone gave him a copy of *Alamzhi Mergen* to read. He liked it, and watching local people perform, began to take note of different techniques of performance, different dialects through “osmosis”. People coming to town to perform to drum up interest in *Altargana* was a highlight because there was very little chance otherwise to see such things locally. Where Rodion comes from Buryats are rare, so he said, and the Buryat language even rarer, and the internet “primordial” in its sluggishness. Because he had won the local heat for *Altargana* his village’s “cultural worker” Lubov’ Istaeva had come all the way out with him to Ulan-Ude for the event. In spite of the international competitions he had been in, he said that his dream was to someday to come to Ulan-Ude because he’d heard there were so many Buryats.

Another young performer I spoke to was Chimigdorzhi Radnaev, who was only twelve. Having no relatives who were into *ül’ger*, he simply developed an interest from reading old books, and had been encouraged by his mother to perform versions of these *Sagaaday Mergen Khüü* and *Nogoodoy Basgan Khoyor*. He wanted to be a lama when he grew up. Books are central in young people learning the material of *ül’ger* and reconstituting it to produce their own style and repertoire as they developed. None of the young performers I spoke to had learned any of their skills from a relative. They had also simply read old texts of *ül’ger* taken down and published by Zhamtsarano, Baldaev and others from the days of “living” epic. The new reciters simply internalise parts of these to build their own repertoire as they copy and experiment. The written word is transformed (back) into the spoken word, but new and different.

I also spoke briefly with the famous veteran performer, Ivan Dabaev (see chapter five), who had been performing since the *Geseriada* in the 1990s. He claimed to know many *ül’gers*, most of which he said he had forgotten, including the small amount of Geser he knew. He explained that his grandfather, Chimit Buduzhapov, had been an *ül’gershen*, but that in Soviet times no one was interested. Today, however, he said that none of his children were interested,

but that young people now more than ever had great opportunities to perform. Similar sentiments were also expressed in an interview with the performer by Nina Sakhiltarova (2018) for *Altargana-2018*: “I used to know a lot of texts, but now I have forgotten everything.’ In his youth, he grasped and remembered everything.” In the end it is youth that is the greatest force for reversing cultural entropy and (re)creating traditions. As long as there are young performers keen to learn from elders and one another and (re)interpret the storehouse of text that was fortuitously preserved by Zhamtsarano, Baldaev and others, the *ül’ger* will survive.

When I spoke to the organiser of the 2016 event, Viktor D. Zhambalov from the Buryatian Ministry of Culture, he said that he was astounded at the calibre of the performers that year. They seemed to have so many good ideas and there were at least double the number that there had been in previous year, when he had started at the Ministry. He emphasised that in many ways the results of efforts to teach young people the skills of storytelling, which largely disappeared by mid-century, were beginning to show. However, the main problem, so he said, was that there needed to be more *konkursy* in the rural areas to get young people interested for *Altargana* and other competitions. He seemed very hopeful about the future. One day, he said, we should just invite all the *ül’gershed* from the Altai and Kalmykia and Mongolia and have a huge competition! In short, the work being done by *Ugaym Erdeni* and *Altargana* seems to be having a very positive effect on encouraging young people.

Yet where is Geser in all this? A recent photograph I saw on social media after *Altargana-2018* presented Rodion Shantanov beaming beneath a pair of portrait paintings in the Ust’-Orda Palace of Culture where the *konkurs* was held. The portraits displayed the images of Manshuud Emegeev and Pyookhon Petrov – those two greatest symbols of the “cult of reciters” of the Buryat Geser and the idea of continuity with the “deep time” of Buryat tradition. In Nina Sakhiltarova’s (2018) recent article on the *ül’gershed* of *Altargana-2018*, the organiser of the *Ugaym Erdeni* competition that had brought many of the young reciters to the event, Nina Garmaevna, also expressed her marvel at the portrait of Manshuud (based on Curtin’s sole photograph of course) and the importance of this event taking place beneath the auspices of the great reciter who “knew the most archaic variant”. Symbolic continuity with this “cult” without a doubt empowers the (re)creation of Buryat tradition today.

When in 2016 I asked Rodion about Geser he said that he was more interested in creating his own epics from other ones and learning ones that were as obscure as possible. Yet in time he may very well likely perform his own version of Geser. In 2018 Rodion competed in “group III” of the competition, the category for adult performers, and came second. The winner of *Altargana-2018*’s group III was the performer Alexey Tsyrendylykov, who has been

involved in and participating in *Altargana* since 2007. Moreover, Tsyrendylykov considers the revival of Geser to be of paramount importance. As Sakhiltarova (2018) records in her interview with him:

In Mongolia, [the revival of epic] is well established, but now we have not so many *gesershed*. This is bad. We must do something about it. In Kalmykia, the performers of the epos *Jangar* - the Jangarchi - are in good standing, they are supported at the republic level.

Tsyrendylykov studied *morin khuur* professionally at university level as a student of music, but perhaps his greatest personal influence has been the *ül'gershen* Ragzen Erdyneev:

In old age Ragzen Erdyneev lived in Ulan-Ude and once invited me to his place. Apparently, from somewhere he learned that I was learning to play the *morin khuur*. When we met up he recited, and I played. Back then I understood little of *ül'ger*, despite the fact that I speak Buryat well. At that time, I was young, I was only seventeen. After that, after about six months, the famous reciter died. I realised only later that he blessed me in a way.

Rare indeed is it for a performer today to have a teacher like this, even if it is only for a short period. Alexey's philosophy is that: "You must believe in what you say" because the *ül'ger* is very hard to learn and must be felt. "This is not just a fairy-tale, it is a tradition that must be experienced. It's a pity that the *ül'gershed* aren't supported at the state level, which is why it's so difficult to transmit the tradition. Language is not of interest to the people." The lack of interest in language and the lack of state support for Geser once again comes to the forefront, as has been reiterated many times in relation to the dispositive of "dispersal" in this chapter.

However, the fact remains that all these reciters are very young and are only just beginning on their paths to becoming performers thanks to the efforts of the organisers of *Ugaym Erdeni* and *Altargana*. Geser is something to work towards, the flower of Buryat oral tradition, and certainly not something which one can simply just jump into. One performer I talked to in 2016, was Gurzhap Batorov, who performed once again at *Altargana-2018*, where he won "group II", the ten to eighteen age-category. In 2016 he was only just ten. He had come out from Oka with his aunty Rema, who worked out much of his material for him, including attempting to set some of the text of *Alamzhi Mergen* to music. She told me that currently the two of them were working on Geser, but that it was necessary for him to "feel it and grow". Geser is not for the faint of heart – it's full of gods and monsters and all sorts of serious matters.

Perhaps, so she said, he will be able to perform all of Geser when he will be twenty. Indeed, we must wait, but in the not too distant future a “new” Geser told by a new generation will arrive.

But perhaps, in part at least, it is already here. The very nature of the current *dispositif* of “dispersal” means that Geser today appears and reappears in unlikely places that often go almost unnoticed. In the *Geseriada-2018* described in chapter six that took place in Osa in Irkutsk in July 2018 there was also a “*konkurs gesershinov*”. The *konkurs* was very small and excepting a couple of columns in the local paper *Znamya Truda* (27th July 2018 “*V dukhe traditsiy predkov*”, p. 6), it went almost unnoticed. In a *polozhenie* (plan) of the event, entrants for the competition were instructed to recite a “single fragment” (*odin fragment*) of a “variant” of Geser in accordance “with the local performing traditions of their region” for no more than seven minutes (Mantkyov and Amagzaev 2018). However, there appears to be no video footage available of the performance to indicate how the entrants interpreted their “local performing traditions” or the originality of the “fragments” in question.

Most curiously, as Aleksandra Toktonova reported for *Znamya Truda*: “sadly other regions of the *okrug* were not able to take part in the competition.” This was for Osa locals only, though it is not explained why this was the case. Most likely it was due to a lack of funding instead of some kind of “territorialism”. This was very much a traditional rural fair plugged into the symbols of the *Geseriada*. Awards for all the competitions for *Geseriada-2018* were livestock. On the front page of the 27th of July edition of *Znamya Truda*, the mayor of Osa region, Mantkyov extends his thanks to a number of local families who had donated sheep as prizes for the competitions. Toktonova reported that one Dmitriy Ukhnaev, from Bil’chir, won the *ül’gershen* competition, and was awarded a ram. It is unclear how many other participants there were in the *konkurs*,¹¹ but it is related that a Nikolay Yerbartkin from Buryat-Yangut came second and an Aleksandr Khalmatov was awarded third place (*ibid.* p. 6). None of these figures seem to have performed professionally before. The burning question is just how many amateur Geser-enthusiasts there might be hidden in rural Irkutsk or Buryatia today.

So too as part of the *Geseriada-18* festival there was also an academic conference on Geser that took place in Osa on the 19th of July. None of the Buryatian geserologists appear to have spoken at it.¹² What is notable, however, is that in the local paper, *Znamya Truda* (Il’yin

¹¹ A timetable later published for the festival gave a mere hour and a half (10.00am-11.30am) for the whole “*konkurs*”, which seems rather short, even though there was to be only one round (*tur*) of competition anyway (*Osaadm*, 17th July 2018).

¹² Instead in *Znamya Truda*, the Osa mayor Mantkyov (2018) lists the highlights as having been the scholar S. V. Kalmykov speaking about the role of a local notable, Mariya M. Sakhyanova’s role in the

2018: 10) there is included a detailed series of six “resolutions” made at the academic conference concerning Geser and Osa. The website of the Cultural Centre of the Native Peoples of the Pribaikal (2018) posted these the very day of the conference:

- 1.) To hold a conference on the Buryat Geser annually;
- 2.) to propose to the Ust'-Orda administration that educational institutions should encourage events on Geser through sponsoring young people to recite the epic, create art inspired by it and so on;
- 3.) To annually hold a “three manly sports” competition under the name of Geser;
- 4.) To “rebrand” Osa as the “homeland of Geser” (*Rodina Gesera*) during the period 2018-21 for tourism;
- 5.) To erect a statue of Manshuud Emegeev;
- 6.) To create a cultural organisation for the preservation and popularisation of Geser.

These are all very noble resolutions and if even one or two of them should be realised, this may well make a profound difference for the perpetuation of Geser, Buryat culture and the local economy. However, it is quite strange that Osa seems so keen to erect a statue of Manshuud, when Manshuud's village Kutuluk is not in Osa at all, but Alarsk. Were he alive Manshuud would not have been able to compete in the “*konkurs gesershinov*”, quite simply because it was only open to locals. As with the long history of the BMASSR/Buryatia borrowing the Western Buryat epics and their reciters like Manshuud in order to ground their own “deep time”, Osa seems to simply be repeating the process, albeit with much less distance. Nonetheless, as far as I am aware, the area that is now Osa region (though it has changed a great deal over the past century, being abolished in 1944 and reconstituted in 1975) has never been home to any of the famous *ül'gershed*.

Yet, if Osa does manage to gain funding and community interest to develop a “cultural organisation” for Geser, encourages young people to take up the tradition by reciting “fragments” and making art based around the hero, and is able to tap into the Pan-Buryat appeal of the *Geseriada* or *Altargana*, this may well develop in a few years to something important for Buryat culture and the local economy. 2020 will be the 1025th anniversary for the Buryat Geser epic. As slightly odd as the idea that the epic might be so exactly dated might seem, it of course refers back at once to the millennial Geser's “deep time” and the legitimacy of the

establishment of the Chinese Communist Party and an A. D. Karnyshev who spoke about the folklorist Matvey Khangalov who had been born in the area. Again, on page 10 of the same issue of *Znamya Truda* there is an article by Andriyan Il'yin entitled “*Geseriade byt!*” (Let the *Geseriad* Begin!) in which these same basic details are given. There seem to have been no actual papers on Geser that I can find, although according to Il'yin some fifty-seven people attended (a photo is also included).

Geseriada as well. Osa mayor V. M. Mantikov seems very conscious of this. At the bottom of the *polozhenie* (plan) for *Geseriada-2018* he announced the date in bold beside the words *Geser – eto gimn lubovi rodine* (Geser – this is a hymn of love to the homeland). We must wait and see what happens.

While the efforts described in this chapter may seem small and disparate – the translation of *Manshuud* into English, activist blogging, competitions, the creation of online Buryat language teaching resources and volunteer groups – these add up to an astoundingly creative and passionate mosaic of “dispersed” reactions to the current linguistic, cultural and political crisis. There is space for optimism. A lot can change in the thirty years the Buryat languages have been given, a timeframe as distant now as the meeting Dugarov organised in June 1989 to consider the forgotten jubilee for an epic tradition which forty years before that had been utterly condemned. The future has not yet been written and those who will write it are only now just beginning.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a very simple goal: to describe and analyse the role the epic hero Geser has played in Buryat history as a case study of how political crisis and cultural amnesia provokes the urgent need to (re)invent a shared identity. As I have shown across its seven chapters, the Buryat subjects of the Late Russian Empire and the Geser *ül'ger* of 1900 were conceived of very differently by local kinship systems and orientalists from how they were later imagined by elites attempting to produce a “national culture” for the collectivised “Buryat-Mongols” during the Stalinist Period, by Dugarov and participants in the *Geseriada* following the USSR’s collapse, or today by “dispersed” efforts in the age of the internet. The Buryats have endlessly changed shape and been reshaped by elites to adjust to crisis alongside their shape-changing hero, Geser. Thus, as I have argued throughout this thesis, it is more apt to speak of Geser and the Buryats not as simple entities, but as historically interwoven lived processes that continue to evolve and adapt – as *Geser-becoming* and *Buryat-becoming*. So too have I emphasised that Buryat identity is intrinsically bound up not simply in a periodisation, but in *dispositifs*: in politicised ways of knowing and that have conditioned ways to navigate, subvert, survive, forget and make the most of cultural change, loss and trauma.

1. The Value of Geser.

Looking back over the vast ideological topography that has been explored it now becomes possible to consider the Geser-Buryat relationship and its evolution and ongoing value in detail. Several questions immediately become apparent. Does the history of Geser come close to telling a commensurate story of Buryat identity-formation in the 20th century? What I have presented is the story of an influential current in the history of the Buryats – one that has largely been overlooked in current scholarship and which is explicitly tied to the most important transition points in their recent history. By zeroing in on the (re)invention of Geser as a key symbol for articulating Buryat identity one is granted a privileged insight into the major transformations of Buryat identity during the 20th century: the origination of Pan-Mongolism beside the collection of epics as dual responses to the “influx of civilisation”; the technocratic invention of Stalinist Buryat-Mongol “national culture” against Pan-Mongolism and to make up for a lack of written history and forced collectivisation; Post-Soviet cultural revival in uncertain but briefly optimistic times; the current waning of the old cultural institutions and the creation of new ones.

It may well be possible to break up the ideological history of Buryat identity-formation in a number of different ways to merely the four *dispositifs* I have used as a hermeneutic in order to centre my research on Geser. This should be obvious from the fact that this thesis has had little to say on the second half of the Soviet Period, which scholars such as Melissa Chakars (2008, 2014) have addressed so well in recent years. During this period, as is argued in chapter five, Geser and the use of epic for identity-formation was not of much importance outside a small academic elite. Nonetheless, this period was, one must admit, relatively “stable” compared with those that had come before it, though it was indeed between the 1960s and 1980s that the Buryat languages rapidly declined in the name of voluntary russification.

Thus, when Buryat and cultural political revival began to take form during the “autumn of nations” of the late 1980s, it is unsurprising that this offered an opportunity to Buryat cultural elites to celebrate the forgotten “jubilee” for the national epic, but that this was largely an “in-house” academic celebration. That this would become the massive *Geseriada* festivals in efforts to kindle a shared “ethnic Buryatia”, on the other hand, does not seem to have even been a possibility until Dugarov’s 1991 celebration of the *ül’gershen* Petrov in Khadaakhan, Irkutsk. As argued in chapter six, the *Geseriada* does not appear to have been of mass-cultural consequence until it piggy-backed off the summer sporting festival in Yeravna in 1992. Even then little seems to have been known about Geser by the general populace, as had been the case in the “national epic” drive of the 1940s. For the most part the *Geseriada*’s mass-cultural appeal was fleeting enthusiasm for festivities that were not understood to the degree that Dugarov’s ambitions to demarcate Buryat space and revive Buryat culture desired. This was driven by his personal belief that the symbol of Geser could be used open up the rest of Buryat cultural revival and the “return of memory” of its *glubiny vekov* (deep time).

In the end the Buryats did not get a “reunified” ethnostate with the fall of the USSR and, as argued in chapter six, the *Geseriada* was a “weak” nationalism at most with little conscious political intent or danger to the new, albeit very unstable, Post-Soviet order. Yet, for a few brief summers they did get a “substitute for sovereignty” in the apt words of Roberte Hamayon, which today still continues to exert strong influences over conceptions of self-identity, as is witnessed in phenomena as diverse as *Altargana*’s *konkurs uligershinov* (competition of reciters), *Geseriada-2018* and the animated Geser feature film soon to be released. Thus, while it is correct that interest in the Buryat Geser in general, let alone as a means of (re)constructing Buryat identity, has largely been the preserve of a small, educated elite over the past century, today Geser is more significant for a diverse range of people than

ever because the efforts of this past history, however technocratic or naively idealistic, successfully embedded the idea that he *is* a central part of Buryat culture.

At the same time the role of Geser in Buryat history has been a serendipitous and even fragile one. A recurrent theme in this investigation has been the realisation of the contingent nature of the history of the relationship between Geser and the Buryats. Without Andrey Mikhaylov it is probable that neither Curtin nor Zhamtsarano nor anyone else would have ever taken down Manshuud's stories and they would have simply been lost, as is the case with his nephew Khartu Khabdaev who had forgotten them due to fear of getting in trouble in the Soviet Period. Even if it had merely been Curtin who had recorded them, then one must recall that his work was not known at all until late in the Soviet Period and never seems to have been read *prima facie* by any Buryat folklorist.

So too might one imagine that in 1940, under the “urgent need” to create a national epic, that *Shono Baatar* or *Alamzhi Mergen* might have just as easily been chosen instead of Geser. Had this been the case, then it is likely that none of the Unga epics except the fragments of Khangalov and R. F. Tugutov's short 1934 version from Petrov may have ever been taken down. So too might it be imagined that if the “consolidated text” had been finished earlier and the jubilee celebrated that this might have passed with little fanfare and thus never exerted the influence it did on Dugarov and others in the late 1980s to finally celebrate the forgotten jubilee. Moreover, as chapter five showed, in 1989-90 the jubilee was little more than a small academic affair: some books, “folkloric evenings” and a conference and could have easily never developed beyond this into anything like the *Geseriada* with its Geser park, banner and festivals. This draws the contingency of the history of Geser and the Buryats into sharp focus. Who knows what events may be happening right now that could affect the future of Buryat identity like this. Anything could happen. If there is a positive moral to be gained from this history, it is that even amidst a century of crisis, small decisions and occurrences add up and can have profound lasting effects.

Moreover, the importance of the Buryat Geser is paradoxical because of its political history. For instance, as odd as it may sound, Geser is *not* a Pan-Buryat symbol. His elevation to national hero of Buryat “deep time” is a product of Stalinism. The Buryat diasporas in China and Mongolia were not affected by this “national epic” drive, and even today in the international milieu of *Altargana*, Geser is still only a Pan-Buryat symbol for Russian Buryats. There appear to have been no attempts to encourage the diasporic populations to adopt him as a symbol. All of the young *ül'gershed* reciters I met in Ulan-Ude in 2016 were Russian Buryats. Let alone Geser, the *ül'ger* tradition does not seem to have been preserved as a key Buryat

cultural symbol among the Buryat diasporas. Nonetheless, it is likely that interest in its poetry, heroic figures, performance and “cult of reciters” would not have survived until now in Russia either, had these not become symbols of “national culture” in the 1940s-50s, which were then resurrected and reshaped for the *Geseriada* in the form of the *konkurs uligershinov*.

Furthermore, what is most unique about Geser is that he is perhaps the only major symbol of Buryat identity that is not at least implicitly Pan-Mongolic. The Old Mongol Script, *buuza*, the three manly sports, Chingis Khan – all of these are shared with other Mongolic peoples too. The importance of the Buryat *yookhor* dance as a distinctly Buryat cultural symbol would be an exception to this, of course, but Geser is the product of a discrete political history formed *against* Pan-Mongolism - one that over time has worn away but leaves behind an echo in the need to affirm the uniqueness of the Buryat Geser compared with other Mongol Gesers. Geser, as chapters two, three and four of this thesis show in detail, was a dangerous choice for a “national epic” because once details came to be known about this relatively unknown figure, he seemed to be shared widely with other Mongolic peoples and have strong Buddhist roots (let alone the possibility of him being a mythologised Chingis Khan). Poppe and others thus *had* to downplay these facts to claim that Geser was a wholly Buryat symbol and a popular mass-cultural anti-religious and anti-authoritarian hero.

As I outlined in chapter two, because so few others except Poppe and Sanzheev (and the condemned Zhamtsarano) knew much about the epic at the time, the “urgent need” to have one in order to match the “national cultures” of other Soviet ethnicities took priority over considerations. The spectre of Pan-Mongolism had but several years earlier during the Purges been utilised to liquidate the entire Buryat intelligentsia, yet in 1940-1 no one seems to have made any intimations that Geser might summon this spectre again. The “trial” of Geser ten years later in May 1948 caused this spectre to return, albeit with added “master plot” fantasies about the “Hitlerite spy” Poppe, because of his personal history working for the Nazis during WWII. However, this was driven by Kudryavtsev’s personal quest to persecute “bourgeois intellectuals” and imagined remnants of Pan-Mongolism. As I argued in chapter three, the “master plot” appears to have developed around this organically as those who were implicated, in efforts to survive and exonerate themselves, suddenly remembered the religious, “feudal” and other aspects of Geser such as his rarity in the BMASSR that had conveniently been forgotten in order to fulfil the demand for a “national epic”. In the end the buck stopped at Poppe (and in an indirect manner with Shulukshin) because they were not present and had already been made *personae non gratae*.

In this it is vital to emphasise just how influential in Buryat identity-formation the Stalinist imperative to prevent the “Buryat-Mongols” from identifying with other Mongols has been. This extended to the point of dismantling the BMASSR in 1937, changing the official dialect of the Buryat language in 1939 and removing the word Mongol from the title of the BMASSR in 1958. There are even echoes of this today, as is evinced by the recent case of Vladimir Khagdaev (see chapter seven). The only way to “save” Geser after his condemnation in May 1948 was to reinforce this ideal. In the 1953 “scientific session” on Geser G. D. Sanzheev instrumentalised the Zhdanov Directive to cut off accusations of Pan-Mongolism at the pass as the work of “cosmopolitans”. As I showed in chapter four, this echoed how the Zhdanov Doctrine had been used to attack the intercultural comparison of the Turkic epics in 1951 as Pan-Turkist ideology. Yet, in the case of Geser, the ideology was used to redeem instead of condemn.

From the Buryat cultural *dekada* of summer 1940 to the “scientific session” of 1953, the emphatic point of the “national cultures” period and its crises was that the Buryats *had* to be permitted to have something unique of their own. If not, then they did not have a history. They could sit as equals beside other Soviet nationalities, but only be part of a forbidden “feudal khanic” Pan-Mongol history or the colonial history of the “Great Russian chauvinism”. The claim made in 1940 was that no other variant of Geser was as old as that of the Buryats, yet to claim this Poppe in his “Chronology” essay engaged in a sleight of hand by applying an 8th century dating for the Tibetan hero to Manshuud’s “archaic” version of the Buryat epic’s existence in the 8th century. Very few have followed the literalist path of imagining (proto)Buryats in the 8th century already telling stories about Geser (see chapter five). Instead the idea that the figure of Geser is a latecomer atop much older “pre-feudal” strata preserved in oral traditions for a millennium – a small world of warring families - has been far more common.

Nonetheless, because of the abstract and unproveable nature of this “pre-feudal” claim and the lack of detailed evidence about Buryat pre-colonial history, even in 1940 opinions on the dating of the epic tradition (and therefore the history of the Buryats) could range from 500 and 600 to 1000 and 1200 years. In the end, as Dugarov (1998) admits, the millennial dating is simply a “convention sign” to represent great antiquity. Thus, the ritualised efforts that took place in June 1989 to affirm the millennial dating for the forgotten jubilee deliberately played down any contrary opinions and went for the upper limit of 1000 years compared with the jubilee plans from the 1940s, which had only been for 600 years. The “conventional sign” needed to appear to be a “deep time” that all experts agreed on. Affirming this was millennial

dating was necessity to emphasise the historical importance of Geser to Buryat identity and gain government support for the celebration.

Moreover, as I elaborated in detail in chapter two, the content and arguments of Poppe's "Chronology" essay are far from sound, as too are those of Zhamtsarano's (n.d.: 137f) unpublished yet vastly influential *Konspekt Uligerov* paper. Poppe's "Chronology" was a response to an "urgent need" which utilised ideas already half-formed in Zhamtsarano and so too in G. D. Sanzheev's needs to develop a Marxian anthropology of Buryat culture in "stages of development" from the primitive Ekhirit-Bulagat to the Khori epics which were downplayed for being "late" because they did not possess the magnitude of the Western Buryat epics. To this was later added the Unga epics, all the Geser variants of which were very close to the Mongol Script Geser – thus singling out Manshuud's *Abay Geser Khübüün* as utterly unique by default. Buryat folklore is structured around such assumptions even today and to either prove or disprove these old Soviet ideas would be impossible. The Western Buryat epics have long since ceased to exist "in the wild" in the form they had at the turn of the last century. Unless one were to invent a whole new theory of development using the slim extant data from this period, the best that might be achieved at present, as I have attempted to throughout this thesis, is simply to look for dissonance between the data and the ideological assumptions behind the Soviet Era theories. In many ways, the study of Geser has never really entirely left the Stalinist Era because of the value that the "stages of development" and the "Chronology" argument contain in creating a needed history for the Buryats to make up for a lack of written records and ongoing cultural amnesia and attrition.

Thus, if there is a core to the history of Geser and Buryat identity-formation after 1940 it is that of the "Chronology" essay and its influence. It is not the "cult of reciters", nor the beautiful language of the *ül'ger*, nor the brave deeds of the epic hero that might be converted into visual or theatrical art, but simply the Buryat *glubina vekov* "deep time" that Manshuud's variant in particular is thought to grant access to. What would Manshuud make of all this? One might recall from chapter one of this thesis, a small endnote hidden away in *A Journey to Southern Siberia* in which Curtin (1909: 147 n.1) records Manshuud as stating: "The story of *Gesir Bogdo* is the father of the world of stories. It is not as beautiful as some, but it is the greatest of all, and is true." This "father of the world of stories" would fit well to describe the afterlife and "bardic nationalist" position of importance granted to the "rhapsode" Manshuud. Yet so too might Poppe's "Chronology" essay's impact on Buryat identity over the past century be read at least as a "foster-father of the world of stories" of Geser and the Buryats that follow. After 1940 what one is studying from a political historian's perspective, to be frank, is the

legacy of the “Chronology” argument and its evolution, even if Poppe is not explicitly named, as I argued in chapter five of this thesis concerning the 1989 meeting of the geserologists and Writers Union of the BASSR.

Perhaps there is even room to call the “Chronology” foster-father argument’s legacy “beautiful”, even if it is not “true”. In the end, the value of myths of “deep time” and “invented traditions” is not that they are “false” (and ergo “bad”), but that they are very much necessary, especially for the colonised. It is hard, if not impossible, for *any people* to live without roots. In the introduction to this thesis I proposed that the Geser-Buryat relationship provides a unique case study or laboratory for studying the (re)creation of identity and the invention of tradition under crisis because of the wealth of ideological topography that it has passed through. Could this tell us something of value that could be applied beyond the Buryats to other peoples and the study of identity-formation?

The methodology I have followed in this thesis – that of emphasising the ongoing evolution or *-becoming* of Geser and the Buryats and the way in which ideology develops as a response to crisis and conditions knowledge – the *dispositif* – could indeed be applied to other peoples, other epics and other enduring symbols of identity in general that attach themselves to myths of “deep time”. When dealing with myths of “deep time” and “invented traditions” the historian has to be especially conscious of *why* and *how* reinventions and acts of reversible remembering and forgetting of the deep past of identity take place and the anachronisms that these can obscure. By emphasising how crisis and deterritorialisation brings with it the need to rediscover and reassert who one is back to the beginning using available tools and material, the identity-formation process comes to appear as a form of immunisation, a defence system against an uncertain world that has to reinvent itself to navigate new and unexpected crises. What is most important is how such acts often leave certain facts out in order to construct these defence systems. These could be, as I have shown with Geser, the fact that the epic was shared with many other cultures, that it was relatively unknown by the populace in the BASSR, that theories on its antiquity could vary greatly. The construction of identity, especially under crisis and urgent need, is always troubled by inconvenient facts, alternative opinions and diverse understandings and appropriations. All of these need to be taken into consideration.

As I have argued since the introduction, the key to how identity and crisis are intrinsically connected lies with the legacy of the ideas of Johann Herder in relation to how “culture” and identity have historically been thought and continue to be thought. Herder (1891) was not objectively wrong that the shared symbols peoples constitute themselves with are always disappearing and evolving and need to be reclaimed. Herder reformulated the idea of “culture”

in the midst of a perceived crisis of German linguistic identity and saw similar crises everywhere in the imperialisms of the 19th century. Romantic nationalism became a popular response to this imperial situation and increasing desires for self-determination by the colonised (Harvilahti 1996: 38, 2014: 18-24). But this concern about romantic culture and the appeal of epic literature for grounding a shared “deep time” did not simply end when the colonial empires of that century crumbled in the 20th.

In the case of the USSR, the “national epic” only developed as a central part of culture in the late 1930s, which of course was also the period in which the uprooting of peoples by collectivisation and their modernisation and liquidation of the native elites who had built the ASSRs profoundly changed both “proletarian” and elite cultural aspirations. With the death of Stalin, the “national epics” ceased to be important for creating new Soviet-friendly versions of ethnicities, but in the 1990s they returned because they were an available symbol for a shared “deep time” when so much had been lost. The need for “sustained acts of self-reappropriation”, to utilise Matušík’s (1993: 69) term I discussed in chapter six in relation to the Post-Soviet awareness of the need to regain something “authentic” in the 1990s, is however, not new. In fact, it likely existed before Herder’s transformation of the term “culture” and its binding to loss and the importance of epic literature to remedy this.

By studying this need, perhaps one might gain some insight beyond merely the “national epic” into why, for instance, today the forces of globalisation are provoking a resurgence of the need to rediscover identity and “tradition”. From popular enthusiasm for *Ancestry* DNA tests, which can now be linked up to *Spotify* so that one can access one’s ancestral musical cultures (Holbrook 2018), to far more noxious phenomena such as the techno-savvy Islamicist fundamentalism of Daesh and the recent online white supremacist “alt right” with their endless Greco-Roman white marble statue avatars, the very forces of the global informational *dispositif* that threaten to erase old boundaries and cultural identities at the same time are used to (re)create them.

It was Herder’s central hope – as both the father of today’s ethnonationalisms and multiculturalisms – that all people might grow to respect each other’s cultures and become brothers rather than colonising and destroying each other’s traditions. Perhaps indeed this is far too naively Utopian and suppresses the history of how “cultures” have been and continue to be formed through borrowing from, influencing and conquering each other. Nonetheless, it is vital to understand that without the need to navigate crisis there is no “culture”, however potentially dangerous myths of “deep time” might be if affixed to aggressive and resentful desires for cultural “purity”. From Romantic Nationalism, Nazism and the Zhdanov Directive

to the present these are always likely to return, no matter what the ideology is or the technology that is available. Greater mutual appreciation, respect and curiosity for traditions and acceptance of their necessary ongoing “invention” is perhaps the only real medicine for the tendency of crisis to provoke identities of fear and paranoid territorialism. The deep problem, of course, is simply that of the ever-mutating nature of cultural memory and the fact that nothing in the world can remain long without change. Matthew Baldwin’s (2016) observations using the film *Memento* to reflect on cultural memory which I described in the introduction to this thesis likely correct – everything is recalled differently from moment to moment. We can only try to compile and recompile again to survive and try to manage some semblance of who we think we are. Only by accepting this perennial and disorientating aspect of the human condition stoically, and with good humour, and by realising that everyone else is in the same boat too might we begin to get somewhere.

Thus, Buryat “reversible forgetting” and “sustained acts of self-appropriation” are testament to amazing acts of survival through so many uprootings and crises. In truth it is astounding that anything of Geser and Buryat culture has survived at all in the last century, let alone that today there is growing interest in reconstituting the *üil’ger* as organic oral performance using material from the few texts that were fortunate enough to have been written down by folklorists. Thus, one must then emphasise the importance of and applaud the efforts of those Buryat scholars who have given their lives over to the study of the Buryat Geser. We must celebrate those like A. I. Ulanov who worked to redeem the epic and quietly kept interest in it alive after the 1950s, when the oral traditions died out, and lived to see the “banner of Geser” enter Ulan-Ude in the 1990s, after he himself had played a major role in vindicating its importance in June 1989. Thus, while Bair Dugarov largely invented the *Geseriada*, without the patient work of Ulanov and his authority to legitimise the millennial claim, the Buryat Geser epic tradition may have languished and might have been wholly forgotten by the end of the Soviet Era. Yet, Dugarov perhaps managed the impossible: he transformed his father’s fragmented and half-forgotten stories about Geser into an entire nature reserve for future generations. So too must Burchina and Khundaeva and many others now deceased be included for their service to preserving and researching this epic tradition when so few others have.

2. Some Discoveries.

I would now like to turn to some of the key things this thesis has uncovered that could lead to further projects and explorations. One of the most important tasks that this thesis has begun is the reassessment of what one might reassemble of the nature of and social role played by *üil’ger*

at the turn of the twentieth century. The reason for this is that the 19th-early 20th centuries function almost as a small “deep time”, or imagined timeless “golden age” for the Buryat *ül’ger* because of how rapidly these oral traditions disappeared and how important especially Manshuud has been as a symbol of rhapsodic “bardic nationalism”.

In the first chapter I attempted to get as close as possible to the “real” Manshuud beneath the accrued mythological layers of the past century in order to understand him in the context of his own time and the ideological lenses of those who recorded his epics. For this I looked closely at overlooked primary sources on Manshuud Emegeev and the Late Russian Empire in order to peel away the mythology that has come to surround the *ül’gershen* and his *Abay Geser Khübüün* cycle in subsequent periods. Through archival data, Zhamtsarano’s travel diaries and Jeremiah Curtin’s forgotten “version” of Manshuud the image that emerges is one radically different from that of the *ül’gershen* as Homeric “rhapsode”, communist “hero of labour”, or Post-Soviet image as primordial “shaman”, which have strongly coloured how Manshuud is viewed today. He was likely at least nominally Orthodox Christian; he could construct very different versions of Geser and had incorporated tropes from Geser into other stories; he was illiterate but seemed to venerate the power that reading and writing gave to people. Yet even locally, and as the “best singer” in the community, he was almost a nobody at the bottom of the Buryat feudal system, who, if it had not been for the Mikhaylovs, would have passed away largely unnoticed and his amazing capacity of storymaking with him. Nonetheless, without anyone else to compare his specific style of “chain-epic” creation with, it remains impossible to determine just how unique a reciter he really was. Perhaps there were many Manshuuds, perhaps there was only ever one, who simply listened to many different singers and developed a unique talent over forty years.

As well as Manshuud, I also attempted to begin the work of divesting the weight of Soviet Era epistemological values about Geser himself, which still colour the study of Buryat epic and identity. Today one can still find unfounded ideas from this era being repeated by thinkers such as Roberte Hamayon (1990: 185; 2004: 297, 2014: 3) such as that Geser was an anti-religious hero and thus lamas banned the tradition. So too in the introduction did I spend much time “setting the scene” for the study by evaluating Hamayon’s “ritualist” theories about the origins of the *ül’ger* and hunting, which seem to have little basis. Only by making such efforts might we begin to get somewhere and see these the Manshuud and Geser of 1900 in the light of their own *dispositif*. In the end, even though his ideas were formed by Soviet Era assumptions of primordial communist culture, A. I. Ulanov (1974) is likely very much correct in his belief that the *ül’ger* had not always been the tens of thousands of line form which were

encountered during the late 19th-early 20th century. The problem is that we cannot really establish what these may have been before this time any more than we can make general statements about the epic's connection with hunting and the Pleiades even in the late 19th century. One is left with fragments and must do our best to read them as best we can in relation to the time in which they were recorded.

More than anything what this should point out is the need for “new” theories about the development and content of the *ül'ger* tradition and comparisons with other traditions, which I hope will soon begin to be made as interest increases in this aspect of Buryat culture. Currently almost nothing has been written about the tradition in a long time outside of the now sadly declining circle of Buryat folklorists in Ulan-Ude. One hopes that as the “dispersal” *dispositif* expands and there is a greater awareness of newer literary, anthropological and historical methodologies from around the world through the internet, that Buryats might begin to apply them to studying the history and contents of the *ül'ger*.

There are also several other future projects that this thesis also suggests. In light of the different chronological path that the condemnation and redemption of the Geser took in comparison with the epics of the Turkic ASSRs, much value might be found in a future scholarly project in which the political history of multiple epic narratives from the former USSR. Because they have passed through the same four *dispositifs* much might be learned about epic and national identity as a whole. A similar comparative study on the topic of the largely forgotten “new epics” that turned the language and symbols of the old epic traditions towards the praising of Marxist heroes might also be of much merit as almost nothing has been written on this curious phase in Soviet literature.

Furthermore, as has been reiterated many times during this thesis, much of the Unga Geser material remains unpublished today, and had it not been for Darima Burchina's 1990 book *Geseriada Zapadnykh Buryat* (The Geseriad of the Western Buryats), perhaps no one would know about the epics of Torojev, Zhatukhaev and others at all. I strongly hope that in coming years that these see the light of day. Reading these forgotten *ül'gernüüd* in the archives of the BNTs in Ulan Ude was perhaps the fondest memory I have of writing this thesis and I am only sad that I was not allowed to make copies of these works, but I plan to work on them at a later stage.

In writing this thesis I was also struck by the fact that so little has been written on the *Geseriada* and its legacy today. Although some amateur documentaries have been made about the *Geseriada* (see chapter six), no Buryat historian has written a book on it. It is very much likely that a great deal more material relating to the *Geseriada* period ensconced in local papers

and archives and private collections than I was able to find in the few brief months I spent in Buryatia. Although the *Geseriada* produced a great deal of popular enthusiasm at the time, it has almost entirely been forgotten. As of the present I have not heard if anyone is writing a book for its 25th anniversary in 2020.

Similarly, there is little written from an academic perspective currently on the overcoding of the landscape with the narratives of Geser in Oka, as in the Osa region in Irkutsk, where the *Geseriada-18* was recently held. The same is true for Daraashyn Dabaan's *serge* posts. Here the very hill itself is a unique case study of the complex historical layers and myths which can amass around a landmark, especially in relation to the history of colonialism. Most curious of all is the Primorskiy combine farm's enduring legacy. I only discovered its existence by accident due to Nikolaev's interview concerning *Geseriada-95*. To my knowledge no anthropological or historical scholarship has been published on this fascinating and unique community. I would be more than happy to be disproven on this matter because it is so surprising that its existence and history could have avoided notice, except for in a few local Irkutsk newspapers.

In the same way the contents of the seventh chapter of this thesis, aside from interviews with academics and reciters, are all serendipitous finds from local newspapers, blogs and other rich sources of contemporary Buryat culture online. It was absolutely necessary to include all this, not only to raise awareness about the current state of Buryat language, academia and the lack of recognition by UNESCO, but also because there are so many positive efforts being made by those trying to preserve Buryat culture. Regional *konkurs* networks, NGOs and especially the internet have opened up possibilities that are growing by the day: language teaching aids and online translations of Geser material, political blogging, a Geser cartoon feature in the works.

This seventh chapter could only be written in *medias res* and with a journalist turn because of its immediacy. Shortly before I submitted this thesis I learned that on the 27-8th of October 2018 several Buryat poets, including Yesugey Sunduev, gathered at the statue of Geser in Ulan-Ude in order to perform a reading in both Russian and Buryat of the Geser variant of Papa Tüshemilov. Later, on the evening of the 28th, a talk by the *skazitel'nitsa* (female storyteller) Buligta Ubraeva was held about the *ül'gershen* by the "Zugaasha" society at the House of Friendship of Peoples (*Dom Druzhy Narodov*). 2019 is likely to bring at least some effort to mark what will be the 170th birthday of Manshuud Emegeev, which was recently noted in passing by Sakhiltarova (2018) in her article on the *konkurs uligershinov* at *Altargana-2018*. So too will it be imperative to track whether any of the six proposals made at Osa in July this

year, mentioned at the end of chapter seven, come to fruition. Small events for Geser appear and disappear almost unnoticed. A Geser-blog to record updates like this might be a good project for someone in the near future to undertake because otherwise much of it will go unchronicled. It is my express hope that this thesis has begun at least the rudimentary work to bring to light the ongoing value of Geser to Buryat culture and that much more might soon follow it.

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