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## **Construction of a National Emblem, Recomposition of Identities and “Heroic” Millenarianism in Post-Soviet Buryatia: A Reappraisal**

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In Siberia the collapse of the Soviet Union has stimulated the awakening of ethnic consciousness that had begun with perestroika among minority ethnic groups. It has given rise to various attempts to revitalize cultural specificities that had been eradicated during a long period of standardization according to the Soviet model. The Soviet model implied that nationalities were classified by their numbers and way of life. In consequence, the revival movements largely differ depending on the size and economic activities of the ethnic group.

The change has especially prompted strong minorities who have both an autonomous republic of their own and valuable natural resources, such as Yakut and Buryats, to commit themselves to redefine identities and claim sovereignty.

Various aspects combined to give the debates substance: remoteness from the central power in Moscow; coexistence of various ethnic groups scattered over a wide territory, more or less mixed with each other and with Russians and more or less acculturated; memory of having been a place of exile in Tsarist as well as Soviet times; predominance of Russians over any local ethnic group, including the one after which the autonomous republic is named; presence of strong local intelligentsias.

In addition, the local Russians, a number of whom are descendants of exiles, feel themselves at the same time somehow resistant to the central power in Moscow, long-standing inhabitants of these severe, distant countries, and open to relations with other East Asian countries. They live mostly in towns and are aware of the availability of local resources for industrial exploitation, a fact that gives credibility to their claims for more autonomy.

On the other hand, rural areas are mostly inhabited by small indigenous ethnic groups who, because of the harsh halt of state support in connection with decollectivization, must suddenly resurrect half-forgotten traditional techniques of self-sufficient hunting and cattle-breeding.

In between are several types of indigenous elites who have all received Soviet education and are now more or less wavering between cooperation with local Russians and revitalization of their own traditions.

I shall confine myself to analyzing a process that occurred during the past decade in Buryatia. It was an attempt to build symbolic references for a national identity in a new political perspective, at a level that had been unknown before. It was focused on the making

of the most famous epic hero of the Buryats, Geser, into a national cultural emblem for the Republic of Buryatia. This paper is both a continuation of previous studies on this topic and a reappraisal of their results, in the light of new materials.<sup>1</sup> In fact, scrutinizing the unfolding of this process over the past decade leads me to question its relation to the ethnic identity of the Buryats as such and to link it instead to an overall recomposition of identities on a territorial basis.

It is to be noted that a similar process did not occur in Yakutia, while some typical features of this type of symbolic construction were observed in steppe areas of Central Asia among Turkic ethnic groups famous for their heroic epic traditions. Without starting a comparison, I would like to point out, through the case of the Buryat epic hero, how a symbolic procedure was implemented to face a political problem in the post-Soviet context.

### A BRIEF HISTORICAL REMINDER

The Buryats are a middle-sized minority belonging to the Mongolian linguistic family, living around Lake Baikal. They were integrated into the Russian empire in the seventeenth century as separate tribes who had not experienced a state organization of their own before. They were then ruled as minority ethnic groups coming under a same colonial framework but administratively distinct. In addition, they were unevenly subjected to Russification and Christianization—more in the areas west of the Baikal, less in the east where they were, rather, subjected to Mongolian Buddhist influence. As a result, they did not develop a common identity in the early period of colonization by the Russian empire.

Buryat self-consciousness took shape during the nineteenth century as a reaction against the increasing inflow of Russian peasants searching for land. It was reinforced by the coming of monks from neighboring Mongolia to spread Buddhism in their language. Buryat ethnicity was officially acknowledged in the early years of the Soviet Union along with its peculiar relationship to Mongolia. The Buryat, who had helped to spread the Bolshevik movement in Mongolia, were granted an autonomous republic: it was created in 1923 as a component of the multiethnic Soviet state and it was named Buryat-Mongolia.

For the first time Buryat tribes and territories were gathered together. However this was a short-lived situation. In 1937, at the end of a decade marked by compulsive Russification and purges against presumed nationalisms, the Buryat territories were dismantled and the autonomous republic sharply reduced. After the war, in 1958, it was renamed Buryatia instead of Buryat-Mongolia.

Today 249,500 Buryats (out of a total population of 421,600 according to the census of 1989) live in the Republic of Buryatia, where they are largely outnumbered by Russians: they hardly make up a quarter of the total population of the Republic called by their name. Other Buryats live in the territories separated in 1937 and since then organized as autonomous regions directly administered by the Russian Federation: 77,300 in Ust'-Orda in Irkutsk Province, 66,100 in Aga in Chita Province. The collapse of the Soviet regime created a void that made it possible to think about reunifying all territories with Buryat population. Territorial reunification (as a political idea if not as a real project) has played a part from the very start of the movement I am going to comment on.

## 2. THE CELEBRATION OF THE EPIC HERO GESER

A multifaceted celebration of the epic hero Geser as a national figure took place in post-Soviet Buryatia officially from 1990 to 1995.<sup>2</sup> However its potential role as a national figure was already latent in intellectual and artistic circles even before the change of regime.<sup>3</sup> And its celebration is continuing today in other forms that will be detailed below.

Here is the way the celebration was organized. As early as 1990, a version of the epic of Geser (the Ekhirit-Bulagat version recorded by Zamcarano from the bard Emegenej Manshuud-Manshut Imegenov in Russian spelling in 1906),<sup>4</sup> was proclaimed a thousand years old and a large-scale commemoration of its millennium was planned for 1995. This version was claimed to be the most ancient and, more importantly, the only genuinely Buryat version of this epic, notwithstanding the fact it is widely known in its lands of origin, Tibet and Mongolia. The Ekhirit-Bulagat live primarily in the Ust'-Orda region of the Province of Irkustk in the west of the Baikal, outside the autonomous republic.

At the same time, a full series of events dedicated to both the hero and the epic was launched to punctuate the five-year preparation of the commemoration: both popular and academic books were published,<sup>5</sup> cultural and artistic manifestations were set up. Festivals called "Geser's Games" (*Geserei naadan* or *naadam*) were organized each summer in the meantime, i.e. from 1991 to 1995. They took place successively in the homelands of traditional bards of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, famous for their way of performing this epic. The banner of Geser was carried ceremoniously from one selected place to the next. The itinerary of these festivals symbolically outlined an area encompassing the three Buryat-inhabited territories dismantled in 1937.

These festivals combined elements of shamanist and Buddhist traditions, along with national ritual "games." Thus, the banner of Geser was "animated" the way a shaman's drum was formerly, a visit to a Buddhist sanctuary was paid and traditional wrestling and archery contests (*sur xarbaan*) took place.

As initially decided, a great celebration of the hero and his millennial epic story was held with the aim of consecrating the whole process. It took place in the framework of an international Forum-Festival organized in the capital Ulan-Ude in July 1995,<sup>6</sup> in the vicinity of which sacred poles dedicated to the hero and his horses were erected.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, a national natural reservation park called Geser's land (*Geserei oron* in Buryat, *Kraj Gesera* in Russian) was inaugurated at the same time in the heights of Oka valley at the intersection with Tunka valley. This is an area where many geographical features (peaks, rocks, etc.) are named after Geser's deeds and considered to be traces of his steps or fights.<sup>8</sup> The place called Ulaan shuluu "Red Stone" supposedly preserves the print of Geser's or his comrades-in-arms' blood, etc. Significantly, the local population does not belong to the Ekhirit-Bulagat, i.e., to the tribe whose version was said to be a thousand years old and which mostly lives outside the autonomous republic. The inhabitants are called Khongodors, a tribal name that encompasses a variety of groups who emigrated from Mongolia after internecine wars in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. The epic narrative is hardly known among them and no specific Khongodor version was ever recorded. This is a seismic and volcanic mountain area most of which is sparsely and not permanently inhabited.

On the other hand, it abounds in valuable mineral resources.<sup>9</sup> The building of a sanctuary devoted to Geser was started near the village of Khuzhir. In the minds of the organizers, the whole park is intended to foster ecological and moral education among the youth (*Kraj Gêsêra 1995*).

My previous papers ended with questions about the meaning of the whole process. Apparently the claim to reunify the three areas of Buryat population vanished with the advance of the 1990s. It was not mentioned during the 1995 celebration (as far as I know) and, in my opinion, the meaning of that celebration was essentially cultural.

With the passing of time and thanks to supplementary information, my analysis has deepened and leads me now to a more complex appreciation of the process focused on Geser. In this paper, I shall first emphasize some political aspects of the symbolic construction and its context. Then I shall argue that it can be analyzed as a pseudo-commemorative movement whose only pretext is related to Buryat culture but whose actual relevance extends beyond the frame of Buryat ethnicity and relates primarily to the national identity of the post-Soviet Buryat Republic. Evidence for this is provided by the unfolding of the process throughout the decade. Finally I shall suggest that Geser as an heroic character is well suited to such a quasi-messianic role and that the commemoration process conformed to Soviet stereotypes.

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Among the factors that played a part in the process, the first is the fact that it was initiated by the government and straight away taken up by a part of the Buryat intelligentsia.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the process was set in motion by the Russian-dominated government of the Buryat Republic in 1990 at the same time it proclaimed its sovereignty. The Supreme Soviet decided to create a special section called Geseriad at the Ministry of Culture on the 15th of November of that year and to place the process of organizing festivals under the aegis of the President of the Cabinet. To put it another way, the matter was launched and assumed throughout at the highest official level of the Republic, with the apparent aim of obtaining the support of the Buryat minority in order to better assert land rights and claims. Significantly, the dismemberment of the Buryat territories achieved in 1937 was declared illegal by the Supreme Soviet of the Republic in June 1993 (Stroganova 1999: 120, n. 30), that is, after it had been informally contested and prior to the celebration.

Actually, the government decision was inspired by the obvious fame of Geser in Buryat intellectual circles, as shown by the proliferation of works published almost without a break during previous decades (editions of several versions, records, studies and comments of various kinds). It was almost immediately reappropriated and carried out by the Buryat intelligentsia, who thus proved both nationalistic with respect to culture and realistic with respect to politics. The Buryat branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Buryat Union of Writers managed to jointly organize first the conference that initially asserted the millennial age of the epic, then the festivals, press campaign, publications and other manifestations that followed.

However, after the 1995 celebration, a confused feeling emerged among Buryat

intellectuals that the whole process was finally missing its goals.<sup>11</sup> Today, contrary to this feeling and to my first appraisal made under its influence, this seeming failure has not put an end to the symbolic construction around Geser. As a matter of fact, publications and conferences continued.<sup>12</sup> A jubilee dedicated to the bard whose version was proclaimed millennial, Manshuud Imegenov, was celebrated in December 1999 in Ulan-Ude. Besides, there are now at least thirty Geser sanctuaries in various areas with Buryat population. To crown it all, the construction of a large “ethno-cultural” Institute with a Buddhist centre and on the top of it a sanctuary dedicated to Geser has been officially planned.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the Geser sanctuary should be built on top of the Buddhist centre questions the relationship between the hero and Buddhism, as well as that between the government and Buddhism.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth stressing here that, apparently, the glorification of the hero and his epic remained essentially confined to Buryat intellectual and artistic circles and did not become popular among the masses, especially in rural areas. Although the scarcity of information makes it difficult to really appreciate the situation, it seems that the average Buryats did not adhere to the Geser movement (if they ever supported the very idea to begin with), and that there was no echo of it even in the Tunka region where millenarian trends not related to Geser were nonetheless recorded at the very same time, i.e., 1994–1995 (Stroganova 1999). In her paper, Stroganova insists that millenarist ideas were found before in this area, and she mentions that similar events had been recorded by Vampilon in 1919 and Zhigmidon in 1933 (Stroganova 1999: 114, 119).

Now, one may wonder why the political authorities of the Republic strove to promote Buryat cultural identity, why they chose Geser among other possible figures and why they continued to support the process after the initial apparent claim to the dismembered lands proved to be merely utopian—good to think about but not to be really carried out.<sup>15</sup> The answer to the second question may help to answer the other two.

Beforehand, it is worthy of note that the very decision of assigning a politically important function to an epic hero was not a specific innovation of the Buryat Republic. It is well known that epic traditions have had and still have a prominent ideological—therefore possibly also political—role in the history of Central Asian nomadic societies.

Thus, similar commemorations of epic heroes were held previously. A politically important one was decided already under the Soviet regime, that of the Kalmyk heroic epic called *Zhangar* whose five hundredth anniversary was celebrated in 1940. A festival was devoted to its 550 years in 1990, just after the change of regime. Other peoples of Central Asia also celebrated the millennium of their respective heroic epics in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup>

As for Geser, he had been made into an emblem of the Buryat national culture during and after World-War II as a reaction against the enforced Russification of the 1930s. The hero and his epic were then an object of acute debate.<sup>17</sup> They were condemned in 1948–49 for exaltation of Mongolian nationalism and feudalism. A conference was held for their rehabilitation in 1953.<sup>18</sup>

## CULTURAL ASPECTS

Thus, the process built around Geser had all possible assets to be successful as a

symbolic construction of a national figure, especially since it was rooted in epic tradition. Epic tradition is in principle the most appropriate base to ensure its legitimacy. In addition, the selected hero was the most famous one, and had already been erected into an emblem.

As a matter of fact, the epics have specific properties that may account for their role as ideological vehicles and that of their heroes as cultural national emblems: it is the normative, ritualized character of epics that makes the ideological stakes of their heroes legitimate. The usual name for epic in Buryat is *ül'ger*, which literally means "model, example, reference for imitation". The epic heroes are considered not to be ancestors,<sup>19</sup> but imaginary characters who embody ideal values. Listening to epics is currently seen as the best way to train oneself to imitate the heroes' behavior. The whole performance itself is submitted to strict conditions that liken it to a ritual. It is held to be symbolically efficacious just the way a ritual is.<sup>20</sup>

Such features make it meaningful that epic heroes are selected for the role of cultural national figures rather than other types of figures, for instance, mythical ancestors, historical famous leaders or others. Actually, to support the construction of a national figure, the Buryat intelligentsia in charge of the process throughout the decade did not address the figure of Bukha Nojon, Lord Bull, the founder of the main native Buryat tribe (the Ekhirit-Bulagat), nor did they address Gengis Khan, the great unifying figure of the medieval Mongols and the emblematic reference of post-communist Mongolia.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, consistent with ascribing to him a history of a thousand years, the Buryat intelligentsia praised the hero Geser as a medieval warrior. While they attempted to "historicize" his feats (assigning them a place in space and time), they also attempted to keep his figure mythical, as shown by the way he is portrayed on banners and posters: he is dressed in full armor, brandishing a weapon, riding a winged<sup>22</sup> steed jumping over clouds. This combining of historical deeds and mythical personality must be considered intentional. By contrast, the symbolic reconstruction of Gengis Khan tends to make his figure pass from historical to mythical and resemble a Buddhist deity in present-day Mongolia (Aubin 1996). Be that as it may, both Geser and Gengis Khan have nowadays become central figures of merchandising (for instance, labels of vodka) as well as of national celebrations in their respective countries.

Now, if the choice of an epic hero to support cultural identity is usual in this type of society, the choice of Geser from amongst Buryat heroes is more intriguing since he is a borrowed figure, whereas genuine Buryat figures were available—*Alamzha mergen* for instance. This also must be considered intentional.

The name Geser was adapted long ago from the Latin Caesar, as were also the German Kaiser and the Russian Tsar. It was adopted as the name of an epic hero first in Tibetan (Stein 1959), then it passed to Mongolia and from Mongolia to Buryatia. The name apparently left no trace on its way through Central Asia, although Turkic populations living there also have strong epic traditions with powerful heroes. The Buryats are aware that their hero is shared with the Mongols and Tibetans, but all of them seem to be unaware of the Latin origin of the name.

In Tibet, Geser is the only epic hero, and he became the champion of Buddhism as the centuries went by. By contrast, in Mongolia and Buryatia, Geser is merely the greatest

among other heroes. The Mongol Geser supports Buddhism in a very similar way to the Tibetan,<sup>23</sup> while the Buryat Geser is either indifferent or outright hostile to Buddhism, depending on the version. These differences illustrate to what extent borrowings result from selective strategies implemented by borrowing cultures. Thus the Buryats borrowed Geser while making his figure the reverse of its Tibetan and Mongol models—reverse with respect to Buddhism.<sup>24</sup> The absence of any Buddhist elements in the Ekhirit-Bulagat version of the epic was put forward by the Buryat intelligentsia as evidence for its genuineness and historical precedence over every other version. It served as a powerful argument for proclaiming it millennial. This feature must also be considered intentional.

At this point, I would like to make a series of remarks. Although the topic of the celebration was officially (and formally) the millennium of the epic text, the whole process was focused on the single figure of the hero, Geser.

Significantly the narrative contents of the millennial version are ignored, except for the very general idea that the hero is a warrior fiercely defending the independence of his people against all kinds of domination and invasion.

Actually, the millennial version depicts a dualistic society, divided into two camps that indefinitely fight each other in spite of the periodic victories of the hero's camp over the adversary. Geser is only the first leader of the victorious camp, who initiates the series of victories to be continued by his sons. By no means is his figure in this version that of a unifier of lands and peoples, as required by his role as an emblem in the process examined here.

By contrast, Geser is clearly a unifying leader in all other versions, that recount how he repels various invaders. Such narrative contents would have made them more appropriate to support the ideal of self-defense at the higher political level assigned to the hero. However these other versions were permeated with features praising Buddhism and marked by Mongol influence, which would have pointed to both their later origin and their less genuinely Buryat conception.

Anyway, no attention was paid to the story of the hero and his deeds. What mattered was not performing the epics but portraying the hero. Precisely, the insistence on his image alone and the very way it was pictured allow us to better understand the role assigned to his figure and to assume that the whole process was primarily aimed at building a national emblem as such, that is, so to speak, a purely emblematic figure.

As described above, the hero looks like a warrior of the past, whose intervention by the end of the twentieth century is totally unlikely to really happen. This precludes any interpretation of his figure as that of an actual possible leader. This rather makes his image only impersonate the very principle of an ideal of self-defense. Then, this principle is at the same time shown to be rooted in ancient times and suggested to be ideally valid, thus potentially (re-)actualizable. For this reason, we may consider that the Buryat intelligentsia in charge of the process very aptly strove to combine the respective properties of historical evidence with those of symbolic flexibility, or, to put it another way, to combine old events with utopian mythical figures.

Basically, this type of joint reference to history and myth makes the whole process similar to the development of a kind of “messianic expectation,” according to the current



understanding of this expression. As defined by Gerschom Scholem for instance, "messianic expectation" consists in "appealing to an idealized past to draw from it an idealized vision of the future." Applied to the process focused on Geser, this definition means that it was somehow necessary that Geser had been imagined in the past, so as to be expected eventually in the future. It was necessary that his ability to defend his people had been demonstrated formerly so that it might eventually be benefited from again. Moreover, it was necessary to root the memory of his heroic value as far as possible in the past so as to increase the strength of this memory in popular consciousness. All this also suggests that what matters in such a process is expectation itself rather than the carrying out of something expected, that is, its power as a symbolic construction.

In addition, Geser has himself some messianic features in most versions spread among the Buryats. He had been sent from heaven to earth by his father, whose name is Khurmast-Khirmos (derived from Ahura Mazda). His mission is to (re-)establish peace and order on the earth—in this a Christian influence has often been suspected.<sup>25</sup> He is never the elder son, but either the second of two (as in the Ekhirit-Bulagat version) or the second of three (as in all other versions). Not to be the elder seems to be a privileged social position for this type of mission, since one may then represent the legitimate line without being in charge of having all its rules respected.<sup>26</sup>

From another point of view, one may underline that the whole process was organized in a typically Soviet manner and reflected the typically Soviet taste for commemoration,<sup>27</sup> insofar as commemoration may be a means of compensation for frustration. This Soviet touch is not surprising since the process was conducted by Soviet-educated Buryats who had become familiar with their ethnic traditions through ethnographic literature rather than from direct experience. Only the commemorated figure and some related details were different. Other than political leaders, the minority ethnic groups had until then mostly abstractions to admire and identify with: the "ideal reindeer-breeder," the "ideal dressmaker," etc.

It is in the light of the global context that I would like now, by way of conclusion, to reconsider the whole process. Taking into account its unfolding over the past decade leads me to reappraise it as the building of symbolic replies to political problems that were unsolvable and acknowledged as such.

As a matter of fact, the process started in a context of sudden political change, which was experienced as the opening up of a wide space to many kinds of claims, and first of all to social, political and ethnic recompositions and redefinitions. No change of this kind occurred. The initial and apparently major claim—that of reuniting dismantled territories—had vanished before the 1995 celebration. The erection of Geser as a national emblem remained confined to the political and intellectual authorities of the Republic instead of becoming really popular among the Buryat population, so that it may seem irrelevant to their ethnic consciousness. It is probable that the enthusiastic collaboration of the Buryat intellectual and artistic elites was also a way for them to maintain their privileged position and power.

Is the outcome for all that insignificant for Buryat ethnicity? Two concrete results can be mentioned. On one hand, the ancientness of their epic tradition has been officially proclaimed, which amounts to turning the oral culture of the Buryats into both history and literature. On the other hand, a national natural park has been built and given a Buryat

name. This amounts to assuming the respect for the natural world and species inherent to the traditional way of life of the Buryats and to promoting it to a worldwide level of ecological philosophy. Thus, the millennium and the park come as obvious revaluations compared to the former denigration of Buryat traditions as more or less wild and backward by colonial and Soviet powers.

Through these revaluations of Buryat values, the process appears to offer the Buryat population an oblique strategy of adaptation to their status as a minority instead of real changes in their situation. They are granted a positive view of their culture as a support for a collective identity that encompasses their own, while they have no other choice than to adapt themselves as individuals.

Moreover, beyond its role in enhancing Buryat self-consciousness, the process appears to have been also aimed at building a national identity at a higher level, that of the Republic of Buryatia as a political unit. It is as though, through the process set in motion by the government of Buryatia to celebrate Geser, the Russian majority had adopted the cultural image of the Buryat minority to serve as an emblem of their Republic and a support for their unrealistic dream of independence from the central power in Moscow. In other words, the process amounted to recomposing collective identity on a foundation other than ethnic in post-Soviet Buryatia.<sup>28</sup> The logic of identity appears more or less to correspond to the absence of real sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> It also accounts for the involvement of the elites, since it saves them from searching for legitimacy. Finally, the enlarged, recomposed identity searched for explains why Geser was the most appropriate figure although he was ultimately a borrowed figure in Buryat tradition. Precisely, borrowing both allows for and renders necessary the transformation of traditions.

## NOTES

- 1) Hamayon 1996 (English translation by Caroline Humphrey 1998) and 2000.
- 2) The [1996]-1998 paper also attempts to account for the choice of an epic hero to support the emergence of a nationalist movement in the early 1990s. Faced with both the possibility and the necessity of redefining their identity and status, the Buryats had no obvious religious tradition to refer to. Their traditional shamanism had been squeezed from the centre and pushed towards the periphery of the society by two world religions, Christianity in Cisbaikalia, Buddhism in Transbaikalia. Christianity was excluded as a support for Buryat identity because of its identification with Russian colonization. Although Buddhism had been propagated by Mongol monks and perceived as less artificial than Christianity, it was perceived as shared with too many other Asiatic people to be appropriated in an original way by the Buryats, and in addition it was claimed by the Tibetans to support their national consciousness. As to shamanism, although it was reviving, it appeared to be but an addition of private practices irrelevant from a political point of view, by contrast with what happened in Yakutia, where the question of a national role for shamanism has been posed.
- 3) For instance, the issue of *Literaturnyj Irkutsk* (the Journal of the Organization of Writers of Irkutsk, Federation of Russia) dated July 1989, is devoted to the Buryat people as “one of the most powerful Siberian peoples” nowadays. The illustration shown on the first page represents the hero Geser

- riding a horse seemingly flying in the air. See also note 18.
- 4) It was first published in Cyrillic transcription by Zhamcarano in 1930, then adapted to contemporary Buryat and published along with its Russian translation by Khomonov in 1961.
  - 5) See bibliographical references at the end of this paper.
  - 6) Support had been solicited from UNESCO but in vain. However the International Cultural Organization welcomed a Sakha (= Yakut) Festival (where parts of the Yakut epic Niurgun Bootur were sung) in Paris in November-December 1993, and a Festival about the Turkic epic character Dede Gorgud in June 1999. This Festival initiated by Azerbaidjan, gathered participants from all Turkic countries (Turkey and Central Asia). It commemorated the 1300th anniversary of the story of Dede Gorgud (a story which is thus dated prior to Islam).
  - 7) This information is not mentioned in my 1996 paper, although the poles were erected at that time.
  - 8) Such interpretations of the landscape were already mentioned at the end of the nineteenth century.
  - 9) Namely gold, molybdenum, graphite, bauxite, asbestos etc. Dugarov in *Kraj Gêsêra* (1995: 5). Tracks of lava are identified with the ruins of the castle of the fiercest enemy of Geser (ibid. 17). An independent ecological fund "Akhalar" was created by the lama Fedor Samaev also in the beginning of the 1990s. Its aim was also to transform into a parcel of World Heritage some territories of Oka and Tunka (Zhukovskaya 1997 : 11). I have no idea about a possible relation with the location of the Geser Park.
  - 10) More precisely, by the influential part of the intelligentsia, which cooperates with the political power. There are also counter currents, but they have virtually no public channels of expression.
  - 11) The lack of international participation and support (in particular from UNESCO) contributed to their disappointment.
  - 12) The epic of Geser was the topic of Khundaeva's Doctoral dissertation and her two books published in 1999.
  - 13) A part of this information comes from Isabelle Charleux (CNRS, Paris) and another part from Elizaveta Khundaeva (The Buryat Institute of Social Sciences, Ulan-Ude). I express my thanks to both of them.
  - 14) The pre-Soviet position of Buddhism was strong only among the Eastern Buryats. It was partly restored in the 1990s and many monasteries have been rebuilt (Zhukovskaya 1992, 1995; there were 22 monasteries in 1996, Zhukovskaya 1997). The Western, more Russified Buryats have a stronger influence in the present situation and the Russian-dominated government has an "uneasy relationship" with Buddhism (Humphrey, referring to Namsaraeva 1998). Besides, the religious situation is confused. 101 religious organizations coming under 13 different denominations were registered in 1996 (Zhukovskaya 1997: 15)
  - 15) The administrations of the Ust-Ordynski and the Aginski Buryat Autonomous districts are mentioned at the end of the list of institutions which jointly support the organization of an Annual International Seminar "Ethno-social Processes in Siberia: Euroasian Aspect" to take place in September 2001 in Ulan-Ude. Together with the Government of the Republic of Buryatia and the Interregional Association Siberian Agreement, two Institutes of the Siberian Department of the Academy of Sciences also joined in sponsoring the event.
  - 16) For instance, Manas in Kirgizstan in 1995, Alpamysh in Uzbekistan in 1999 (Karl Reichl, personal communication). The movement around Manas also was organized at the state level: the Kyrgyz Republic founded a "State Directorate on propaganda of epos 'Manas'" in Bishkek.

- 17) " L'obstacle majeur dans la campagne contre le nationalisme culturel bouriatio-mongol pendant l'après-guerre n'était pas cependant un écrivain ou un poète vivant mais le héros légendaire des Mongols, 'Geser' " (Kolarz 1955: 163).
- 18) Khadalov, P.I. & A.I. Ulanov 1953, Damdinsüren 1957, Stein 1959, quoted by Hamayon (1990:163).
- 19) Thus Geser is never held to be an ancestor, even though certain geographical details are identified as traces of his deeds on earth. Only in the Ekhirit-Bulagat version does Geser have sons, but their progeny is not related to real tribes by contrast to founder-ancestors such as Ekhirit and Bulagat. In other versions, his only son dies during a quarrel between his parents.
- 20) Thus, it is necessary to perform the epics before hunting and performance is forbidden outside the hunting season. It is seen as useful in case of warfare, misfortune or epidemics. The functions of epics and their properties as vehicles for ideologies are dealt with in other works (Hamayon 1990 chapter iii to vi; 2000).
- 21) Mongolia has long been centralized and is an independent state. This is enough to account for the erection of this historical figure as emblem of the nation-state. Through the very fact of the millennium, the epic of Geser was made more ancient than the emergence of Gengis Khan as a world emperor in history (end of the 12th-13th century).
- 22) More precisely, the mane is pictured as forming two wings.
- 23) He is the leader of the campaigns aimed at propagating Buddhism in "all ten directions."
- 24) This contributes to the above-mentioned question posed by the building of a sanctuary above a Buddhist centre.
- 25) In particular, Russian orthodox Christianity has long been imbued with millenarist ideas.
- 26) This point has been developed in Hamayon (2000), while the hero's kinship relations were dealt with in detail in Hamayon (1990).
- 27) Russia commemorated the millennium of Christianity in 1988, in the middle of perestroika but before the change of regime.
- 28) It is tempting to mention that the 50th state of the USA, Alaska, has an Indian totem as its state emblem even though Indians living there represent only an extremely small percentage of the population.
- 29) Sovereignty was suppressed in 2002.

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