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The Epic of King Gesar/Geser: From Epic Hero to Religious Personality in Contemporary Buryatia

Galina Dondukova and Bato Dondukov

Abstract

The article focuses on the current circulation of the epic hero Geser in the public and religious discourse of Buryatia. To understand the debates around Geser in Buryatia, we study the broader historical, literary, and religious contexts of the epic hero in both Tibet, where it originated, and Buryatia. A case study of the debates over the proposal to celebrate a Day of Geser shows yet another clash between shamanism and Buddhism in Buryatia. The opening of a Ripa lineage temple of the Nyingma school near Ulan-Ude, the capital of the republic of Buryatia, in 2019, where Gesar rituals are regularly performed, adds a new layer to the perception of the epic hero. Geser, once a literary hero and cultural symbol of Buryatia, is now increasingly viewed as a religious figure—a warrior deity with whom believers can communicate and from whom they can seek protection.

Keywords: Tibetan epic of King Gesar, Buryat epic of Geser, epic hero, religious figure, Buryatia, Tibetan Buddhism, shamanism, Ripa lineage.

1. Introduction[1]

Originally Tibetan, *The Epic of King Gesar*, the son of Heaven, recounts his victories over various monsters and other enemies, and is widely known throughout Central Asia, from Pakistan to Kalmykia. Claimed to be "the world's longest epic,"[2] it is generally believed to have been transmitted orally since the 12th century. Due to the epic's large size and oral transmission, there is neither one definitive title, nor a single official version or even a standard collection of versions of this text.[3] However, many scholars recognize three main regional traditions of the *Gesar/Geser* epic: the eastern Tibetan (Kham

1 The research was carried out within the state assignment (project "Folklore and Literature of Mongolian Peoples within the Context of Cross-Border Cultural Interaction," № 126020516673-5).

2 Karen L. Thornber, "The Many Scripts of the Chinese Scriptworld, the Epic of King Gesar, and World Literature," *Journal of World Literature* 1, no. 2 (2016), pp. 212–225.

3 Thornber, "The Many Scripts of the Chinese Scriptworld," pp. 212–225.

and Amdo), the western Tibetan (Ladakh and Baltistan), and the Mongolian (including Kalmykia in the west and Buryatia in the north).[4]

This research focuses on the region of ethnic Buryatia.[5] The Buryats are an ethnic group living in southeastern Siberia, on the shores of Lake Baikal, Russia. They represent the major northern subgroup of the Mongolian people. Before their incorporation into the Russian Empire in the late 17th and 18th centuries, the Buryats were firmly integrated into the broader Mongolian culture. Common territory and cultural practices, pastoralism, Tibetan Buddhism of the Gelug school, and one literary language for many centuries provided relative unity for the Mongolian world. Folklore, historical chronicles, didactic literature, and Buddhist monuments were shared across the broader Buddhist world of Central and East Asia, Tibet and India.

The article explores the contemporary circulation of the epic hero Geser in public and religious discourse in Buryatia. Specifically, we study the debates surrounding the proposed Day of Geser since 2022 and trace the transformation of the literary hero into a religious figure. We argue that, unlike the Tibetan Gesar—who has been incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon since the 19th century[6]—in Buryatia, the epic hero Geser has only recently entered the religious sphere. What is more, in Tibet, the shamanic and Buddhist motifs of the epic are not opposed, but integrated while in Buryatia, the situation is quite different. There, apart from the literary discourse Geser has been existing mainly within the cultural and ideological landscape of Buryatia as a symbol of Buryat ethnic identity. But today, however, he has become the subject of debates between Buddhist and shamanic leaders in Buryatia. Finally, a new Buddhist temple of Tibetan Ripa lineage recently opened in Buryatia further contributes to the transformation of Geser from an abstract cultural symbol into a tangible religious figure—one with whom individuals can communicate, seek protection, etc. Thus, Buryatia emerges as a unique space where various interpretations of Geser/Gesar—shamanic, local (Buryat), and global (Tibetan) Buddhist—interact, clash, and coexist within a single cultural and religious space.

4 Geoffrey Samuel, "Ge sar of gLing: Shamanic Power and Popular Religion," in Geoffrey Samuel et al., eds., *Tantra and Popular Religion in Tibet (*New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1994*)*, pp. 53–78; Solomon G. FitzHerbert, "Constitutional Mythologies and Entangled Cultures in the Tibeto-Mongolian Gesar Epic: The Motif of Gesar's Celestial Descent," *Journal of American Folklore* 129, no. 513 (2016), pp. 297–326.

5 The term "ethnic Buryatia" emphasizes the fact that the Buryat people live not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in neighboring Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaykalsky Krai.

6 Much of the Gesar/Geser epic's milieu and ethos suggests a pastoralist/warrior culture in which institutional/monastic Buddhism is not well established, However, in Eastern Tibetan tradition, unlike Buryat and Ladakhi ones, Gesar has been embraced within certain sections of institutional Vajrayana Buddhism especially since the late 19th century (see Solomon G. FitzHerbert, "Tibetan Buddhism and the Gesar Epic," in John Barton, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: online edn. Oxford Academic, 2017), p. 2.

Recently, *The Epic of King Gesar* has gained increasing academic attention—from studies at Harvard University's Institute for World Literature, where *Gesar* is examined as a work of world literature,[7] to the publication of the first collective monograph dedicated to the historical, cultural, and literary aspects of the Tibetan epic.[8] Nevertheless, the Buryat versions of the epic remain underrepresented in global scholarship. This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary and media discourse analysis with anthropological methods such as interviews and participant observation. In particular, we draw on an interview with Danzan Lama, the abbot of the Ripa Samten Gatsal Ling temple in Erkhirik, as an oral testimony to the recent Buddhist reinterpretation of the Geser figure. The research also involves a broader contextual analysis of the entangled histories of Eurasia, as reflected in the Buryat, as well as the wider Mongolian and Tibetan, versions of the epic.

We start with an overview of the Tibetan and Buryat versions of the epic; the scholarly views on religious aspects of the epic and the epic hero in Tibet; and the transformation of Geser from a literary to a cultural hero in post-Soviet Buryatia. We then turn to the current debates in Buryatia over whether Geser is a shamanic or Buddhist figure, presenting the context and timeline of events—from the proposal by public leaders to celebrate a Day of Geser, to the opposing letter by Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev, head of the Buryat Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR). Finally, we introduce a new actor in the Geser religious discourse of Buryatia: the Ripa lineage temple of the Nyingma school, which opened in 2019 in the village of Erkhirik, 20 km from the capital, Ulan-Ude. This temple, where Gesar rituals are regularly performed, is growing in popularity among laymen. As a result, the religious dimension of the epic hero is being filled with new meanings.

2. The Tibetan *Epic of King Gesar*

The Epic of King Gesar tells the tales of the life and conquests of a legendary Tibetan king of the Kingdom of Ling. Scholars debate as to whether Gesar was a real figure who gained mythic status over time, or a fictional character. However, in Tibetan scholarly tradition there is a broad consensus that the *Gesar* epic emerged from a historical kernel concerning a Buddhist chief who lived in eastern Tibet in the eleventh century. While Western scholars usually argue that the title "Gesar is derived from the Byzantine Greek title *kaisar, i.e.* Caesar, Tibetan scholars has put a similar amount of scholarly effort to show that there may indeed have been a historical eastern Tibetan horse-trading chief. He was perhaps named Sengchen Norbu or Norbu Drandul and assumed the central Asiatic title "Gesar during the Period of Fragments that followed the

7 Thornber, "The Many Scripts of the Chinese Scriptworld," pp. 212–225.

8 Matthew T. Kapstein and Charles Ramble, eds., *The Many Faces of King Gesar: Tibetan and Central Asian Studies in Homage to Rolf A. Stein* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

demise of the Tibetan empire in the 9th century AD.[9] The epic is believed to be approximately 900 years old.[10] Scholars generally regard it as having ancient, pre-Buddhist Inner Asian cultural roots. However, the lack of hard textual evidence makes it impossible to assert the epic's antiquity with any confidence. There is no documentary evidence for the existence of the epic before the late 14th century. For this reason, many scholars accept the 14th–15th centuries—marked by the rise of the eastern Tibetan kingdom of Lingtsang—as the period during which the *Gesar* epic took shape as a distinct heroic cycle.[11] The first printed version, which contained only seven chapters, was produced in Beijing in 1716 and appeared in the Mongolian language and script.

Notably, studies of the Tibetan epic acknowledge the presence of both shamanic and Buddhist elements, which are not seen as opposed, but rather as "somehow transcended and embraced."[12] The epic's shamanic elements are recognized by many scholars.[13] Solomon FitzHerbert, for instance, highlights the Inner Asian shamanic mood as one of the salient features that sets the Gesar epic apart as a distinct area within Tibetan cultural discourse. One prominent example is the hero's numerous spirit-helpers, who play central key roles in the narrative and reflect Inner Asian shamanic tradition.[14] Shamanic motifs in the *Gesar* epic emerged primarily from Tibetan Bon culture but may also be part of Mongolian and Turkic influences stemming from their settlement on the Tibetan plateau in the 13th and 14th centuries.[15]

While the Buddhist ideas are interwoven in the text of the epic, the epic hero himself has been incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon. According to FitzHerbert, Gesar is represented as "an enlightened being—as the combined manifestation of the Three Bodhisattva Lords [Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Vajrapani] and as an 'emissary' or 'manifestation' of Padmasambhava,—whose tricksterism is enacted on behalf of the forces of goodness, justice, and the White Side in its perennial battle against the forces of evil, injustice, and the Dark Side."[16] Notably, the cult of Gesar as an enlightened being did not arise

9 FitzHerbert, "Constitutional Mythologies," p. 300.

10 Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden, *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling* (Boulder: Shambala Publications, 2001).

11 FitzHerbert, "Constitutional Mythologies," p. 300.

12 Solomon G. FitzHerbert, "Gesar's Familiars. Revisiting Shamanism as a Hermeneutic for Understanding the Structure, Motifs and History of the Tibetan Gesar Epic," in Matthew T. Kapstein and Charles Ramble, eds., *The Many Faces of King Gesar: Tibetan and Central Asian Studies in Homage to Rolf A. Stein* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 125–127.

13 See David-Neel and Lama Yongden *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*; FitzHerbert, "Gesar's Familiars"; Roberte N. Hamayon, "The Dynamics of the Epic Genre in Buryat Culture: A Grave for Shamanism, a Ground for Messianism," *Epic Adventures: Heroic Narrative in the Oral Performance Traditions of Four Continents* 3 (2004), pp. 53–65; Rolf A. Stein, *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959).

14 FitzHerbert, "Gesar's Familiars," p. 92.

15 FitzHerbert, "Gesar's Familiars," p. 123.

16 FitzHerbert, "Tibetan Buddhism," p. 1.

from a "wordly" deification of a historical or legendary hero of Ling, but rather from the meditative discoveries of realized lamas.

The ethos of the Buddhist cult of Gesar is most closely associated with the Nyingma and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Within this context, the religious lineage of the Ripa Ladrang is of particular interest. The Ripa lineage, part of the Nyingma school—the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism founded by Guru Padmasambhava—is rooted in teachings that emphasize spiritual revelations. According to Ripa tradition, the lineage was founded in the 17th century by Pema Deje Rolpa.[17] The Ripa lineage is a family tradition, in which spiritual authority and teachings are transmitted through generations, gradually accumulating a unique body of spiritual knowledge.[18]

Today, the lineage is headed by Namkha Drimed Rinpoche, who has discovered and codified volumes of hidden spiritual treasures and made a significant contribution to the development of the Gesar cult within Buddhist tradition. According to Ripa teachings, Gesar was a real historical figure, who founded the kingdom of Lingtsang in Tibet in the 10th century; the Ripa lineage even traces its origin directly to Gesar himself.[19] In contemporary practice, the teachings of Gesar within this lineage are expressed through a system of ritual, meditative, and tantric practices, grounded in the *terma* (*gter ma*) tradition—hidden teachings concealed by Padmasambhava.[20] These teachings are revealed by *tertons* (*gter ston*), or treasure-revealing lamas, such as Namkha Drimed Rinpoche, who discovered the *Ge sar Gter chos*—a cycle of Gesar practices described as "the most significant and remarkable spiritual property of the lineage today."[21]

Namkha Drimed Rinpoche's personal connection to Gesar began in his childhood through a series of visions. "Since when I was a young child, Gesar Akar Werma, a form of Gesar who is about eight years old, wears a white robe, and has a pale white complexion, has been with me like a shadow. All my Gesar sadhanas were written at the request of Akar Werma, five to ten pages each time. Guru Rinpoche gave the sadhanas to Akar Werma who gave them to me…"[22] Namkha Drimed Rinpoche later was recognized as the

17 "Brief History of Ripa Lineage," *Ripa Ladrang Foundation Official website* [https://www.ripaladrang.org/our-story/brief-history-of-ripa-lineage/] (URLs below are current as of 15 May 2025, unless otherwise noted).

18 Geoffrey Samuel, "Namkha Drimed Rinpoche and His Ge sar Gter chos," in Matthew T. Kapstein and Charles Ramble, eds., *The Many Faces of King Gesar: Tibetan and Central Asian Studies in Homage to Rolf A. Stein* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), p. 221.

19 L. E. Yangutov, "Geser v traditsii N'ingma," *Bulletin of the Buryat Scientific Center of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 2, no. 26 (2017), p. 45.

20 L. L. Abaeva, "Fenomen Gesera (Gesara) v buddijskoj traditsii tibetcev," *Bulletin of the Buryat Scientific Center of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 2, no. 26 (2017), pp. 58-63.63.

21 Samuel, "Namkha Drimed Rinpoche," p. 221.

22 Samuel, "Namkha Drimed Rinpoche," p. 221.

reincarnation of Gesar's elder half-brother, Gyarsa Shalkar (*Rgya tsha Shel dkar*), further reinforcing the idea of Gesar as a historical figure whose bloodline continues through reincarnation. After relocating to India in the 1960s, Namkha Drimed Rinpoche, his son Gyetrul Jigme, and other members of the lineage began visiting Europe and North America. Today, the Ripa lineage is a global Buddhist organization, with monasteries in Tibet, Nepal, India, as well as Dharma centers in Switzerland, the USA, Spain, Japan, France, and elsewhere.

Thus, in Tibet, the epic hero Gesar was conceptualized by Buddhist lamas, leading to the formation of a complex Buddhist cult in which Gesar functions as a yidam (meditational deity) and protector of the Dharma.

3. The Buryat *Epic of Geser*

The Mongolian (and the Buryat) version of the epic was influenced by the Tibetan versions of the epic, but it is nevertheless generally considered not as a translation, but as an independent work of Mongolian literature.[23] Mongolian scholars also tend to accept that the *Geser* epic has Tibetan origins. They see its dissemination into Mongolia as part of a broader cultural importation from Tibet, which began in the thirteenth century.[24] For example, the Mongolian scholar Tsendiin Damdinsuren argued that the historical core of the epic dates back to the eleventh century in northeastern Tibet.[25]

The Buryat heroic epic about Geser is usually classified into three versions: Ekhirit-Bulagat, Ungin, and Khori (Mongolian) versions.[26] The first two versions of the epic originated among the Western Buryats, while the third developed among the Eastern Buryats. The division on Western and Eastern Buryats is due to the fact that the Buryats initially lived and continue to live on both sides of the lake Baikal. This geographical separation contributed to major differences. In most general terms, the Western Buryats, due to closer contact with European peasants of the Russian empire, transitioned to a sedentary lifestyle much earlier and largely practiced Shamanism. In contrast, the Eastern Buryats, who maintained closer ties with Mongolia, preserved a stronger adherence to Buddhism and a nomadic lifestyle.[27]

The epic genre became mostly developed among the Ekhirit-Bulagat, more so than among any other Buryat groups. The most well-known

23 Charles Bawden, ed., *Mongolian Traditional Literature: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. xxiii.

24 FitzHerbert, "Constitutional Mythologies," p. 300.

25 Ts. S. Damdinsuren, *Istoricheskie korni Geseriady* (Moskva: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSr, 1957).

26 D. A. Burchina, "Geroicheskij epos," in L. L. Abaeva and N. L. Zhukovskaya, eds., *Buriaty* (Moscow: Nauka, 2004), p. 271.

27 Galina P. Dondukova, "The Settled Sorrow of Saddle: the Buryat Ethnic Identity in the Poetry of Bair Dugarov" (PhD diss., University of Warsaw, 2019), p. 148.

Buryat version is the Ekhirit-Bulagat epic *Abai Geser-Khubuun* [*Abai Geser-Son*], considered the pinnacle of Buryat oral poetry. It was written down by the Buryat intellectual Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1881–1942) from the *uligershin* (storyteller) Manshud Imegenov (1849–1908) in Ust-Orda in 1906 and was first published in the academic series *Examples of Folk Literature of the Mongolian Tribes*, edited by B. Vladimirtsov in 1930–1931. According to the Buryat literary scholar and folklorist Alexei Ulanov, this version is "quite independent, original, and not similar to either the Mongolian or Tibetan legends about Geser, except for the name of the main character."[28]

The hero of the epic is *Abai Geser*, the Son of Heaven, who descended from the Sky to clear the Earth of monsters (*mangadkhai*). Epic stories depict the life and heroic acts of Geser and his sons, who are given a special mission to fight against evil on Earth and establish peace and happiness for people. The Buryat versions of the *Geseriad* contain a detailed prologue to Geser's exploits that is drastically different from the Tibetan versions and conveys a strong Inner Asian shamanic sensibility. In this prologue, the great *tengri*[29] *Khormusta khan*,[30] ruler of the celestial tribes of the West, wages war against *Atai Ulan*, khan of the malicious gods of the East. After his victory, *Khormusta* dismembers *Atai Ulan* to prevent his resurrection and scatters his body parts across the Earth, where they become demons and monsters. This act almost causes the extinction of humanity, prompting Khormusta to send his middle son, Geser, from the heavenly realm to undo the damage and restore the balance.

The second birth of Geser on Earth, his wedding, and his heroic acts are divided into nine branches or song episodes. Each episode is centered on one of Geser's victories over an adversary. For example, the first episode depicts Geser's youth, during which he defeats three giant rats, human-sized mosquitos, and steel ravens—while still an infant. Later episodes describe his battles with beasts born from *Atai Ulan*'s dismembered body and other monsters.[31]

As noted by R. Hamayon, the epic genre emerged from the shamanic ritual genre. Among the Western Buryats, epic performances progressively replaced the most important shamanic collective rituals.[32] According to the

28 A. I. Ulanov, *K kharakteristike geroicheskogo eposa buryat* (Ulan-Ude: Buryat-Mong. kn. izd-vo, 1957), p. 116.

29 Mongolian people attached a huge symbolical meaning to the concept of *tengri.* Osip Kowalewski writes that *tengri* in ancient Mongolian meant sky, the genius of sky, a powerful deity, a source of spirit, an eternal and fair ruler of the world (Osip M. Kowalewski, *Mongol'sko-russko-frantsuzskii slovar'*, 3 vols. (Kazan': Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1844–1849), p. 1763). The shamanic pantheon of Mongolian people consisted of a set of *tengris*.

30 In different versions he is also named as *Turmas, Khorbustu*, or *Hormust.*

31 Burchina, "Geroicheskij epos," pp. 267–294.

32 Hamayon, "The Dynamics of the Epic Genre," p. 53.

traditional rules of the Ekhirit-Bulagat, for example, the epic performances were strictly regulated: they were absolutely mandatory before a hunt but absolutely prohibited outside of the hunting season. Performances could only take place at night and were forbidden during the daytime.[33] Tsyben Zhamtsarano wrote: "*Uliger*[34] is sung (told) for the achievement of different benefits, for example, for healing, recovering of sight, success in crafts, hunting, fishing, etc.; the *uliger* contributes to successful journeys."[35] There was a deep belief in the "magical" power of the oral poetic word. Moreover, it was believed that the heroes of the epic—deities, *tengeris* and others—were invisibly present at the moment of epic performance. For this reason, the *uligershin* was in charge for full and correct transfer of events.[36]

During the 20th century, the *Geser* epic underwent a complex trajectory of promotion, denunciation, and rehabilitation.[37] In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet officials used national folklore to demonstrate how well the Soviet government was preserving important elements of traditional cultures, in line with the general policy of *korenizatsia*. Folklore was actively collected, researched, and promoted. In Buryatia, the *Geser* epic attracted most of the attention, maybe because the story was set in the lands around Lake Baikal,[38] but also thanks to Zhamtsarano, who brought the Buryat epic to Leningrad in 1930, where Nicholas Poppe—the foremost Mongolist of that time—became interested in *Geser*.[39]

Across the Soviet Union, *Geser* came to be recognized as the national epic of the Buryats. During the 1930s, it was widely studied, published, and praised as a narrative of historical and cultural significance. This promotion of *Geser* was consistent with the attention that national epics were receiving in other parts of the Soviet Union at that time. In the late 1930s, various Soviet nationalities, such as the Kalmyks, Kyrgyz, Yakuts, and Armenians, held official celebrations marking the anniversaries of their epics. Soviet authorities decided that the Buryats too should commemorate their epic. Nicholas Poppe and other scholars were tasked with determining the age of Geser to set an appropriate anniversary date. In May 1941, Stalin signed a decree to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Buryat epic in November 1942.[40] Local authorities assigned

33 Hamayon, "The Dynamics of the Epic Genre," p. 55.

34 *Uliger* (Mongolian *ulger*) is a Buryat common name for big epic poems including Geser epic. *Uligershin*—a storyteller, a person who perform *uligers*.

35 Tsyben Zhamtsarano, *Obraztsy narodnoi slovesnosti mongol'skikh plemen: teksty*, vol. 1, *Proizvedeniia narodnoi slovesnosti buriat* (Petrograd: Tipografiia Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 1918), p. 33.

36 Zhamtsarano, *Obrazcy narodnoi slovesnosti*, p. 18.

37 See Melissa Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia: Transformation in Buryatia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014); Jonathan Ratcliffe, "Becoming-Geser, Becoming-Buryat: Oral Epic and the Politics of Navigating Four Identity Crises" (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2019).

38 Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia*.

39 Ratcliffe, "Becoming-Geser, Becoming-Buryat," p. 77.

40 Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia*, pp. 167–168.

numerous scholars including Sergei Baldaev, Ilya Madason, Alexei Ulanov, and others to conduct further research and to publish the epic in both Russian and Buryat. However, the outbreak of the Great Patriotic War interrupted these plans and the anniversary celebrations were postponed.

By the end of war, the cultural policies toward national folklore had changed. A reinvigorated campaign against cosmopolitanism and nationalism was implemented. Aleksandr Kudriavtsev,[41] the first secretary of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Buryatia, began to criticize *Geser*, arguing that it was wrong to idealize the past through such an epic. In May 1948, Kudriavtsev organized a meeting of 61 politicians, scholars, writers, and journalists to discuss *Geser*. The debate concerned the epic's origins, ideology, and relationship to historical events, questioning its promotion and celebration. Numerous individuals who had previously written about and researched the epic spoke out against it. Geser was especially criticized for failing to represent a proper Soviet hero for the masses, for being a poor reflection of the Buryat people, and for being merely a mythical character. Others linked Geser to Genghis Khan, a figure who was also denounced at that time in the Soviet Union. Some even declared that Geser was anti-Russian.[42] Such reactions among intellectuals were predictable, as many feared for their careers and even their lives. Although the worst of the purges of the late 1930s were over, people still had reason to be cautious. The denunciation of *Geser* was therefore a way to show to the central authorities that the Buryats were becoming loyal, model Soviet citizens.

However, not everyone at the meeting sharply criticized *Geser*. Some scholars limited their criticism to the academic concerns, such as the validity of the 600th anniversary date. Alexei Ulanov, N. Zurgeev, and G. Rumiantsev continued to defend the epic, arguing that *Geser*, as a historical document, held value for the Buryat nation.[43] Nevertheless, the predetermined conclusion of the meeting was to censor *Geser*. Kudriavtsev declared that any further research or publication on the epic would be regarded as bourgeois nationalist activity. The celebration of its 600th anniversary was cancelled, and various published works on *Geser* were ordered to be removed from libraries and public use.

In 1951, the status of the *Geser* epic was reconsidered.[44] A meeting of scholars was held in Moscow at the Oriental Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences, where participants actively advocated for the rehabilitation of the epic.

41 Kudriavtsev was appointed the first secretary of Buryatia in 1943. He was the second consecutive non-Buryat first secretary of the Buryat-Mongolian Republic, after the Buryat, Erbanov, who was purged in 1937.

42 Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia,* pp. 169–170.

43 Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia,* p. 172.

44 First Sectretary Kudriavtsev was replaced in 1951. His place was taken by a Buryat, Aleksandr Khakhalov, who previously was the Minister of Culture in the republic; on that position he had written positively about Geser (Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia,* p. 175).

Members of the Buryat-Mongolian Scientific Research Institute were present too. The participants concluded that the epic poem did, in fact, hold historical value for the Buryat people. They dismissed previous claims about the poem's alleged anti-Russian sentiment and Geser's supposed resemblance to Genghis Khan. Ultimately, the meeting declared that *Geser* could once again be recognized as a legitimate subject of academic research. After the meeting in Moscow, the Union of Writers of the Buryat-Mongolian Republic announced that *Geser* was once again an acceptable topic for scholarly work. Local scholars who had prepared manuscripts on *Geser* in the late 1930s and early 1940s could finally publish their work. From its rehabilitation in 1951 until the late 1980s, the local government in Buryatia acknowledged the epic as culturally significant for the Buryats. However, after the earlier episode of condemnation, it was no longer used as a major propaganda tool for construction of socialist reality. Instead, priority was given to new literature rather than traditional epic poetry.[45]

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the search for ethnic identity became central across many former union republics during the 1990s. This form of collective identification replaced Soviet and class-based identities, which had effectively dissolved with the collapse of the USSR.[46] In Buryatia, the politicization of ethnicity and ethnic mobilization emerged as major features of the post-Soviet ethno-national movement. The "Declaration of Sovereignty of the Republic of Buryatia" was adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the Buryat ASSR on October 8, 1990. This new status was later formalized in the *Foundations of the Constitutional Order*, stating: "The Republic of Buryatia is a sovereign democratic constitutional state within the Russian Federation."[47] Although this did not signify the disintegration of the Russian Federation into fully independent states, regional governments began to act more assertively as autonomous political entities, articulating their local interests and demands to the federal center.

The collapse of the USSR marked yet another wave of *Geser*'s revival and promotion. On November 15, 1990, just after Buryatia declared its sovereignty and transformation into a full socialist republic, the government issued an official resolution to organize a festival titled the *Geser Epic—Spiritual Treasure of People of Central Asia*, scheduled for 1995. The resolution also included a promise to support various preparatory festivals.[48] The idea for this festival was first proposed at a scholarly conference on *Geser*, held in 1989. A meeting at the Union of Writers brought together scholars, representatives of public organizations, ministries of culture and national education, as well as

45 Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia,* pp. 173–176.

46 Serguei A. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 83.

47 Constitution of the Republic of Buryatia, 1994 [https://www.prlib.ru/en/node/420925].

48 Roberte Hamayon, "Shamanism, Buddhism and Epic Heroism: Which Supports the Identity of the Post-Soviet Buryats?" *Central Asian Survey* 17, no. 1 (1998), pp. 51–67.

representatives of Ust'-Orda and Aga Buryat autonomous okrugs.[49] Leading specialists in Buryat folklore advocated for and substantiated the claim that the Geser epic was over 1,000 years old, and they approved a cultural program to be carried out across ethnic Buryatia. Although versions of Geser were widespread throughout Central Asia, the Ekhirit-Bulagat version, transcribed by Tsyben Zhamtsarano from Manshud Imegenov in 1906, was recognized as the most archaic one. The main argument for the epic's 1,000-year age, as Hamayon explained, centered on its content: "it takes no account of events happening later that shattered the region, notably the propagation of Buddhism and the resistance to it, both of which appear in other versions."[50]

Thus, the years 1989–1995 marked the *Geseriad* festival era, which sparked renewed interest in *Geser* and transformed it into one of the major symbols of Buryat ethnic identity. The series of events in honor of *Geser* started in the summer of 1991 in Ust'-Orda okrug, in the village of Khadakhan, the homeland of *uligershin* (storyteller) Pyookhon Petrov (1866–1943). At a folklore festival, which also commemorated the 125th anniversary of Petrov's birth, a banner (*tug*) of Geser was raised and consecrated. Between 1991 and 1995, Geser's banner was carried through Ust'-Orda, to Buryatia, and then to the Aga okrug, making its way across a series of local festivals held in the homelands of the most celebrated *uligershins*. In addition to folklore festivals, the celebration of the epic's 1,000th anniversary included academic conferences, traditional ceremonies, and concerts. The final festival, organized under the joint leadership of the Ministry of Culture, the Union of Writers, and the Buryat department of the Academy of Sciences, took place in Ulan-Ude in 1995. Thousands of performers representing every district and ethnic group in the republic participated.

Despite the generally "invented" character of the event—the epic was no longer performed in its entirety, with only selected excerpts of limited narrative content foregrounded—it was ideologically justified.[51] As Bair Dugarov notices: "*Geseriad* became, to a certain extent, an embodiment of the growth of national consciousness, a reconnection with spiritual roots and sources, and revival

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49 Ust-Orda and Aga Buryat autonomous okrugs were once part of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR. However, in 1937 the territory of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR was decreased by forty percent by the authorities in Moscow without the consent of the local government. The Alar, Bokhan, Ekhirit-Bulagat, and Olkhon regions were transferred to the Irkustk Oblast; while The Aginsk and Ulan-Onon regions were transferred to Chita Oblast. Within the Irkustk and Chita territories, two Buryat autonomous regions, Ust'-Orda and Aga, were created. They incorporated some, but not all of the above listed regions leaving some Buryats outside of any specific designated Buryat territory. Such changes led to the fact that Buryats became a minority in their republic (Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia*, p. 77). Ust'-Orda Buryat autonomous okrug was further merged with neighboring Irkutsk oblast in 2005, while Aga Buryat autonomous orkug—with Zabaykalsky Krai in 2006.

50 Hamayon, "Shamanism, Buddhism and Epic Heroism," pp. 61–62.

51 Hamayon, "Shamanism, Buddhism and Epic Heroism," p. 61.

of ancient customs and traditions of eternal universal value. *Geseriad* can be perceived as a reaction to the bitter fruits of historical unconsciousness and national nihilism that took root during the former totalitarian times; and under the sign of a cultural hero of nation-wide stature, *Geseriad* filled the spiritual and ideological vacuum that emerged in Buryat society during the post-Perestroika period."[52] It can be concluded that the event became a celebration of the hero, rather than the epic itself. Geser emerged as an alternative unifying idea, a key symbol for constructing Buryat identity. Ideologically directed toward uniting all Buryats across the three regions—Buryatia, Ust'-Orda and Aga—Geser indeed became the most powerful and advantageous symbol for national and cultural revival. In contrast to Genghis Khan, who remains distinctly Mongol, Geser—particularly in the archaic version preserved by Buryat *uligershins*—was considered as authentically Buryat. Furthermore, unlike religious identity, neither Buddhism nor shamanism could serve this unifying function due to the well-known informal division among Buryats on the Western (mostly shamanic) and the Eastern (mostly Buddhist). Thus, neither ties to Mongolia and Genghis Khan nor religion, but *Geser*, provided the ideological basis for uniting all regions of ethnic Buryatia in the 1990s.[53]

In the 2010s, various cultural and academic events in Buryatia continued to commemorate the *Geseriad* festivals of 1991–1995. Jonathan Ratcliffe mentions an academic event particularly relevant to our current research and the aforementioned Ripa lineage of the Nyingma school. In June 2016, an international seminar on *Geser* was held in Ulan-Ude to mark the 1020th anniversary of the Buryat hero. Among the attendees was the Tibetan monk Gyetrul Jigme Rinpoche, an internationally famous teacher of the Ripa lineage. According to Ratcliffe, communication with the Tibetan delegation was quite challenging: the Buryat side claimed to possess the oldest version of the epic, while the Tibetan side disagreed. As Ratcliffe notes, "…while [Bair] Dugarov was quite happy to acknowledge that *Geser* came from Tibet … he believed adamantly that the Buryats possessed the oldest version of the epic."[54] The Tibetan side, however, disagreed to agree. This episode highlights a symbolic encounter between the Buryat Geser and the Tibetan Gesar, figures with a shared root but divergent historical trajectories and limited interaction. Little is still known in Buryat scholarship about the Tibetan Gesar, just as the Tibetans seem to know very little about the Buryat Geser.

52 B. S. Dugarov, "Geseriad kak etnokulturnyy faktor v sovremennykh usloviyakh", in *Traditsionnyy folklor v polietnicheskikh stranakh. Materialy II Mezhdunarodnogo nauchnogo simpoziuma "Baykalskiye vstrechi,"* (Ulan-Ude: Izdatelsko-poligraficheskiy kompleks VSGAKI, 1998), p. 102. Bair Dugarov, the national poet of Buryatia, Dr. Hab., is the author of numerous academic articles on *Geser*, the former Head of the Union of Writers, and one of the main organizers of the *Geseriad* festival in the 1990s.

53 Dondukova, "The Settled Sorrow of Saddle," pp. 79–80.

54 Ratcliffe, "Becoming-Geser, Becoming-Buryat," p. 202.

4. The Day of Geser

After examining the peculiarities of the Tibetan and Buryat versions of the epic, along with their historical and religious contexts, we now turn to a case study in which the proposal to celebrate a "Day of Geser" led to tensions between Buddhist and Shamanist groups, centered around the figure of the epic hero.

In 2021, activists from the public organization *Buryad Soyol* [Buryat Culture], with the support of scholars and public figures, proposed to celebrate an annual "Day of Geser" on the 25th of September.[55] The choice of the date was due to the fact that on September 25, 1989, a literary and folklore evening was held to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the birth of *uligershin* Manshud Imegenov. That 1989 event was among the first in a series leading up to the 1990s celebration of the epic's 1000th anniversary in Buryatia. Notably, the version of the *Geser* epic transcribed from Manshud Imegenov by Tsyben Zhamtsarano in 1906 was recognized as the most archaic, and it served as a key evidence for the epic's millennial age. Moreover, as noted by Bair Dugarov, the choice of the second half of September was not accidental: "According to the Old Mongolian and Tengrian calendar, our ancestors celebrated the New Year on the day of the autumn equinox.[56] Pastoral and nomadic peoples marked the end of the annual economic cycle, and celebrated this event when there was plenty of various dairy products—"white food." Another important factor is that around September 25, the Pleiades, *mushed* in Buryat, appear in the sky. It was during this period, just before the start of the hunting season, that *uligershins* would traditionally begin performing the epic about Abai Geser, an epic that could not be recited at just any time of year."[57] Since September 25, 2021, public activists in Buryatia have gathered to celebrate "The Day of Geser" at the monument of Geser in Ulan-Ude.

In January 2023, an official letter from the public of Buryatia was submitted to the leaders of three Russian regions—the Republic of Buryatia, Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaykalsky Krai—requesting the revival of the *Geseriad* festival as part of the centenary celebrations of the Republic of Buryatia. The letter was registered with the Department of Citizens' Appeals at the Administration of

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55 D. Kusheev, "25 sentyabrya mozhet stat' oficial'nym dnem Gesera v Buryatii," *MK v Buryatii*, 11 September 2021 [https://ulan.mk.ru/culture/2021/09/11/25-sentyabrya-mozhet-stat-oficialnym-dnem-gesera-v-buryatii.html?ysclid=maut3ast2k554693470].

56 Originally the New Year celebrations took place in autumn, however, today the New Year—Sagaalgan—coincides with Buddhist lunar New Year and is celebrated in late January-February. This practice dates back to Khubilai Khan's conversion to Buddhism in the 13th century. In the early Soviet period, there was an argument made by Buryat intellectuals to move the celebration of Sagaalgan back to autumn because it would revive agricultural/proletarian roots and thereby make the holiday acceptable to the Soviet atheist authorities, but it never happened.

57 D. Kusheev, "25 sentyabrya."

the Head of the Republic of Buryatia and the Government of the Republic.[58] Signed by sixty-one public activists, the letter included endorsements from Solbon Sanzhiev, head of the "Buryad Soyol" public organization; heads of local ethnic associations in Irkutsk Oblast and Zabaykalsky Krai; and prominent cultural figures such as Evgeny Bolsoboev, head of the Union of Artists of Buryatia, Larisa Sanzhieva, head of the Union of Composers of Buryatia, and scholars from the Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies—Bair Dugarov, Oleg Rinchinov, Irina Urbanaeva, and many others. The authorities were asked to develop the ideological framework of the *Geseriad* as an international celebration of friendship and unity. "The ideas of the epic *Abai Geser* have always been the basis for the spiritual consolidation of the people, and during the celebration, large numbers of people, especially young people, were introduced to spiritual life. We believe that in these difficult times, there is a need to revive the national holiday of *Geseriad*." [59] The letter recalled how in the 1990s, the millennium of the *Geser* epic was widely celebrated at the interregional level. The appeal drew attention to the continued interest in the epic, referencing events such as the 2020 International conference *The Epic of Geser: Spiritual Heritage of the People of Central Asia*, held in Ulan Ude to mark the 25th anniversary of the millennium; the 2020 ethnocultural festival-marathon *Under the Banner of Geser* held in Irkutsk Oblast and the Republic of Buryatia, which drew more than 6,000 participants; and the annual *Geseriad* festival held in the Osinsky District of Irkutsk Oblast since 2017.

In June 2023, the proposal to officially designate September 25 as the Day of Geser was raised at a session of the People's Khural of the republic of Buryatia by deputy Leonid Krasovsky.[60] Krasovsky stated: "The public believes that *Geseriad* events should be held annually, as the central idea, the spiritual core, of the *Geser* epic is the struggle of good against evil, the affirmation of a bright beginning, happiness, and justice on Earth for all mankind. The epic is a source of the people's wisdom and a treasury of the Buryat language. It remains highly relevant today."[61]

However, the further discussion of the Day of Geser soon shifted from cultural to religious discourse when the Head of the Buryat Traditional Sangha, Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev, sharply criticized the revival of the cultural

58 B. Bagdaev, "Vozrodim Geseriadu," *Asia Russia Daily*, 18 January 2023 [https://asiarussia.ru/news/34954/].

59 Bagdaev, "Vozrodim Geseiadu."

60 Leonid Krasovsky, born in 1988, is the deputy of the People's Khural of the Republic of Buryatia from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation since 2018. People's Khural is the Regional Parliament of Buryatia. "V Narodnom khurale predlozhili utverdit' den' Gesera — geroya buryatskogo eposa," *Novaya Buryatia*, 29 June 2023 [https://newbur.ru/newsdetail/v_narodnom_khurale_predlozhili_utverdit_den_gesera_geroya_buryatskogo_eposa/].

61 "V Buryatii den' Gesera predlozhili otmechat' 25 sentyabrya," *Vostok-Teleinform*, 30 January 2024 [https://vtinform.com/news/148/200096/].

hero of the Buryat epic. According to Khambo Lama, the dissemination of the epic during the Soviet period aimed to promote Geser as a cultural symbol of Buryatia, whereas the true Buddhist patron of the Buryat people is *Zhamsaran* Sakhyusan, Dharmapala *Begtse*, whose name translates from Sanskrit as "The Great Coat of Mail." Begtse, the lord of war in Tibetan Buddhism, is especially venerated among Mongolian people.[62] Below is Khambo Lama's open letter to the Head of the Republic of Buryatia, Alexei Tsydenov:

OPEN LETTER

To the Head of the Republic of Buryatia -
To the Chairman of the Government of the Republic of Buryatia

Alexey Sambuevich,

We, the Buddhists of Buryatia, Zabaykalsky Krai, and other regions of Russia, express our opposition to the proposal of declaring a national holiday in the Republic of Buryatia in honor of the Geser epic.

For the Buryats of the Kyakhtinsky, Selenginsky, Dzhidinsky, Zakamensky, Bichursky, Mukhorshibirsky, and Kizhinginsky districts, the lay community of the Ivolginsky dastan and the Aginsky Buryats of Zabaykalsky Krai, such a holiday would be a day of sadness and grief. Rather than uniting, it may divide the population and provoke unnecessary conflict, all because some are lobbying for the recognition of a "Day of Geser."

We are against any holiday associated with the hero of the Geser epic—the so-called Geseriad.

In the 1970s, atheist communists hastily legitimized the Geser epic as pan-Buryat cultural symbol in an effort to keep pace with other ethnic groups (such as the Kalmyks and Kyrgyz), and, more significantly, to use Geser in atheist propaganda as a counterweight to the Buddhist deities.

For us Buddhists, Geser is regarded as the enemy of Zhamsaran Sakhyusan, one of the ten defenders of the faith (Dharmapalas). This is what our oldest lamas have said.

The Ivolginsky and Aginsky datsans, our central temples, were opened in 1945, during a time of great hardship for Buddhists following the end of the Great Patriotic War. The lamas, through their veneration of the protector Zhamsaran, restored spiritual strength and hope for the future to the believers across ethnic Buryatia. It is shameful and tactless for Buryat-Mongols to ignore this legacy and forget how the Manchus ruled Mongolia and Inner Mongolia for 300 years under the banner of Geser.

Today, more than ten datsans of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (Derestuisky, Aginsky, Ivolginsky, Kizhinginsky, Sartuul-Bulagsky, Gegetuysky,

62 "Begtse," *Tibetan Buddhist Encyclopedia* [https://www.tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Begtse].

> Ichetuysky, and others) daily conduct prayers to honor the protector Zhamsaran. Historically, Zhamsaran Sakhyusan is considered the protector of warriors. Since the beginning of the Special Military Operation[63], many believers have come to these datsans asking the lamas to offer special prayers for the protection of our soldiers, addressing specifically to Zhamsaran Sakhyusan.
>
> We urged you to reflect carefully on the implications of declaring a national holiday centered on a figure who, in the eyes of our faith, is the enemy of the very protector we venerate, especially at a time when spiritual support for our warriors is so vital.
>
> With respect,
> Ayusheev D.B.
> XXIV Pandito Khambo Lama
> Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia[64]

Following Khambo Lama's open letter, scholars Irina Urbanaeva and Alexei Loshchenkov of the Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies published an article titled "*Geser and Zhamsaran in the Aspect of Their Buddhist Theogony*."[65] In this work, the authors provide a comprehensive analysis of the origins and development of the cults of Geser and Zhamsaran (Begtse) within Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism. They argue that the cult of Gesar/Geser in the Tibetan-Mongolian Mahayana tradition represents the buddhization of an Inner Asian epic hero and is the product of purposeful conceptualization by realized Tibetan Dharma masters, particularly through "pure vision" or "mind treasure" revelations. Within this framework, Geser is regarded as an originally enlightened being and a tantric deity, simultaneously embodying the bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani, as well as an incarnation of Padmasambhava who manifests four types of enlightened activity (*siddhi*). He is thus venerated as both a meditational deity and a universal protector of the Dharma.[66] In contrast, Begtse/Chamsrin/Zhamsaran, according to various theogonic accounts, originated not as an enlightened being but a wrathful demon in India. He was pacified and converted to Buddhism by spiritual masters such as Lhachen Mahadeva, Padmasambhava, or the Third Dalai Lama, depending on the source. Following his conversion, he became one of the eight wrathful protectors in the Tibetan-Mongolian Mahayana and the principal guardian of the Hayagriva tantra. Adopted by the Gelugpa tradition, Zhamsaran gained great popularity across the Mongolian Buddhist world.[67] Based on their analysis, the authors contend that there is no theological basis for the opposition between the two figures within Buddhist theogony. Rather, they

63 Further referred as SMO.

64 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are made by the authors.

65 I. S. Urbanaeva and A. V. Loschenkov "Geser i Zhamsaran v aspekte ikh buddiyskoy teogonii," *Buddhist studies* 1, no. 6 (2023), pp. 29–40.

66 Urbanaeva et al., "Geser i Zhamsaran," p. 36.

67 Urbanaeva et al., "Geser i Zhamsaran," p. 36.

suggest that the perceived antagonism between Geser and Zhamsaran among certain Buryat lamas extends beyond doctrinal or ritual frameworks and must be understood within the broader context of religious-political dynamics in the history of Inner Asia.

Indeed, Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev's reaction may be interpreted as an attempt to restrain the growing influence of shamanism in contemporary Buryatia. After the fall of the USSR, both Buddhism and shamanism experienced the renaissance in Buryatia.[68] Buddhism, along with celebrations of Geser, was actively supported by the government and became a cornerstone of the Buryat national revival. Buryatia claimed its status as the center of Buddhism in Russia: historical monasteries were restored, new temples constructed, and the first Buddhist institute, Dashi Choinkhorlin, was opened at Ivolginsky dastan.[69] The growing interest in Buryat Buddhism was further amplified by the exhumation of the incorruptible body of Lama Dashi-Dorzho Itigelov in 2002—an event widely perceived as a miraculous sign of Buddhist power and continuity.[70] In this context, Buddhism, which had already constituted a key layer of Buryat self-identification in the 19th century, re-emerged at the turn of the 21st century as a defining element of national and spiritual identity.[71] Increasingly, Buryat identity has come to be closely associated with Buddhist religious affiliation.[72]

At the same time, shamanism has undergone the dynamic development in the post-Soviet period. A range of "neo-shamanic" phenomena emerged, including the formation of shamanic associations detached from traditional clan affiliations, the participation of shamans in popular media and cultural events, and efforts to assert a shamanic point of view within academic discourse.[73] These developments have been accompanied by attempts to elevate shamanism to the status of a world religion. In recent years, a renewed wave of interest in the *Geser* epic, imbued with distinctly shamanic motifs, has provided a potent new platform for shamanic resurgence. As noted above, the Buryat versions of the *Geseriad* contain an extensive prologue detailing a pantheon of *tengris*, evoking the Inner Asian shamanic worldview. Increasingly, Buryat shamans have come to frame the *Geser* epic as a foundational text of their faith. "It can be said that the *Geseriad* is an analogue of the Bible in shamanism, because the entire pantheon of Tengrism is reflected

68 Hamayon, "Shamanism, Buddhism and Epic Heroism," pp. 51–67.

69 *Datsan* is the Mongolian word for Buddhist temple.

70 See D. D. Amogolonova, "Vozvrashchenie Khambo-lamy Itigehlova v kontekste postsovetskoj desekulyarizacii obshchestvennogo soznaniya," *Tartaria Magna* 1 (2012), pp. 128–147.

71 T. D. Skrynnikova "Tradicionnaja kul'tura i buddizm v samoidentifikacii buriat," pp. 7–8 [http://www.abhidharma.ru/A/Raznoe/0054.pdf].

72 Chakars, *The Socialist Way of Life in Siberia,* p. 268.

73 Natalia L. Zhukovskaya, "Neo-Shamanism in the Context of the Contemporary Ethno-Cultural Situation in the Republic of Buryatia," *Inner Asia* 2, no. 1 (2000), pp. 25–36.

in the legends and traditions about Geser," notes Bair Tsyrendorzhiev, the supreme shaman of the Tengeri center.[74]

Amid these ongoing debates, Vostok-Teleinform reported that on January 29, 2024, Ivan Alkhayev, Deputy Chairman of the Government of the Republic of Buryatia, signed an order designating September 25 as the Day of Geser in Buryatia. The order also instructed that the *Geseriad* be developed into an interregional holiday promoting friendship and unity among the peoples of ethnic Buryatia.[75] However, as of this writing, the proposed date has not yet been formally ratified at the legislative level by the People's Khural.

5. Ripa lineage and Gesar Rituals in Buryatia

The post-socialist revival of Buddhism in Buryatia has, in many respects, evolved into a tension between global and local forms of the religion.[76] On one side stands the traditional Buryat form of Buddhism, rooted in the Gelug school of Mahayana Buddhism, which had existed in the territories around Lake Baikal for over three centuries. On the other side is a globalized form of Buddhism, brought from Tibet, which began to spread quickly in Buryatia during the 1990s. While some Buddhist leaders and followers welcomed these renewed connections to Tibetan sources and sought to strengthen them as part of the broader religious revival, others insisted on an autonomous Buryat Buddhist community. These latter voices emphasized the need to distance local Buddhism from its Tibetan and Mongolian ties and instead establish an independent trajectory. Khambo Lama Damba Ayusheev has repeatedly expressed his dislike for the proliferation of Tibetan and other Asian Buddhist "missionaries" within the republic.[77] Nevertheless, alongside organizations affiliated with the BTSR,[78] a range of new Buddhist communities started to emerge in the 1990s. For example, in January 1995, there were eleven Buddhist associations formally linked to the BTSR and four unaffiliated communities. By 2014, the number of officially registered Buddhist organizations had increased to sixty-three.[79]

74 "Uligershin Petr Kharayev predstavil novuyu versiyu skazaniy o Gesere v shamanskom tsentre «Tengeri»," *Buryat Unen*. 28 April 2024 [https://burunen.ru/news/society/106396-uligershin-petr-kharaev-predstavil-novuyu-versiyu-skazaniy-o-gesere-v-shamanskom-tsentre-tengeri/].

75 "V Buryatii den' Gesera," *Vostok-Teleinform*.

76 O. Dorzhigushaeva, B. Dondukov and G. Dondukova, "Global" and "Local" Issues of Buddhist Communities in Russia," *Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods* 8, no.9 (2018), pp. 455–460.

77 Anya Bernstein, *Religious Bodies Politic: Rituals of Sovereignty in Buryat Buddhism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

78 Buryat Traditional Sangha of Russia.

79 Darima D. Amogolonova, "A Symbolic Person of Buddhist Revival in Buryatia: 'Our Hambo' Damba Ayusheev," *Inner Asia* 17, no. 2 (2015), p. 229.

In the context of Gesar/Geser-centered Buddhist ritual practices, as noted earlier in this article, the "local" Buryat tradition has not been as widely adopted among Buryat Buddhists as the "global" variant that developed in Tibet and Mongolia. The recent establishment of a temple of the Ripa lineage in Buryatia, where teachings closely associated with the figure of Gesar of Ling are performed, introduces a new dimension to the ongoing religious discourse surrounding Geser in the republic. This development reflects a growing intersection of debates between local shamanic and Buddhist organizations. In this shifting context, Geser, long revered as an epic hero and cultural symbol of Buryatia, is being transformed into an explicitly religious figure, one to whom believers can offer devotion, seek for protection, and direct ritual practice.

In 2015, the Ripa lineage founded its first center in Moscow, followed by centers in Kalmykia and Buryatia. The introduction of the Ripa lineage to Buryatia was initiated by Lama Norbu Ayusheev, head of the Okinsky datsan "Puntsognamdolling." According to Lama Norbu, his datsan has a long-standing connection with the Nyingma tradition, including the teachings of Gesar of Ling.[80] In 2012, not far from Moscow, Namkha Drimed Rinpoche conducted rituals dedicated to the Wrathful Gesar. Lama Norbu attended that event and later at a personal audience explained that he came from lands where stories of Geser permeate the entire space. He invited Namkha Drimed Rinpoche to Buryatia in order to bring "the pure Tibetan tradition of Gesar of Ling."[81] According to Lama Norbu, Namkha Drimed Rinpoche perceived a strong karmic connection to these lands in meditation and, in 2016, sent his son Gyetrul Jigme Rinpoche to Buryatia. Gyetrul Jigme Rinpoche visited numerous locations, laying the foundations for the development of the Ripa lineage in the republic. He performed transmissions of practices, consecrated the construction of a Gesar statue in the Okinsky district, approved a site for the Ripa lineage temple in the village of Erkhirik, and even participated in the Geser epic conference mentioned above.[82]

The temple-building process in Erkhirik was led by a young lama, Danzan Dugarov, who, with significant support from the local population, completed construction within three years. Danzan Dugarov comes from a family deeply connected to the Nyingma school: his grandfather, the Buddhist artist Batodalai Dugarov, was renowned for his religious activities in Buryatia. As a follower of the famous Buryat tantric guru Bidiya Dandaron, Batodalai Dugarov led an active religious life throughout the Soviet period and as a result was even sent to a Soviet labor camp. In the early 1990s, he initiated Namkhai Norbu

80 "Interv'yu Lamy Norbu Ayusheyeva o Buryatii," *Ripa Buddhist Centre Official website*, 18 June 2019 [https://www.ripa-center.ru/materials/intervyu-lamy-norbu-ayusheeva-o-buryatii.html].

81 "Interv'yu Lamy Norbu Ayusheyeva", *Ripa Buddhist Centre Official website*.

82 See Ratcliffe, "Becoming-Geser, Becoming-Buryat"; Yangutov, "Geser v traditsii N'ingma," pp. 44–47.

Rinpoche's visit to Buryatia, who was one of the most prominent representatives of the Nyingma school. Subsequently, in 1995, Batodalai Dugarov founded Buryatia's only Nyingma community at that time, "Palbarling."

In 2019, a delegation of twenty monks from the Ripa lineage, led by Gyetrul Jigme Rinpoche and Lhuntrul Dechen Gyurme Rinpoche, visited Buryatia. They held a ceremonial opening of the temple in Erkhirik and gave teachings on Gesar of Ling. Approximately three hundred laymen attended this event.

Pic. 1: Ripa Samten Gatsal Ling temple in Erkhirik, republic of Buryatia (Tenzin_nima Instagram, 8 July 2022)

In Buryatia, a region with a strong Buddhist tradition, ritual practices venerating Gesar as a destroyer of obstacles and a bringer of prosperity and good fortune are becoming very popular among laymen. Moreover, the qualities attributed to Gesar can be invoked in obstacle-clearing rituals to address contemporary challenges and calamities. The Ripa temple in Erkhirik is active on Instagram. Its account, "ripa_buryatia," has 818 followers and 99 posts. They regularly announce upcoming ritual practices, including those related to Gesar. In an interview, Danzan Lama explained that mothers of military service members come to the temple with requests to Gesar to grant protection for their children, since Gesar remains "closer to the Buryats than Zhamsaran."[83] This observation aligns with G. Samuel's argument:

83 Interview with Danzan Lama, 9 September 2024.

> If one can look at Tibetan Buddhist teachings … as having three main levels, one associated with the central Buddhist goal of Enlightenment or Buddhahood, one to do with karma and rebirth, and one to do with pragmatic and this-worldly purposes such as health, prosperity and worldly success, then it is probably true that Tibetan lamas in the West have placed their emphasis mainly on the first and the second… The third, the pragmatic level, with its concern with interaction with local gods and spirits, and with this-worldly good fortune, is certainly important in Tibet.[84]

The story of the Ripa lineage's establishment in Buryatia demonstrates that the region was already fertile ground for its emergence, thanks to the presence of two Nyingma Buddhist communities. But most importantly, the epic hero Geser/Gesar served as the main bridge for rapprochement: although he occupies an important place in Ripa practices, he is also deeply rooted in Buryat tradition. Consequently, the religious life of the Nyingma school in Buryatia has intensified through connections with global Tibetan networks via Gesar, while, conversely, the Buryat epic hero gains new meanings and significance in Buryatia thanks to the Nyingma presence.

Pic. 2: Wall painting of Gesar inside the Ripa Samten Gatsal Ling temple (Ripa_Buryatia Instagram, 24 September 2023).

84 Samuel, "Namkha Drimed Rinpoche," p. 223.

6. Conclusion

Thus, Geser, having originated in a purely literary context, has moved not only into the cultural and ideological spheres connected to Buryat identity but also become actively present in the religious discourse of contemporary Buryatia. While the Tibetan epic hero Gesar entered the Buddhist pantheon, the Buryat Geser transformed into a cultural hero to symbolize Buryat ethnic identity. Although shamanic and Buddhist motifs coexist in Tibetan epic, in Buryatia it is primarily the shamanic features that are attributed to the hero. Within the broader context of post-Soviet Buddhist and shamanic revival, and the tensions between them, the proposal to celebrate a "Day of Geser" sparked yet another clash between local shamanic and Buddhist organizations. The opening of the Ripa lineage temple in Erkhirik, where teachings closely connected to the personality of Gesar of Ling are held, introduces new layers of meaning to Geser in Buryatia. The epic hero and cultural symbol thus shift from an abstract idea to a tangible religious figure—a warrior deity to whom devotees can pray, offering worship and petitions for protection. As religious institutions increasingly adopt ritual practices related to Geser, public interest in the hero is likely to revive, strengthening his presence in the republic's media space. The case warrants further academic inquiry because it represents a unique situation in which diverse contexts, shamanic, global Buddhist, and local Buddhist, coexist around Geser/Gesar within a single cultural and religious landscape. Just as contemporary interpretations pit Geser against Zhamsaran, new confrontations and alliances may emerge in this competitive environment, yet in any event, they affirm the epic hero's continued relevance.