

## **The Mechanisms of Epic Plot and the Mongolian Geseriad**

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It is a well-known fact that the performer of narrative poetry usually tries to reproduce a text he has learned from his predecessors and that he is sometimes able to do so with great accuracy. Two different degrees can, however, be distinguished in the narrator's faithfulness to his text: one relatively strict, the other relatively free. There are, likewise, two types of singer: the traditionalist and the improviser. Both identify their own variant with the text of their predecessor, but they differ according to how strictly they understand this identification. The traditionalist aims at perfection, a goal that, taken literally, produces the repetitive type of singer such as is found among the Kalmuk school (cf. Poppe 1940:3-4; Bitkeev 1983:76-77). The improviser, by contrast, remains faithful merely to a certain plot and basic theme, allowing himself considerable artistic liberty. By retaining this basic character, composition, and style, the improviser assumes he has remained faithful to his model despite considerable modification.

Both types of performers occupy places of their own in the life of folklore, and they are both essential in the normal development of tradition. The improviser extends the limits of the amount of stylistic and thematic variation permitted in the text, the result being a wide field of potential variation revolving round the fixed axis of tradition. The traditionalist rejects the extreme forms of such variation and observes greater moderation in his use of the structural elements. All of this activity affects the processes for developing the plot. A new plot clearly emerges as the result of the variation and development of some episode or motif already encountered in the tradition. New interpretations of the plot take shape, the characters change roles, their functions are reorganized, and so on. At some stage the plot variant becomes a new folklore product. Naturally this scenario applies particularly to the improviser, whereas planting the new

product in tradition and polishing it stylistically are to a greater extent the task of the traditionalist.

An example of this complex process is the development of the Geser epic, which came to Mongolia from Tibet but underwent radical changes in the Mongols' own tradition. Of the twelve main chapters familiar to us in the literary tradition of the Mongols, only five have Tibetan counterparts, and these also include a large number of plot schemes of Mongolian origin. The remaining seven have nothing in common with the Tibetan prototypes and are wholly of Mongolian origin. They are almost certainly founded on oral performances, as may be concluded from the stylistic similarities between the written versions and the oral traditions as well as from the well-known legend telling of the origin of the text used as the basis for the Peking xylograph edition published in the early seventeenth century. According to this legend, the text was written down from live performances by five southern Oirat singers. The Mongolian tradition has produced the chapters about the killing of the black-piebald tiger, the demon Lubsag and Geser's transformation into an ass, the battles against the monster Andulma, the ruler of the Rakshas demons, Gumbu Khan and Nachin Khan, the minor episode in which Geser raises his warriors killed in the war against the Sharaigols from the dead, and the episode in which Geser takes the warrior maiden Adzhu-mergen as his bride.

By means of comparative analysis, it is possible to determine a number of stages in the formation of these redactions and to find indications of the plot mechanisms by which the epic renewal process took place (Heissig 1983a; Nekljudov 1984:180-98). The central part of the Geseriad consists of the campaign against the Demon of the North, Klu-bcan (Mong. Lubsan), and the war with the Horis (Mong. Sharaigols). In the North Geser wins over the demon's wife Bum-skiid (Mong. Tümen Dzhirgalang), slays the demon himself, and settles in his kingdom. The woman gives the hero a magic potion that makes him forget his homeland. Meanwhile, three hostile Hori (Sharaigol) rulers attack his country. They seize Geser's land and cast his wife Brug-mon (Mong. Rogmo-goa) into prison. Geser's soldiers are slain by the superior forces. On shaking off the spell, the hero returns home, beats the Horis, and gets back his wife.

This is the sequence of events, especially in the Tibetan Lin-Geser. The main themes have been assimilated into the Mongolian tradition in a slightly different redaction (chapters 4 and 5 of the written version), and they also form the basis for numerous new constellations, which presumably emerged as follows:

1. According to mythic logic, winning from the original owner may in time be reinterpreted as returning something previously stolen. There is also an example of this development in the Geseriad, with the seduction of the northern demon's wife described above becoming the liberation of Geser's wife from the demon's power. The plot takes precisely this form in both the oral Mongolian epic and the written version (chapter 4). At the same time, two once-independent characters merge into one. Geser's wife Aralgo-goa and the Mistress of the North Tümen Dzhirgalang become a single synthesized person known by both names.

The process by which the plot is formed is not, however, inflexible. In the oral, northern Tibetan versions of the Amdo region this character is inconsistently defined: sometimes she is the demon's wife abducted by Geser, at others Geser's wife abducted by the demon (Potanin 1893:19, 23, 39, 42). The abduction of a wife thus constitutes part of the epic stock of the tradition, but, strange as it may seem, the direction of the abduction may be a matter of indifference. A similar dichotomy can be observed in the Mongolian version of Dzaja in which the wife, quarrelling with Geser as he prepares to depart for his homeland, calls him "he who came from Tibet," saying that she herself intends to remain "in her own country." There are further traces of earlier variation in the words of the vanquished demon: "It was not I who stole your wife!" The demon is speaking the truth, since according to the written Mongolian version Geser's wife herself sets off to rescue Geser and the entire nation from being destroyed by the demon. This apparent discrepancy is a relic of an ambivalent variation.

The following stages in the development of the plot can thus be distinguished:

- 1) Geser slays the Demon of the North after seducing his wife.
- 2) At some point a sort of "ethical dissonance" appears to have emerged, and in order to resolve it, one of the type motifs of narrative folklore is added: the wife had already belonged to the hero at some earlier stage but had been abducted. In order to make this scene possible, two once-distinct characters combine.
- 3) The previous state of affairs cannot, however, simply be erased from the "epic memory" and replaced by the abduction motif. The resulting interpretation is a compromise: Geser's wife sets off to the demon of her own accord.
- 4) Although this motif does correspond to the ambivalent nature of this character, the plot is wanting in logic and needs motivation or explanation. The result is a motif in which the wife sacrifices herself in

order to rescue Geser and the whole nation from the plague brought on by the demon.

5) The next stage, in which the demon is relieved of his responsibility as the cause of this destruction, does not so much serve the demon's original "innocence" as the overall plot of the epic, in which the dominant action is lasting conflict between the hostile uncle Tsoton, the source of all misfortune, and Geser. All conflicts ultimately center around this core.

6) Outside the literary monument, the oral tradition takes a shortcut in the plot development process. Stages 3, 4, and 5 are reduced almost to nothing and are replaced by a generalized wife-abduction motif.

This example demonstrates some of the routes that can be taken by the epic improvisation process, though it must be stressed that it so far applies to only one plot variation. Let us therefore take a look at additional examples in order to illustrate some new, independent plot formations.

2. In the Tibetan redactions the story of Geser's campaign against the North sometimes features another female character—a witch related to the Demon of the North (oral Amdo variant; Potanin 1893:25). In the plot variant quoted above, this character acquires an important role and in the Mongolian version tries to cast a spell on Geser on his homeward journey (variation on the potion motif). In order to carry out this plot, an alien text is used—an episode taken from medieval Chinese (Ligeti 1951:346-51) or Tibetan (Jondon 1989:70) tales and preserved in chapter 5 of the literary version. As the plot development proceeds, this becomes a new main chapter: the turning of Geser into an ass, encountered on two occasions in the written versions, as an extensive redaction (the Lobsag demon) and as a short variation (chapter 6; see Heissig 1980). Having bewitched Geser, the demon abducts his wife.

Altering the motivation for the campaign against the North (fetching the abducted wife) thus makes for an addition to the plot in the chapter analyzed above, and the wife-abduction motif earlier encountered in the oral tradition is developed independently, as a separate plot theme. The abduction motif is assimilated into an equally popular transformation motif so that the latter first appears virtually by way of explanation for the situation in the abduction proper. One relic of the prototype configuration of the motifs is the role of Geser's wife in the new situation: it is through her fault, or because of her deception, that the demon succeeds in bewitching the hero. Thus one main chapter becomes two as a consequence of the plot development process.

3. The interpretation of the acquiring or returning motif would appear to provide Geser with moral justification for his campaign against the North. There are, however, other possible explanations of his motives, especially the concept of the demon's inherent evil, from which the land must be freed. What is more, this fits in with Geser's mission as a cultural hero. In developing this archaic motif the demon ruler of the North is thus no longer simply the primordial ruler of his demonic world, but also a usurper from whose unlawful power his subjects, and even those closest to him, are eager to free themselves the moment they get the chance. In this situation Geser assumes the capacity of a ruler upholding peace, the ruler of the ideal Buddhist empire and the creator of a harmonious world order. The next step in this reconception is that the kingdom conquered by Geser did in fact originally (or in principle) belong to him. In other words, we have here the same process as that observed in connection with the wife to be acquired or returned.

Consider the following sequence of interpretations:

- an "alien" world is ruled by a demon but possesses valuables that can be seized;
- an "alien," demonic world possesses valuables that were once seized from their rightful owner and must be returned;
- an "alien," demonic world is by nature aggressive and a potential threat to the harmony and existence of the subject's own world and must therefore be rendered harmless and destroyed;
- an "alien" world can be purified of its demonic filth and used as part of the subject's own world;
- an "alien" world is a "demonized" part of the subject's own world and must be purified and returned to the care of the subject's own world;
- the whole world in principle belongs to the subject (= Geser), and all that is "alien" to it (= demonic) must be deemed unlawful and be destroyed.

This mythological logic is of course universal and is by no means restricted solely to the development of epic traditions; there are signs of it even in contemporary political thinking.

Assuming that the demon is potentially dangerous, Geser's campaign against him could be prevented but is essential. In this case the marriage themes recede into the background. This is precisely the state of affairs in the chapters about the Andulma Khan, the Rakshas demons' Khan, the Gumbu Khan, and the Nachin Khan, all of which describe Geser's

campaigns and hostilities against each of the demon rulers. It can be proved that all these characters are duplications of one and the same Demon of the North, since features and epithets distinguishing him are to be found in their names (see Nekljudov 1984:197-98). Further proof of their genetic affinity is the wealth of direct textual similarities. But although the first stage in the development of these chapters is tied in with the theme of the campaign against the Demon of the North, the second stage is bound up with the chapter telling about the war with the Sharaigols (e.g., the campaign episodes, the invasion of the demon's camp, the accounts of the battles and duels; see especially Heissig 1983a). Four extensive new chapters thus emerge on the basis of the productive thematic, compositional, and stylistic models originally contained in two chapters.

4. Sizeable fragments of epic entities have been lifted straight from the oral Mongolian tradition to the literary epic material. These episodes deal with a meeting between a hero and a warrior maiden or a wizard—the daughter of some otherworld deity. There are no written records of this motif as an independent entity. The story of the duel and marriage with this being belongs in chapter one of the literary version and appears as a section on its own in the Dzaja version (see Heissig 1983b). A continuation of this motif is to be found in some of the episodes in the literary version connected with the name of Geser's third wife, Adzhu-Mergen.<sup>1</sup> Naturally there are numerous examples of the use of Mongolian oral tradition as elements of the literary tradition, but this case alone seems to connect with the Geseriad an entire epic motif with a central figure identified as Geser. Again this is an example of a new epic formation.

5. Certain problems were encountered in creating the Mongolian epic compilation and incorporating the plot of Andulma Khan, for in it the heroes slain in the Sharaigol war appear as living beings. In order to eradicate this illogicality, a new episode is devised, in which Geser raises his heroes from the dead (Lörincz 1971:61-76). This smallish scene was probably originally intended as an introduction to the section telling of the Andulma Khan (Heissig 1971:43-44) and did not become a separate entity until later. It clearly originates in the oral tradition, or at least its rhythms indicate that it was recorded from an authentic epic recitative, as was the Adzu-Mergen episode in the Zaja version (see Heissig 1983a).

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<sup>1</sup> Also in the form Achu-Mergen, Alu-Mergen, or Alma-Mergen; see Nekljudov 1984:185-87.

It should be stressed yet again that in all the cases mentioned the new product was in all probability created in the oral tradition as a simple performance event by some singer. This happens, for example, when

- an improviser's plot variation strays so far that it can no longer be regarded as a performance of the same text;
- an epithet for one character begins to serve as the name of a new character;
- the duplication of an episode in a new variation becomes a new episode;
- some hero encountered in the tradition is directly identified with Geser, in which case the biography of the former becomes attached to Geser without greatly changing the text;
- it is necessary to eliminate illogicalities in the plot caused by linking episodes together, leading to the formation of a new main chapter.

We can, of course, only guess at the process by which new Mongolian epic texts were created some centuries ago. We have, however, had an opportunity to observe a similar process in contemporary folklore through the East Mongolian singers Choinhor and Sambudash. In 1974 three epic poems on Geser themes, telling of battles against Gilban Shar and Galdan-mangus and the birth of Gilban Shar, were recorded from them (Nekljudov and Tömörçeren 1982, 1985).

Choinhor learned the song about the battle of Geser against Gilban Shar from the Dzarut singer Haldzhin Mangus and, it would seem, reproduced it almost verbatim. By contrast, Geser's battle against Galdan-mangus turns out to be a variation on the former. The opening and closing episodes, as well as those describing the chasing of the enemy and the duel, are almost identical in these texts, but the latter of the songs mentioned is only one-third of the length of the first and its plot has been simplified. In the former poem Geser has two adversaries (Mangus and Mangus's daughter), in the latter only one (Galdan-mangus), and the wife-abduction motif is reduced to a mere intention. The song of Galdan-mangus was, however, presented as if it were a new work, a continuation of the song telling of Gilban Shar. At the beginning of the Galdan-mangus tale Choinhor summarizes the plot of the previous song, and he also refers to a few of the episodes later in the text: Geser's charger came to a halt "at the same point as in the previous story;" the heavenly sisters give the hero a magic weapon "with the instructions mentioned before;" the horse replies to Geser "as before;" and so on. Finally, it turns out that Galdan-mangus "remained unvanquished residing in the previously

conquered land of Mangus.” In other words, this is again a reference to the previous song. The name of the protagonist—Galdan—is according to Choinhor just “an ordinary Mangus name.”

What makes such free variation of the original text and the birth of a “new song product” possible?

In the first song Mangus does not, to be precise, have a name. As is often the case in the epics of the Mongolian peoples, he has descriptive epithets instead of a proper name: “twelve-headed enormously giant-like” and “twenty-four-headed red-bald” (see Lörincz 1970:325-31). It is, of course, possible that this creature was in the prototype text called Galdan. But it should be noted that the vagueness of the names for the epic demons indicates that they were conceived of as a vague band of terrible beings. The singer does not commit an error of content if he calls the same being by different names (epithets typical in the Mongolian tradition or “names for the devil”). It is precisely this strategy that opens up the way to the duplication of the character, and the phenomenon does not conflict with the general content of the song.

In the latter poem the wife-abducting motif is reduced to the minimum: “Mangus came to take one of Geser’s lawful wives.” Nor is the plot realized, for no abduction takes place. Instead there is the motif of a plague sent by the monster, which is missing from the Gilban Shar song but is to be found in the sixth chapter of the literary version of the Geseriad. It will be recalled that in the literary compilation the plague was the outcome of a plot by Tsoton, whereas in this particular variant it is the consequence of the mythological logic outlined earlier: the plague is a manifestation of the monster’s malice, its natural emanation. The epic conflict leads to a whole range of motifs: the demon must be destroyed not only because it was not completely overcome the first time but also because of its aggressiveness and maliciousness. It is not quite clear whether the singer learned the motif of the plague-bringing Mangus from a written version of the Geseriad he had read at some time or whether it was already featured in the prototype version of Haldzhin-mangus. The two explanations are equally possible. Nevertheless both the plague and the abduction of Geser’s wife are to be found in the literary compilation, whereas only one of the motifs appears at a time in the oral versions of Choinhor.

Sambudash’s song (on the birth of Gilban Shar) is based on a narrative in prose form that the singer heard in childhood from an old man. There were probably two such stories: the text is divided into two almost equal episodes only loosely linked to one another. The first tells of the many-headed witch Gilban Shar born into a Mangus family and of his schooling by a devilish hermit lama (Geser is not mentioned at all in this



episode). The second part tells how the newborn Gilban Shar was fed human children abducted by his father. On learning of this, Geser abducts Mangus's youngest son and does not return him until the demon promises to stop his abductions (this time there is no mention of Gilban Shar). The background to the first episode is not clear, but it fits in well with the Mongolian folk tradition. The second episode probably ties in with the didactic story popular in Central Asia of the children stolen by the man-eater Rakshas and the repentance caused by the reprimands of the emperor's devout son Sutasoma (Jondon 1989:113-14).

By a series of fortunate coincidences, we have thus had a chance to observe the life of tradition at a stage in which, in its oral form, either the plot becomes differentiated (= Choinhor's two texts in place of the one prototype), or the opposite—integration—takes place and two songs combine (= Sambudash's text). There is every reason to assume that similarities exist between this process and the formation of new main chapters in the Mongolian Geseriad a few centuries ago. Let us now take a closer look at some of the chief mechanisms in this process. These mechanisms may lead to the differentiation or integration of song motifs and may in both cases apply to characters (the hero, his partner, or his antagonist) or plot elements (motifs and episodes).

1. At the hub of the integration process is the main character, Geser, who is assimilated with the other heroes in narratives, such as heroes of the Mongolian epic unfamiliar to us, the numerous anonymous Central and East Asian characters of narratives, the emperor's son Sutasoma who admonishes the man-eater in the didactic narrative of Tibet, and so on. These elements integrate under special conditions in which one character is understood as a manifestation of another, or names that sound alike combine, or the adventures of some other, nameless hero become attached to the biography of the focal hero, and so forth. It is less common to find a merging of two partners of a single hero (as Aralgo-goa and Tümen Dzhirgalang above), and it is highly unusual (though not entirely unknown) to see the assimilation of two mutually antagonistic figures.

2. The differentiation process concerns above all the form of the antagonist. This process is a result of the attitude towards the demons in epics as an undifferentiated band, the detachment of epithets, names, and nicknames, and, as a consequence, the birth of new characters as described above. The differentiation process applies to a lesser extent to the hero's partners. An example of this phenomenon in our material is the appearance of Geser's additional new wife Has Shiher (Jasper-sugary). This figure could have emerged by differentiation on the basis of the epithets used for

the other wives. The main character does not here become the object of a differentiation process.

3. The integration process is manifest in the plot development as the coupling of new plot elements with the narrative, as the linking of one text with another, as plot contaminations, and as the formation of epic cycles. This process naturally ties in closely with the assimilation of characters and applies especially to the main character.

4. The same applies to plot differentiation, the reproduction of a plot model, the duplication of an episode, and the resulting differentiation and independence. It is particularly frequent in the duplication process of antagonistic characters.

5. One special differentiating device in the development of the plot is a change in the motivation for events. This is a highly productive device and easily leads to the emergence of new narrative entities.

Finally, it should be remembered that every case of epic redevelopment takes place within the framework of the singer's improvisation, to begin with in the form of variation on certain thematic elements of the text, so that a maximum increase in the extent of the variation leads to the evolution of the original version and the formation of a new redaction. Variation does, however, demand a certain stability in content, whereas the trend towards independence of a new product is possible only if this similarity is disrupted. It may be assumed that such disruption often occurs in the audience's reception, so that subsequent tradition serves to legitimize new products.

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