

Epos and National Identity: Transformations and Incarnations

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Myth, History, and Nationalism

In his 1990 book E. J. Hobsbawm outlines the history of nationalism. He begins with the French Revolution, proceeds through stages like “proto-nationalism,” “transformation” (1870-1918), and the “apogee” of nationalism (1918-50) to the late twentieth century, and finally ends up with a prophecy according to which (in light of the progress in the study and analysis of nations) nationalism is past its peak: “The owl of Minerva which brings wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling round nations and nationalism” (182-83).

Obviously something unexpected happened to Minerva’s owl. The book was published in 1990, and as we now know, Hobsbawm’s vision did not come true. One of the reasons might be that in his book the word *myth* appears only in the subheading—not anywhere else. It is perhaps to history that we have to return in order to discover the roots of our ideas and ideologies, triumphs and tragedies—but the problem is that national history is a myth suppressing and surpassing time rather than a true history.¹

For an epic scholar the mythic patterns of history are well known: heroic ancestors and their monstrous antagonists, golden ages of cultural prosperity and the darker ages, migration and settlement stories, defeats and victories (cf. Smith 1984:292-93). There is no single, specific heroic or mythic age, but a constant interplay between myth and reality, past and present—no history, but “a perpetually re-created song of truth” (Zumthor 1990:84). We may take as an example the South Slavic epic poetry that experienced a dynamic, productive period continuing well into the twentieth century (e.g., Lord 1960:14-17). The chief reason for this phenomenon

¹ On returning to history, see Hutchinson 1992:103; on national history as myth, Herzfeld 1987:82.

was that there were clear points of comparison and analogy between the contents of the old poems about earlier history and what was occurring in more recent history: the uprisings of 1804-6 and 1815-16, the constant resistance to Turkish rule (in which some of the singers likewise took part, sometimes actively, sometimes watching from the sidelines). Continuous warfare with occupying forces, conflict between different sectors of the population, social, cultural, and economic heterogeneity—all helped to strengthen the vitality of improvisatory poetry (among Christian as well as Moslem singers). This situation also inspired a large number of new epic songs. Narrative poetry did not find itself in a state of stagnation; it was in use as a productive pattern adapting to new situations.² From that point of view the meaning of, for example, the Battle of Kosovo (1389) for the Christian Serbs is more myth than history—a myth of defeat.

Transformations of Epic Models

As is well known, German romanticism took Homer as a paragon or pattern for the epos in the eighteenth century and, as Lauri Honko has stated (1992:2), the birth of an epic signaled the emergence of literature, but also the emergence of nation. This paragon was not a blueprint, but a flexible tool in the hands of educated, nationalistic authors.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the German politician, poet, and wandering bard Wilhelm Jordan (1819-1904) created the epos *Die Nibelunge* consisting of two parts: *Die Sigfridsage* (1868) and *Hildebrands Heimkehr* (1874). In his *Epische Briefe* Jordan declared that he was in fact “The German Homer,” a kind of embodiment or incarnation of an epic poet, matured at the correct stage of development of the people, in a fateful hour occurring only once in a thousand years. According to his epic vision, the German people were on the way toward becoming the leading world power and supreme religion. The task of the national bard was to disclose the “ripened fruit” that was the work of the people (*Volksarbeit*) over those thousand years (1876:27-37, 56; cf. Martini 1974:387-88). Jordan traveled from town to town throughout half of Europe performing his own epics and also made a tour to America in 1871. His works remained relatively unimportant in the history of world literature, but they form an interesting example of using (or adapting) some of the poetic devices of epic folk

² Koljević (1980:215-321) gives a comprehensive account of the context of Christian Serbian epics.

poetry, plot structures, tropes, images, and allusions in a new sociohistorical context.

It is worth noticing that this model of creating an epos, based on romantic-heroic historicism and nationalism and eulogizing the politics of Bismarckian Germany, was the one championed by Andrejs Pumpurs, the author of the Latvian national epos *Lāčplēsis* (*Bear Slayer*). In the preface to his work Pumpurs stated that he wanted to prove that the Baltic peoples also belonged to the Aryan epic peoples of Europe—and not only the Greeks and the Germans, as Jordan insisted (Pumpurs 1988:141; Rudzītis 1988:17-18). He went on with creating his epic on the basis of Latvian etiological tales, folktales, local legends, wedding songs, and other items excerpted from folklore. The origin of the main plot is to be found in folktales describing a powerful, supernatural hero, brought up by a she-bear. In folktales this hero fights against various monsters, while in *Lāčplēsis* he strives not only against mythic but also against human enemies, the German Knights of the Sword. Even with its abundant folklore motifs his epic is—because of its passages of national romantic proclamation and artistic metrical devices—very far from a folklore-based work, resembling in this sense the works of Wilhelm Jordan. Pumpurs' natural, mythical philosophy is, however, significantly removed from the militant, expansionist overtones of the German nationalist.

The epos of Andrejs Pumpurs did not fall into oblivion. At the end of the nineteenth century the *Bear Slayer* had the same kind of significance as the *Kalevala* for the Finns or the *Kalevipoeg* for the Estonians. Despite its romantic-nationalistic groundwork the epos continued to be published even during the Soviet period. One reason for this phenomenon was probably that the antagonists in Pumpurs' tale are the knights of the sword and feudal rulers. Recently, in the years of struggle for independence, the *Bear Slayer* acquired new political connotations. During the celebrations of the centennial of the epos (1988), the periodical *Avots* (*Fountain*) published a libretto of a rock opera based on the poem. Taking place at the same time was the premiere of the dramatization of Pumpurs' work, and the Latvian writers' union organized an international seminar dedicated to the *Bear Slayer*.

Once again the old paragon has been adapted according to the changing political and sociohistorical contexts. Models of textualization appear to be productive when their conventions, basic contents, and networks of interpretation are related to the dynamic (or emerging) trends of thought or dominant ideological concepts (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990:75-78). The process of using these models is very often stimulated by a general idealistic current represented by a nucleus group of cultural

activists or by an organization, although the national-political stimulus may come from the power machinery of society.

The Epic of Geser

The term *epos* has normally been used of literary epics created by known or unknown authors, in some cases even of oral-derived epic collations or conglomerates. In fact, the borders between these categories are flexible. Sometimes the term has been used to refer to a cycle of epic poems (for example, incorporated around one main hero) belonging to some particular nation or ethnic group; this takes place when the poems have an epic-like significance for the community in contact with them. Such significance can reach from mythic and cosmogonic meanings to the contemporary use of folk epics, for instance to propagate national identity and integrity.

The epic of Geser is among the best known and most widespread epic traditions in the world. The influence of Tibetan civilization can be seen in most of the oral and literary versions of this epic. It is known in Tibet, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (in China), Buryatia (in Russia), and Ladakh (India). There are also versions in Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and among various Tibeto-Burmese, Turkish, and Tunghus tribes (Herrmann 1990:485; Nekljudov 1984:145; Stein 1959:59-60). In many cases the translation of the hero to some particular tradition has been so natural that scholars formerly disputing matters like “original form,” “initial stage,” or “origin,” or trying to locate the “original manuscript” or searching for the idealistic “poeta anonymus” (see Herrmann 1990:496-501), have been able to produce evidence in order to explain the epic of Geser as a national treasury of this or that nation.

On the basis of new (oral as well as literary) collections and materials, it is possible to create a more complete and complex picture of this epic. At present there is enough evidence to state that Geser is best preserved in Tibet and its adjacent areas in oral and in literary form. Formerly, unfamiliarity with the Tibetan literary monuments and the scarcity of collected oral versions led to various speculative fallacies created at the writing table by European scholars (Herrmann 1990:500-1). The western concept of *epos* modeled on Homer was misleading, and research was conducted without sufficient knowledge of cultural history, religion, educational conditions, oral tradition, and so forth. During the past few decades, research based on new materials and methods has been able to

override these earlier concepts,³ sometimes even in cases in which the prior results seemed to be on solid ground. In addition to the research on the epic of Geser, we find parallel examples on Central Asian epic.⁴ In the following I intend to examine a few examples of Geser epic as a manifestation of cultural identity, but dozens of other cases may be found as well.

In outline the Tibetan version (from Amdo) could be summarized in the following way (see Nekljudov 1984:169-80):

In the kingdom of gLing there was no king and chaos prevailed. One of the sons of the Heavenly God was sent down to the earth. He was reborn into a noble family (or as a son of a mountain spirit). As a baby he was slobbering and deformed, and was given the name Džoru. Even as a child he began to destroy demons and various monsters. As an adolescent he came to the throne and earned the beautiful Brugmo as consort. He also obtained his magic horse, heroic shape, and proper name. The first heroic deed was annihilation of the demon of the North. The demon's wife Meza Bumskiid helped him to accomplish this task, but after the victory she gave Geser the herb of forgetfulness and so he stayed in the North. At home Geser's uncle Khrotung tried to seduce Brugmo—without any success. Khrotung betrayed his land and led the Hories to gLing. The Hories carried off Brugmo. Geser was finally able to break the spell with the help of heavenly forces and hurried to the camp of the enemies disguised as a scabby boy. By means of magic and supernatural power he destroyed the king of the Hories, subdued his kingdom and returned to gLing.

Most of the main elements of the above-mentioned summary (its “plot-structure” or “macrostructure” or “chain of macropropositions” or “mental text”) are also found in the Ladakh and Mongolian versions. There are, however, huge differences in different regions that I have not mentioned. The variation is abundant, especially on the level of surface structure, and not only in the oral versions but also in the literary texts.⁵ As a result we get a multi-dimensional network of possible actualizations of this epic.

³ See, e.g., Bayartu 1989; Halén 1990; Heissig 1980, 1983, 1987; Nekljudov 1984.

⁴ For example, the Oirat/Kalmyk epic Džangar or the oral epic poetry of the Turkic peoples—see, e.g., Bitkeev 1992:6-14; Džamtso 1988:139-48; Harvilahti 1993; Reichl 1992.

⁵ See Nekljudov 1984:146; Herrmann 1990:486-87, 490-96; 'Jam-dpal rgyal-mtsho 1990:478.

According to the materials now available, there are in Tibet dozens of volumes, more than one million verses in different “versions” of the epic. The collection of the Geser epic started during a critical stage: the work that had begun in the 1950s was totally interrupted during the cultural revolution and continued only after 1978. By 1986 Tibetan scholars had already recorded 29 chapters (as they say) of the oral forms of this epic, a total of 985 sound cassettes (see Tunzhu 1988:154; 'Jam-dpal rgyal-mtsho 1990:472). It is clear that research conducted on the basis of these collections will give unprecedented results.

The Tibetan Oral Epos

As to their artistic skill, the Tibetan performers can be divided into several classes—from respectable and skillful masters to untalented and poor ones. The performances formerly had a ritual character: when the singers started to sing, an incense table was set up with a big portrait of Geser, his thirty heroes and concubines on either side. Different paraphernalia (bows, arrows, swords believed to have been used by the hero) were brought, butter lamps were lit, and bowls with alcohol were served for the Gods. By reading the Buddhist scriptures, with eyes closed, legs crossed, beads in hands, the singer got into a trance and during the possession Geser or some other hero entered his body. Once the sacred spirit had entered him, the performer started to sing. Usually the mode of performance was flexible and varied. The singers could perform on various occasions and for different audiences, who were able to choose the chapter to be performed according to the situation.⁶ Such a description of “the epos in the making” clearly shows how important it is to modify our Western literary-based concept of the epos (cf. Honko 1992).

Geser as a Buddhist Epos of the Mongols

In the *Nomči qatunu Geser*, one of the Mongolian literary versions, there is an appendix, a sort of religious legend or sutra, called “Scripture of the meeting of the Dalai Lama and Geser Khan.” In this chapter Lama Erdeni (Dalai Lama) is meditating when he suddenly hears a booming sound from heaven: Geser Khan appears to him in the night sky and gives

⁶ 'Jam-dpal rgyal-mtsho 1990:474-78; see Stein 1959:7-9 and Nekljudov 1984:150.

strict rules and instructions concerning ritual behavior and sacraments. Then he disappears back into the night with his magic horse at a fantastic speed. According to this holy scripture, Geser Khan is in fact the reincarnation of Avalokiteśvara. Those who believe in these words will find the way to salvation, but Geser Khan's spirit will bring the unbeliever misfortune.⁷

This sutra added to the heroic epic of Geser aimed at the creation of a lamaistic religious epic text. Bayartu (1989:232-33) and Halén (1990:159-63) have even found a historical basis for this sutra. In 1578 the dGe-lugs-pa leader bSod-nams rgya-mtsho (later the third Dalai Lama) and the leader of the Tümet Mongols, Altan Khan, met each other near Köke-nuur. The Altan Khan became a Buddhist, and the yellow sect and Geser spread over the Mongolian world. According to Halén (160-61), Geser Khan might have been identified with Altan Khan through folk etymology, based on the identical meaning of Mongolian *altan* "gold" and Tibetan *gser* "gold." The joining together of Geser and the Dalai Lama may have been conscious lamaistic propaganda, as Bayartu indicates, or an unambitious expression of piety and cultural identity: Geser was as an object of worship equal to the Supreme Divinities. Later Geser was also identified with the war god Guan Yu, and in consequence the warlord Baron Roman Ungern von Sternberg was also considered to be an incarnation of Geser.⁸

The Beijing Xylograph Edition of Geser

The epos was printed in Beijing as a block-printing edition in old Mongolian script in 1716. This edition does not contain any information about the compilers.⁹ The reasons were political: the publishers had good reason to be cautious with the censorship of the Qing dynasty (see Bayartu 1989:2, 197, 249). On each page of this edition is, in Chinese characters, the title *Sān gúo zhì*, "The Chronicle of Three Kingdoms," a title that referred not to the epic of Geser but to a chronicle published under the first Qing emperor. According to Bayartu, this was a trick invented in order to

⁷ See in detail, e.g., Bayartu 1989:228-30 and Halén 1990:159-61.

⁸ See in detail Bayartu 1989:234, 244; Halén 1990:163; Riftin 1991:163-64.

⁹ According to Heissig (1983:513, 1987:1156), this edition is most probably based on a West Mongolian Oirat oral version; see also Damdinsüren 1957:56. Halén (1990:163) states additionally that the language of the Beijing version differs from the classical written Mongolian and is close to the spoken vernacular of the Köke-nuur Öölöts.

mislead the censors: the chronicle was in fact translated into Mongolian (*yurban ulus-un bičig*), but remained unpublished. Under this disguise the epic of Geser was published in Mongolian, although the work clearly propagated the heroic ideals of the Mongols and maintained the national spirit, longing for restoration of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (see Bayartu 1989:246-47, 249-50).

The Buryat Epic of Geser in the Oral and Literary Tradition

In Buryat oral epic tradition the versions produced may range from more than ten thousand lines among one group of the northern Buryats (Ehirit-Bulagats) to less than a thousand among the Hori Buryats. Ehirit-Bulagat epic poetry also contains more archaic, mythical features than that of the other groups. In some of the oral versions this epic has clearly maintained the macrostructure of a literary version (for example, the Beijing xylograph), but the stylistic figures and the poetic devices are used in accordance with the Buryat oral epic tradition alongside elements attributable to the singer's personal style (see Lörincz 1975:64-65, Nekljudov 1984:208, 211). Many of the Buryat versions represent the structures and contents of the local tradition and are relatively independent of the literary sources. The Ehirit-Bulagat version is especially interesting with its abundant shamanistic features (Nekljudov 1984:206-7).

On the basis of versions collected among the Buryats, a compilation bearing the title "The Heroic Epos of the Buryats" was published in Russian in 1973. A Russian poet named Semën Lipkin has declared himself to be the translator. The text of this version of Geser is based on Namdžil Baldano's collation in the Buryat language (24,000 verses), and is founded (as stated in the book) "almost entirely" on original versions. Four chapters (the first, second, sixth, and ninth) have actually been translated into Russian by the folklorist Aleksei Ulanov in a word-for-word prose format, and five are included only as summaries. In his preface Ulanov states that in the translation process "the content, style and poetic devices have been observed" and that "only side-episodes hampering the integrity of the plot have been removed." Finally, Lipkin has contrived a poetic translation using regular rhyme and other poetic features unknown not only in Buryat but also in Russian epic poetry. Baldano thus played the role of the Elias Lönnrot of the Buryats, Ulanov translated his text into Russian prose, and Lipkin versified the result called "Geser: The Heroic Epos of the Buryats." The title page does, however, announce "Translation from the Buryat language by Semën Lipkin."

The different forms of the Geser epic I have mentioned give a glimpse of the different dimensions of the concept of “epos”: 1) oral, living epic poetry, 2) literary epos containing elements of sacral text, 3) literary epos serving the purpose of ethnic or national integrity, and 4) collation (in a language other than the original) created in accordance with the ideological program of a multinational state.

In the life-cycle of the Geser epic, the situation is right now rather interesting. The ritual forms of performance and genuine oral traditions are on the decline, although there still are productive singers in Tibet. During the 1980s the singers won social appreciation as members of the Political Consultation Committee and the Tibet Society for Folk Literature and Art. Through modern editions, radio and television programs, orchestral arrangements, and conferences the epic of Geser reappears in new forms and in new incarnations. As for the Mongols, Geser and Chenggis Khan are the main national heroes. In the folk tradition there is also a belief that, according to a decree given by Buddha and Hormusta, the Heavenly God, Geser will reappear as an incarnation of Chenggis Khan in order to rule over the world (Bayartu 1989:243-44). The present-day revitalization of the worship of Chenggis Khan, the new editions of the Geser epic, festivals, concerts, and so forth are indications of the new life of the heroic culture. These new avatars of the old epic heroes will certainly imply new meanings and consequences.

Conclusion

It is possible to identify a whole network of epic genres serving the purpose of epos: oral and literary creations, short epic poems, and long conglomerates. The works also vary in genre: sacral texts and secular forms, poetic forms but also prose-texts and mixed forms in which verse and prose alternate. In addition to these, as a rule, excerpts from different genres play an important role (chapters in verse hagiography or panegyric, fragments of lyric elegy or laments, for example). In oral epos narrated, recited, and sung modes are possible—with or without the accompaniment of an instrument. There are evidently folklore-based written versions, but also abundant examples of literary creations in which the poet has used only a limited number of the basic elements of folk poetry. Whatever the case, the desire to reinforce the people’s self-esteem and to arouse respect for their own heritage and culture is among the main tasks of an epos (even within an oral epic poetry culture): the hero is unconquered, invincible, since he is ours—and even if he was once defeated, he will be back one day,

as a liberator of his people, driven by revenge. When events warrant—in times of political awakening, conflicting ideological interests, or even a state of war—an epos may be employed as a kind of myth-like weapon for ideological purposes, but that is only one of the manifestations of the use of epics in the folklore process (cf. Honko 1991:32-33, 44). The political role of the epics in strengthening cultural and national identity varies over a large spectrum according to the prevailing sociocultural situation. The use of epics in cultural life involves many positive values but also elements demanding careful deliberation. But we may well ask who will conduct the deliberations, since we are dealing with a phenomenon capable of surviving historical periods, empires, and ideologies.

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