

Emblem of Minority, Substitute for Sovereignty: The Case of Buryatia

Roberte N. Hamayon

For many peoples the fall of the Soviet regime saw the disappearance of a structure that had ensured their membership of entities with which they had in fact been only partially able to identify. This is true of the Buryats and Russians living in Buryatia, a former autonomous republic on the shores of Lake Baikal in southern central Siberia.

Though the Buryats have given their country its name, they know that they are not masters there. A little over half of them actually live there (249,500 out of 421,600 in 1989), representing only a quarter of the population. The rest live in either one of two national districts of the Russian Federation (77,300 in Ust'-Orda in the province of Irkutsk to the west of Baikal and 66,100 in Aga in the province of Chita to the East).¹

Russians have been living in Buryatia in large numbers for several generations and are dominant in every respect; however it is by no means certain that they can still claim the country as their own. Though their ancestors long ago conquered the people after whom the republic is named, the fall of the USSR has created a space in which Buryat emancipation has become at least a thinkable possibility.

Buryatia's reaction to the collapse of the old certainties was rapid, unusual – indeed unique in Siberia, though similar to some responses in Turkophone central Asia – and paradoxical in content. It is at any rate from this perspective that I propose to examine here a process set in motion in 1990 and centring on Geser, the hero of a Buryat epic, whose aim was to construct an emblem for this republic with its Russian majority. The question I shall address is, can this initiative be seen as a reconstruction of identity, and if so, of whose?

*

The initial impetus for this process of construction came from a decision taken by the Supreme Soviet of Buryatia, when it proclaimed its own sovereignty. On 15 November 1990 a 'Geseriad' department was set up in the Ministry of Culture, under the aegis of the President of the Council of Ministers, and given the task of celebrating the Geser epic. This decision, taken by a Russian-dominated government, was immediately appropriated and implemented by the official Buryat intelligentsia.

Their first act was to announce that what is generally regarded as the epic's oldest version² was now a thousand years old. This is also, and more importantly, the only authentically Buryat version of a story known throughout Tibet and Mongolia. The Buryat branch of the Academy of Sciences joined forces with the Writers' Union to organise a conference at which the epic's age would be announced, and to publish its proceedings

(*Gêsêriada* 1991). They also initiated celebrations, publications, press campaigns and other efforts in the run-up to the anniversary, scheduled for 1995.

The 'Geser Games' were held in summer at the birthplaces of the great bards of the pre-Soviet era. They included a shamanic ritual to introduce the hero's 'spirit' into the official banner, a visit to a Buddhist shrine and 'games' of both ritual and sporting significance (wrestling, archery). The route of the banner's ceremonial journey from place to place for a succession of celebrations acquired a political significance. It took in all three territories inhabited by the Buryats, the republic and both national districts, thus symbolically reuniting territories that had been separated in 1937, when accusations of pan-Mongolism and collaboration with Japan were used as a pretext to inflict purges on the Buryats. Although the Supreme Soviet of Buryatia declared this division 'illegal' in June 1993 (Stroganova 1999, p. 120, n. 30), the issue never subsequently resurfaced.

A major celebration took place according to plan in July 1995. This international Festival-Forum was held in the capital Ulan-Ude, but did not receive the support hoped for (notably from Unesco, which had first been approached in 1991). This disappointed the organisers and left them bitter.

The events continued nevertheless. The year 1995 also saw the opening of the 'Geser Country' nature reserve in the Oka region where, according to the myth, the hero descended to earth. Posts dedicated to Geser (where he could tie up his horses) were erected near Ulan-Ude and at least thirty shrines were built in the other Buryat regions. The lives of the elites were regularly punctuated by publications and conferences. December 1999 saw the jubilee celebrations in Ulan-Ude of the bard whose version of the myth had been declared a thousand years old. Geser, his story and portrait appeared on websites. The hero's fame even extended to the labels on bottles of the local vodka. As though to give all this activity a spiritual significance, an ethno-cultural institute was officially planned, with a Buddhist centre on the ground floor and a shrine to Geser at the top, a sign of the new relationship between the hero and Buddhism.

*

One might be tempted to conclude that, because the call for territorial reunification never got off the ground and Buryatia's efforts were never crowned with international recognition, the process did not attain its goals. However it would almost certainly be more accurate to conclude that its real goals lay elsewhere.

Although the initial interest was in a particular version of the epic, attention subsequently focused on the hero alone. It is only in academic studies that the epic narrative itself has any real presence. Otherwise only the hero's name³ and portrait are invoked. Geser is represented with the features of a medieval warrior, apparently to lend credence to the idea that his story dates from 'a thousand years ago'. Clad in armour and bristling with weapons, he rides through the clouds on his winged horse. This image in itself conjurs up the essential elements of the epic, in which the hero defends his people's independence against all attempts at conquest. Thus the celebrations of Geser subtly combined a historicisation of the narrative, which became located in history when it was declared to be a thousand years old, with the preservation of the hero's mythical status in his portrait.

All these manifestations were confined to the official elites (politicians, intellectuals and artists), never catching the popular imagination. A degree of indifference on the part

of Buryatia's Russian population towards this hero who was not one of their own was perhaps only to have been expected. However the movement also failed to catch the imagination of ordinary Buryats, while its echoes never managed to reach the regions at the greatest distance from the capital.

Nevertheless millenarian movements unconnected to Geser were identified during the same period (1994–1995) in the Tunka region, where similar currents had been noted earlier (by Vampilon in 1919, Zhigmidon in 1933, cited by Stroganova 1999, p. 114, 119).

Furthermore the epic tradition was the most appropriate medium to guarantee the legitimacy of a symbolic construction of this type in Buryat eyes, while the hero chosen was the best known of all. No religion could have provided the basis for a national identity drawing on local inspiration. Shamanism, the religious background of the native peoples, could not have served, having been too long attacked by the Russian colonisers and too deeply despised for its links to a 'primitive, tribal' lifestyle incompatible with state centralism. Buddhism was already the official religion in too many countries and its arrival in Buryatia was recent, superficial and partial.

The epic, on the other hand, has long been recognised as a vehicle of ideology among the Turko-Mongol peoples of the steppes. Ritualised performances sanctify and legitimise the hero's ideals of self-defence and reproduction at both the individual and collective levels. It was thus self-evident that an epic hero would become an emblematic figure.⁴

Moreover the celebration of an epic hero at a politically significant level was not a Buryat invention; nor was it the first time that Geser had played such an important role for the Buryats.

In 1940 Stalin decided to obtain the support of the Kalmucks, a minority of Mongol origin who had migrated to the lower Volga region, by celebrating the 500th anniversary of the epic narrative of their hero Djangar. The 550th anniversary of this epic was celebrated in Kalmuckia in 1990. Similarly the Kirghiz commemorated the epic of their Manas following the change of regime.⁵

The specificity of Geser among Buryat heroes was nothing new. It emerged in the late-19th century in Transbaikalia: the hero drove out Buddhism, which had spread from Mongolia, and the epic was banned by the clergy as a result. During the 1930s Geser became symbolic of Buryat resistance to Russification and the territorial division of 1937.⁶

This symbolic specificity is intriguing because Geser is a borrowed hero. His name is derived from the Latin Caesar (which is also the root of the German Kaiser and the Russian Tsar). First adopted in Tibet (Stein 1959), he passed into Mongolia and from there into Buryatia. The Buryats know that they share their hero with the Mongols and Tibetans, but seem to be unaware of the origins of his name.

In Tibet Geser is the only hero, venerated as the proponent of Buddhism. In Mongolia and Buryatia Geser is simply the greatest of many. The Tibetan and Mongol Geser upholds Buddhism, whereas the Buryat Geser is either hostile to it, as in Transbaikalia, or indifferent as in the version said to be a thousand years old. Thus the Buryats have turned their borrowed hero into the opposite of what he represents in his cultures of origin.

The absence of any Buddhist element was used as an argument to prove that the version given millennial status was also the oldest and most authentic. It portrays a society split into two camps which are perpetually at war with each other, despite the periodic victories of the hero's camp over their enemy. Geser is simply the leader of the victorious camp. In all the other versions, on the other hand, he has a unifying, centralising role,

making these other versions more appropriate to reinforce an ideal at the highest political level, despite certain features betraying a Buddhist influence. However this was of little importance since what matters is the figure of Geser himself, rather than his story.

The stress on the hero's image and the form taken by his portraits suggest that what was at stake in this process was to construct a national emblem that would be purely symbolic. The celebrations of the epic revived a prestigious past and provided an embodiment of heroic values, but Geser's image as a medieval warrior meant he could not be seen as a potential leader. In other words his portraits represent the principle of defence, anchored in the distant past and idealised through its very outdatedness.

This dual appeal to history and to the symbolic function confers an aspect of what Gerschom Scholem terms 'messianic expectation' on the whole process. Scholem describes this as an 'appeal to an idealised past to provide an idealised vision of the future'. In a sense Geser's power had to have been demonstrated in the past so that his people could defend themselves later. The memory of his heroism had to be rooted in the most distant past in order to ensure his presence in the popular consciousness. For what matters is the 'expectation', in other words the symbolic construction itself.

*

In this light the process of celebration that unfolded in Buryatia around the figure of Geser throughout the decade between 1990 and 2000 appears as a symbolic way of getting round certain political problems. Launched in a context of radical change, it unfolded without producing any real change. The demands for territorial reunification had faded by 1995. Geser's promotion to the rank of national emblem remained confined to the Russian spheres of influence where it originated, gathering no popular recognition.

Does this mean it has no implications for Buryat ethnicity? In fact it has had two concrete results in this area. Firstly the proclamation of the antiquity of their epic tradition simultaneously provided the Buryats, whose culture had hitherto been regarded as entirely oral, with both a history and a literature. Secondly, the creation of a nature reserve with a Buryat name established their traditional lifestyle as respectful of Nature and promoted it to the rank of ecological philosophy at an international level. These re-evaluations close the book on the denigration they previously suffered. They offer the Buryats an oblique strategy that enables them to accept their status as a minority rather than actually changing their situation. They are all the more able to compromise as individuals because, at the level of the collectivity, their culture is now seen in a more positive light and their Geser has a broader emblematic role.

For it is at the level of the Republic of Buryatia that the enterprise should be judged. It expresses a desire on the part of the state to assert its political individuality and rootedness in its territory, given that it cannot turn its dream of sovereignty into reality. It would seem that the Russian majority of this little entity far from Moscow, itself a minority in the federation of states as a whole, has adopted the cultural image of its own local minority in order to assert its independent identity in relation to the central power. Any reconstruction of identity has been carried out on a territorial rather than an ethnic basis, by combining two minority positions. The result is that the Russians of Buryatia must be regarded as different from all the others.

But from another angle the process we have examined here can also be seen as a manoeuvre on the part of the elites who, while apparently rebuilding traditional legitimacy,

were seeking to consolidate their power anew, after it had been threatened by change. Many details of the way that the Buryat Geser epic acquired its thousand-year status support this view. The organisers of the 'Geser Games' followed strategies which had been tried and tested by the Soviet authorities: the use of ritual, the inclusion of traditional elements of various origins removed from their contexts, and a deliberate dissociation of form and content. The name given to the games themselves and the season in which they were held are proof enough of this. For while ritual 'games' of this type were commonly held in summer, they were never associated with epics or with their heroes, while the ritual performance of epics was prohibited in summer, the proper period for these lasting from the start of autumn to the end of the hunting season.

Roberte Nicole Hamayon

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes et GÉODE, Université Paris-X

Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear

References

- Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam, 'Introduction (Demography and the Politics of Identity in the Russian Federation)', *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia* 34(1), 1995, pp. 4–10.
- Gêsériada: Proshloe i nastojashchee*. (S. Sh. Chagdurov éd.), Ulan-Udê, Ministerstvo kul'tury burjatskoj SSR. Burjatskoe otdelenie vserossijskogo fonda kul'tury 1991.
- Gêsériada: Fol'klor v sovremennoj kul'ture*, Ulan-Udê, 1995.
- Hamayon, Roberte, 'Shamanism, Buddhism and Epic Heroism: Which Supports the Identity of the Post-Soviet Buryats?', *Central Asian Survey* 17(1), [1995]–1998, pp. 51–67.
- Hamayon, Roberte, 'Reconstruction identitaire autour d'une figure imaginaire chez les Bouriates post-soviétiques', in J.C. Attias, P. Gisel and L. Kaennel (eds), *Messianismes. Variations sur une figure juive*, Genève, Labor & Fides 2000, pp. 229–252.
- Humphrey, Caroline, 'The Moral Authority of the Past in Post-Socialist Mongolia' in *Religion, State and Society* 20, 1992, pp. 375–389.
- Khundaeva, Elizaveta O., *Burjatskij êpos o Gêsêre: svjazy i poëtika*, Ulan-Udê, izd. BNC SO RAN (institut mongolovedenija, buddologii i tibetologii) 1999, 166 p.
- Khundaeva, Elizaveta O., *Burjatskij êpos o Gêsêre: simvolj i tradicii*, Ulan-Udê, izd. BNC SO RAN (institut mongolovedenija, buddologii i tibetologii) 1999, 96 p.
- Kolarz, Walter, *Les colonies russes d'Extrême-Orient*, Paris, Fasquelle 1955 (translated from English).
- Kraj Gêsêra*, izd. Naran, 42 p. (K 1000-letiju burjatskogo narodnogo êposa 'Abaj Gêsêr') 1995.
- Pallas, P.S., *Khram Gêsêra. Poseshchenie Kiakhity. Puteshestvie po Burjatii cherez Selenginsk i Udinskij ostrog v 1772 godu*. Ulan-Udê izd. Nara, 1995, 31 p.
- Scholem, Gershom G., *Le messianisme juif. Essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme*. (Bernard Dupuy trans.), Paris, Calmann-Lévy [1959]–1974.
- Stein, Rolf A., *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet*, Paris, PUF 1959, 646 p. (Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises XIII).
- Stroganova, Elena, 'Millenarian Representations of the Contemporary Buryats', *Inner Asia* 1(1), 1999, pp. 111–120.
- Zhukovskaya, Nataliya L., 'Religion and Ethnicity in Eastern Russia, Republic of Buryatia: a Panorama of the 1990s', *Central Asian Survey* 14(1), 1995, pp. 25–42.

Notes

1. The Buryats, who are ethnic Mongols, were integrated into the Russian empire in the 17th century as a group of tribes. They remained administratively divided, and the extent to which they were subjected to

Russification and christianisation varied. Their awareness of their own ethnicity developed in the course of the 19th century, as a result of the spread of Buddhism from neighbouring Mongolia. It was recognised in the early Soviet era through the creation of the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Republic in 1923.

I should like to offer my warmest thanks to Yves Hamant for his comments and his very valuable information concerning the contemporary situation, to which the final page of this essay seeks to respond.

2. By Manshuud Imegenov, written down by Zhamcarano in 1906.
3. Written in Mongol script, which is known only to a very small number of scholars.
4. The elites of Buryatia did not invoke either the mythical founder of the main Buryat tribe, nor Genghis Khan, who unified the Mongol tribes behind his conqueror's banner in the Middle Ages. Genghis Khan is the emblematic figure of post-communist Mongolia, where he is regarded as a god and often represented as an erudite sage, sitting down rather than on horseback, and holding a book rather than a weapon. While the absence of any allusion to Genghis Khan can certainly be explained, as Yves Hamant notes, by a concern to avoid any accusations of pan-Mongolism, it also reflects the Buryats' feeling of superiority in relation to the Mongols and their resulting desire to set themselves apart.
5. The 1300th anniversary of the epic cycle of Dede Korkut was celebrated by Unesco in June 1999, on the initiative of Azerbaïdjan but with the collaboration of all the other Turkish peoples of central Asia and of Turkey itself.
6. 'The main obstacle in the campaign against Buryato-Mongol cultural nationalism in the post-war period was not however a living poet or writer, but the legendary Mongol hero Geser' (Kolarz 1955, 163).