

Buryat Hesariad: Tengrist mythology and the epic interpretation

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In modern humanities, there is a heightened interest in the problems of religious mythology, which determine the spiritual aspects of the ethnic and cultural traditions of peoples. As is well known, many theological representations of antiquity are preserved in an epic interpretation, as evidenced by the famous mythological poems of the Near East, India, Greece, etc. Therefore, the study of the sacred world of the Buryat Hesariad, represented by the pantheon of epic deities, seems relevant. With a general lack of knowledge of the religious-mythological tradition of the Eastern steppe, a complex of Uranic deities of Buryat mythology is first interpreted in close connection with the heavenly genesis of the epic hero. First of all, this article explores the pantheon of deities in Buryat mythology associated with the cult of the sky. In comparative terms, a description is given of the world of the gods, contained in the heavenly prologue of the epos "Geser." The author comes to the conclusion that in the epos of Geser, the most "hereditary" features of the original epic tradition of Central (Inner) Asia, as well as many elements of the ancient axiological fund of Mongolian peoples, remain. The article also examines the aspects of the image of Khormusta and its transformation in the system of the Buryat-Mongolian religious mythology and shamanist tradition.

Keywords: Buryat mythology, epic, sacred tradition, Hesariad, Khormusta, the cult of the sky.

1. Characteristics of the Tengrist pantheon and the image of Geser

The Buryat heroic epic of Geser, as evidenced by the history of folklore studies in Buryatia, is one of the main areas in Buryat epos research. It is considered to be sufficiently studied in terms of plot structure, poetics and its correlation with the Buryat folk tradition. As a set of different mythological stories that underlie the epic story, the epic "Abai Geser," however, is still poorly understood in terms of the Uranian ideas of the buryats.

Being the oldest form of the world's development, Tengrist (from the word Tengri — the sky-dweller) mythology, as evidenced by the text, occupies a significant place in the outlook of narrators — creators of Hesariad. The originality of the Buryat mythology, relating primarily to the world of celestial gods and their pantheon of gods in general, is most clearly revealed in the epic "Geser," his opening chapter — the prologue, where the mythological picture of the whole cosmos, the gods — sky-dweller gods and the fathers of the heroes of the Buryat epic — Geser and his thirty three Bators (heroes) adopted a systematic look. In the opinion of the Buryats, "the best guide to get acquainted with the mythology of the shaman is a heroic poem about Geser Khan — the son of heaven" [1, p. 7].

Tengrist mythology, containing the pantheon of ancient deities and mythological picture of the sacred universe, determines the status of the Buryat Hesariad as a legend having substantial value to identify a national framework for the spiritual heritage of the Buryat people and its organic connection with the Central Asian cultural complex. It should be stressed that the major ideological and plot-forming role in the Buryat Hesariad is played by its introduction, called the prologue. It is the prologue that describes the divine inhabitants of the upper world (Deede Zambia) and “portrait” characteristics of the main characters of the Tengrist pantheon which play an important role in the plot of the epic action and determines the origins of the sacred image of Geser. Numerous versions of prologues that have not been the object of study in epos research present three groups of sources related to Tengrist mythology.

The first group of sources is the basic one and includes known variants of storytellers M. Imegenov, P. Petrov, P. Tushemilov, P. Dmitriev, and a consolidated version by M. N. Khangalov. The world of skydwellers is most widely and extensively deployed in the prologue of the molkinsk version, being a separate version in ungin Hesariad and differing from all the published texts of “Geser” in completeness and originality of the plot structure. The prologue with more than 4 thousand lines of verse is actually legend itself in the legend and code of mythological stories, unique in its completeness and variety.

The second group of sources consists of lesser known materials, first introduced by us for scientific usage in Russian. These are three variants in the records of the American scientist J. Curtin. Of particular value is the variant by Arhokov, which greatly supplements the mythological discourse of prologue in the ekhirit-bulagat version. There are also the prologues of the Hesariad by storytellers like O. Hantaev and M. Shobonov, being stored in the archives of the Center of Oriental Manuscripts and Block-Prints of the Institute of Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Ulan-Ude) and archives of the Institute of Oriental Studies (St. Petersburg). The third group of sources are prologues not related thematically to Hesariad, but important for understanding the prologue phenomenon and general typological features characterizing the importance of the “Tengrist” factor and the role of deities in the epic tradition of the Buryats. These include prologues of uligers (stories), “Huherdey Mergen” (narrator B. Boldonov), “Bukha Hara hubun” (narrator M. Imegenov), as well as the prologue in some variants of the Kalmyk epic “Dzhangar” which is of comparative interest.

A special group of sources is the prologues from Central Asia and Tibetan versions of Hesariad. Some of them are used by us for the first time in comparative epos research. For example, thanks to the help of my colleague Sechenmunha from Lanchzhou (China) the guye version was translated into the Russian language. The same should be said about the Tuva version translated into Russian by D. S. Kuular at our request. This group of sources also includes prologues from the East Mongolian “Tales of the Kalpa” (“Galvyn ylger”) and Yakut olonkho “Nyurgun Bootur Swift” discussed for the first time in Buryat folklore. In general, the above mentioned Mongolian, Tibetan and Turkish versions of the prologues, which were investigated in the comparative typological aspect, were an important prerequisite for understanding the importance of the concept of the son of the sky as an epic hero in the Siberian and Central Asian ethnic and cultural range and for revealing the Buryat folk mythological continuum [2, p. 183–276].

It must be stressed that the characteristic of the gods in the Buryat Hesariad is not limited to the prologue. Their role is evident in many of the key episodes of the epic nar-

rative as Geser himself and his Bator, being sons of the western skydwellers, fight with the descendants of the eastern Tengri. The Tengri appeared on earth in the form of powerful mangadhais and other negative characters. Therefore, in addition to the prologue, of great importance are uliger (epic) texts, and also the text of shamanist invocations, ethnographical and ethno-linguistic materials. They contain an essential source base to recreate a complete picture of the sacred aspects of the Hesariad associated with the cult characteristic of higher mythological characters in the overall context of the Buryat folklore and mythological traditions.

The existence of two different stadial versions of the Buryat Hesariad — the ekhirit-bulagat and ungin version, in a single folk tradition, allows us to consider a complex set of Uranian ideas of the buryats, to reveal a strong relationship with shamanist mythology and to trace the evolution of images, motifs and themes of theogonic poetry as the highest form of narrative myth-making. In their semantic characterization and hierarchical representation the Tengrist myths, in the heavenly prologue of the Hesariad, form several plot cycles. The first of them can be called “matriarchal.” It includes the poetic tales of Ehe Ekhe Burhan, Manzan Gurme and Majas Hara. This triad is accordingly the Great Mother Goddess with the function of the demiurga and her daughters — progenitors of the gods.

The next cycle of myths contains information about the origin and genealogy of the Uranian gods, and provides a number of characters of the older generation, headed by the skydwellers, the elders. The third cycle of myths combines the archetypical motif of the generational change of the gods, which is manifested in the form of a struggle for supremacy in the celestial world. It results in a military conflict between the western and eastern deities, headed by Khan Khormusta and Atai Ulan respectively. Teomahiya in turn is characterized by motifema. Thus, in the mainstream of the plot the struggle for power in the Upper world is manifested in the myth of Segen Sebdeg Tengri, the skydweller, to personify the center, and his daughter Seseg Nogon. The original continuation of the theme of the Battle of the gods is a series of myths about the fight of Asaranguy thirteen Tengris for supremacy among the Eastern skydwellers after the overthrow of the Atai Ulan on earth. The same motif, his “zoomorphic” modification in the form of combat between western and eastern celestial bulls occurs in a number of versions, not yet disclosed variants, of the prologue. It should be emphasized that the topic of binary oppositions is popular in the celestial subjects because of the duality of the majority of Buryat mythology itself. This feature of the Buryat mythology is most clearly expressed in the keynote of heavenly teomahiya, which is the core of prologue action and has no analogue in the Central Asian prologues.

The general characteristics of the Tengrist pantheon reflects the preserved system of interpretation of the Buryats about the universe and its origin. Architectonics of the skydweller’s world traces stadil continuity, genealogical and hierarchical relationships between the deities given in a system based on the dualistic principle. A significant role in modeling the pantheon, classifying the mythological characters and distinguishing the chief members of the patriarchal family of skydwellers, is played by symbolism of numbers 3, 7, 9, 13, 44, 55, and 99 which are considered sacred in the mythological traditions of the Mongolian people. Additional important “organizing” functions are color and lateral codes that govern the binary features of the Tengrist space and theonymy of a number of characters.

The concept of the pantheon itself is based on anthropomorphic images of deities, which is a primary element in the Buryat’s celestial mythology. We analyze the ekhirit-bu-

lagat version and synchronistically identified three groups of skydwellers. The first group comprises the most archaic deity personifying the sky and atmospheric natural phenomena. They include Auer Sagan Tengri, Hurta Bayan Tengri, Manta Bayan Tengri, Haranhuy Burunhuy Tengri, and Galta Ulan Tengri — Fire Red Tengri which is personalized as the solar deity. In the epic it acts as a precursor of Atay Ulan in the folklore and mythological traditions of the Buryats and a generalized image of oriental skydwellers, which is evidence of their stadial seniority in comparison with Western ones. It is to be noted that the Galta Ulan Tengri is one of the main uliger characters and the plot action associated with him and his daughter, Gagurai Nogon — Geser's celestial wife, is an essential part of the epic narrative with elements of prapologue.

The next group of deities forms Esege Malan Tengri, Zayan Sagan Tengri and Huhedey Mergen Tengri. They are the supreme triad of the Western skydwellers — celestial ancestors and patrons of Geser. It is noteworthy that Khanhan Khermos (Khormusta) in the ekhirit-bulagat version appears as a symbolic character, not adapted to the plot structure of uliger text. This fact points to late adoption of the image of the sky.

Mangadhais, led by their patriarch of celestial origin, belongs to a special group of mythological characters. The attribute of symbolism of the elder among mangadhais and his metamorphism has expressive parallels in the Eurasian mythologies, particularly in the east Mongolian epic "Legend of the Kalpa." It depicts that he is a former Tengri, overthrown from the sky on the periphery of the space and transferred into the category of demonic beings as a result of the generational change of gods. This character being preserved in the integrity of his image in the ekhirit-bulagat version does emphasize its unique importance in the reconstruction of archaic foundations of the pantheon of the Buryat-Mongol deities.

A further stage in the development of the theological ideas of Buryat myth-makers is continued by the Ungin tradition. The total number of Tengris as mythological units of the first order reaches 99, a sign of the high sacred informational content of the text, and it became possible to consider the list of celestial deities in the pantheon of the Hesariad as the most complete catalogue of Tengrist gods known in Buryat research. The following scheme of a hierarchical system of celestial world, reflecting the priority of goddesses progenitors was revealed. The genealogical number of Western deities is represented in descending order: Manzan Gurme, Esege Malan Tengri, Khan Khormusta Tengri. The son of the last is considered to be Geser who has variants of Buryat names in the Ungin prologue and appears in a number of cases not only as the son of the supreme skydweller, but as a deity warrior. The symmetry is observed in respect of pedigree of the eastern deities: Majas Hara, Asaranguy Hara Tengri, and Atay Ulan Tengri.

The bilateral genealogy of supreme skydwellers is evidence of the ordering of a hierarchical system of the pantheon according to the evolution of traditional mythological concepts of the Buryats, which is particularly manifested when comparing the character line of leading deities in the ekhirit-bulagat and ungin versions. In this connection it is interesting to note a stadial change of a number of Uranian deities in the system of the epic pantheon. As a result, Zayan Sagan Tengri, Huhedei Mergen Tengri, and Galta Ulan Tengri who played a significant role in the ekhirit-bulagat version is moved to the background in the ungin version and transfers their function to a new generation of the gods. In this context it is important to emphasize the constant position of Esege Malan Tengri who preserves his supreme status in both versions of the Hesariad. Consequently, the epic

material adequately reflects the cult importance of this deity as a central figure in the religious and mythological traditions of the Buryat.

The image of Geser that incorporated features of many uliger heroes of divine origin organically embodies the archetypal concept of a son of the sky in the Buryat epic tradition. Therefore, in the context of the prologue of the Uranian ideas of the Hesariad creators is an expanded myth, which narrates about the world of the gods as a celestial background of the hero. As an epic character Geser presents functional-semantic characteristics of Huhedei Mergen on a heroic level — the god thunder in Buryat mythology. In the epic interpretation, the function of the fighter against the forces of Evil constitutes the oldest core of the image of the celestial hero who sent the deities of the sky to earth to destroy the monsters. This type of hero associated with the central theme of heroic tales in the Central Asian tradition is clearly manifested in the archaic ekhirit-bulagat epic.

The functional similarity of the god thunder and the hero, the messenger of the sky, remains in ungin version of the Hesariad. Its hero is considered to be the son of the Khan Khormusta and in later mythological interpretation of the Buryats and Mongols he, the god of the sky, simulates atmospheric lightning phenomena. In doing so, he thereby duplicates the basic function of Huhedei Mergen, who was driven back as a result of generational change of the gods in the Buryat pantheon. It is necessary to emphasize the etiological mythology of the prologue as a starting point for the appearances of Geser as a god and the son of a god in the role of the epic hero, and by whom the epic demonstrates its paradigmatic relation to the myth. Indeed, the semantic and genetic relationship of the hero with the Sky is a prerequisite for the sacralization of the uliger. The idea of the divine origin of Geser is associated with the genesis of the prologue as the most important initial part of the epic containing images of theogonic mythology.

The image of Geser in the Buryat epic is characterized by diversity. He has all the features of the hero-warrior typical of the Turkic-Mongolian heroic epics. At the same time, the image of Geser has a symbolic peculiarity: in all versions the hero appears as the son of heaven. The divine origin of the epic hero is related to the importance of the uranic factor in the religious and mythological tradition of Central Asia, which received an adequate folk interpretation in the Buryat Hesariad. Geser, the envoy of the Heaven, becomes the son of the Earth, the protector of the human race and the key to its prosperity and welfare.

Indeed, the Buryat epos “Geser” retained the most “ancestral” features of the primary epic tradition of Central (Inner) Asia. These are, first of all, the elements of the ancient ideology, worship of the Sky, connected with the Buryat shamanist traditions and mythology. The example of Hesariad as a “heavenly epic” and its role in the Buryat ethno cultural tradition illustrates that myth itself, in view of its paradigmatic function, serves as a pattern for reflection of an archetypal line of behavior and a system of moral values, criteria, responsible for social order. This cultural continuum is based on the origins predetermined in mythology and sanctified by the positive influence of supernatural forces reflected in anthropomorphized images known as Tengris. Thus, the concept of Tengrist mythology that represents the quintessence of the Uranian views of the Buryats is most prominently and clearly presented in the context of the Buryat Hesariad and implemented in its interpretation of the epic.

2. Khan Khormusta in the epos and shamanist traditions of the Buryats

The Geser epic is closely associated with the Tengri system (Tengrism), the most ancient cult in Buryat shamanism. The plot of the epic tale starts in the upper world, the Sky where the main characters are divine beings — Tengris. Their total number is 99; they are divided into 55 west white sky-dwellers and 44 east black ones. The former are headed by Khan Khormusta (Tengri), one of the most active and powerful gods, whose son is Geser, the main epic hero. The latter are led by Atai Ulaan Tengri who in the struggle for power in the sky was defeated by Khan Khormusta and cast down to the Earth, the Middle world. Different monsters resulted from his remains; they are enemies of the human race and fifty five western sky-dwellers order Geser to go down to Earth and destroy them. Geser and the sky-dwellers' sons (33 bogatyrs) who went down to the Earth, do not lose touch with the sky. Geser himself addresses 55 western Tengris and their head, Khan Khormusta, for help in accomplishing a rite of offering when they are in trouble.

Khan Khormusta Tengri is in fact the acting head of fifty five western Tengris universally recognized in all versions of the epic "Abai Geser." As is known, his name is derived from the main deity of Zoroastrianism — Akhura Mazda. This theonym, being modified phonetically for many centuries, came from the Sogdian language into Buddhist texts from medieval Uigurs, and from there appeared in the Mongolian literary language in the form of Khormusta not later than the 15th century. Folklore variations of this name — Khormos, Khjermos, Khirmas, Khirmus, Khjurma, Tjurma, Sjurmas — are retained in the dialects of Buryats living in the Angara area, shamanists unfamiliar with vertical Mongolian writing.

Nevertheless, a foreign name doesn't prevent the Buryat Khormusta from viewing himself as the complete ruler of the western sky in the epic "Geser." His image in a number of versions of Ungin Hesariad (narrators P. Petrov, P. Dmitriev, P. Tushemilov, B. Zhatukhajev) is developed most convincingly so that it assumed the traits of a genuine epic character. As a result, the beginning of Khormusta's reign correlates with mythical time, when "a tree used to be a tender sprout, and a white dark-maned deer used to be a kid" [3, p. 290–291]. All his regal family comprised of three sons and three daughters is described, the army of thirty three baturs (bogatyrs), three squads of horse riders and three hundred leaders is referred to (there is direct evidence of the epic number three indicative of strength and succession of clan and tribal traditions). His white square palace is described in detail including all exterior and interior features. Khormusta leads a way of life as a true steppe khan for whom hunting is the greatest pleasure and gives himself up to it selflessly forgetting about the appointed meeting with Atai Ulan.

With loving care "portraits" of Khormusta's horses are depicted: the light bay one ("sagaan sharga morin") — for making a journey round the upper world ("deede zambi"), and the dark bay one ("belgen kheer morin") — for travelling in the lower world ("dodo zambi"), which will be transferred to his son Geser when he goes to the Earth. All military attributes of the main skydweller are enumerated in detail and a thorough description of his battle armor is provided. Traditional for Buryat epic's style, we find descriptions of both the preparation of Khormusta's horse and his personal preparation for battle with Atai Ulaan Tengri. This combat is particularly picturesque in using poetic graphic means — comparisons and hyperboles which were portrayed in P. Tushemilov's version: they, the skydwellers, fought and struggled to such an extent that the universe was covered with a

hazy dust, and in this haze deer (roes) lost their kids and birds — their nestlings (chicks) [4, p. 5–18, 28–32].

It is remarkable that in the shamanist pantheon only *balagan* (now *aloro-ungin*) Buryats living, for the most part, on the left bank of the Angara river consider Khormusta to be the head of fifty five western Tengris. In contrast, *kudin* and other Buryats living on the right bank of the Angara river view Zayan Sagaan Tengri (“Creating white sky-dweller”) as the leader, who in the epic is identified with the very Khormusta and acts on behalf of his name [5, p. 65]. This circumstance, most likely, is accounted for the fact that in the complement of the *balagan Buryats* there are many clans descended from Western Mongolia and Dzhungaria who moved there in the 16–17th centuries, at the time of intertribal wars and Manchurian expansion. They brought the Mongolian cult of Khormusta with them and a pre-written version of the Mongolian Hesariad as well, underlying *ungin* (oral) versions of the epic “Geser,” in which the role of Khormusta is evident.

It should be assumed that it is in this ethnic environment composed of native bulagats and in the past Mongolo-oyrats that Khormusta adapted himself to it and adopted some characteristics and duties of Esege Malaan Tengri, a supreme off-Baikal deity. This influenced “personazhny and agentivny codes” of the traditional culture” of the indigenous population [6, p. 107]. Consequently, Khan Shargai noyon, the head of the western hats, one of the most revered spirits of the shamanist Olymp comes down to Earth from the Sky upon Khormusta’s orders and becomes the main protector and defender of Buryats, specifically from evil spirits [7, p. 306]. Also in accordance with the order given by Khormusta, his son Bozhontoi noyon-baabai (“Father master Bozhontoi”), being the descendant of Khuler sagaan Tengri (“Bronze-white skydweller”) and the first smith, sends his nine sons to the Earth.

Thus, Khormusta is esteemed as the protector of blacksmith’s work and handicraft. In addition, there are many other shaman evocations, in which Khormusta is referred to in connection with the appeal to fifty five western Tengris. These kind skydwellers were revered by Buryats for protection, and sending various earthly blessings, for example, abundant hunting or good trade [7, p. 56]. For Buryats Khormusta himself, or Khan Khjurmas Tengri, due to their duties personifies warm drizzling rain that is helpful for cattle-breeders in order to have good grass and healthy cattle [8, p. 84].

Indeed, the Buryat epos “Geser” retained the most “ancestral” features of the primary epic tradition of Central (Inner) Asia. These are, first of all, the elements of the ancient ideology, worship of the Sky, connected with the Buryat shamanist traditions and mythology, which we see in the example of the Khan Khormusta.

3. The motif of feasting and the cult of drink in the Buryat Hesariad (based on an interpretation of Khormusta’s image)

In the Buryats’ traditions of folklore and mythology, the supreme skydweller is considered to be Khormusta, who was known as a sky god among the Mongol peoples in the post-Chingissid epoch. His image is reflected in the Buryat version of the “Geser” epic in which he is treated in various aspects — from family relations to status-hierarchical relations in the cosmos. On the whole, the epic texts, especially the heavenly prologue, provide an expressive depiction of Khormusta as an extraordinary character.

One curious brush-stroke to the “portrait” of Khormusta is the accentuation of his tendency towards merry, at times protracted feasting. Episodes illustrating this trait are met in practically all the variants of the Hesariad. Thus, in the Khangalov variant, when Khormusta sets off to see the foremother of the gods, Manzan Gurme, to seek her advice about which one of his sons he should send to Earth, he visits a sun god named Pison Sagan Tengri along the way. He gets drunk and spends the night in the home of his hospitable host. In Tushemilov’s variant, Khormusta is shown feasting as a guest of Atai Ulan, the leader of the eastern skydwellers, from the new moon to the full moon, until the time comes for him to return home. At times, he becomes so carried away by feasting and falls so heavily under the spell of drink that he even forgets about urgent matters.

Drink also plays a certain role in the development of the plot involving the son of Khormusta: Geser, the hero of the eponymous epic. For example, in the scene in which Alma Mergen — the wife of Geser — meets Geser’s heavenly elder brother Zasa Mergen, the latter treats the heroine to *arza-khorzo* (a milk vodka of varying strength), which has been prepared especially for her by the foremother Manzan Gurme. The aim of this is to “inspire” Alma Mergen to save Geser, who has been turned into a donkey, since she is the only one who is able to do this. Here, the custom of treating someone to drink is depicted as a formal ceremony in which it characterizes the importance of the two characters’ meeting. The text narrates the following: “Zasa Mergen, the husband’s elder brother / began to speak eloquently about everything that had happened from long ago, / so that grass grew on the flat stone, / so that foam formed on the clear water” [9, p. 225–226].

Thus, drink appears as an effective means of communication between the epic characters, and it creates a specific atmosphere of spiritual contact that is sanctioned by tradition. Even Geser himself demonstrates his heroic might more than once in his consumption of milk *arkhi* — the strong drink of his ancestors. He invariably displays his devotion to the traditions of old by gathering his subjects for a great feast to mark the occasion of his victory over an enemy. As a matter of fact, such depictions of festivities emphasizing the role of drink are common in the epic.

Such examples tell us that both the epic heroes and their heavenly protectors, led by Khormusta, love to indulge in feasts and merrymaking. As Khangalov notes, the latter sometimes do this without any special motivation [10, p. 237]. Thus, Khormusta frequently summons the skydwellers for no other reason than “to pass the time, since there are too many idle days in the year.” The lofty guests gather in a white royal palace “as high as the heavens, sparkling like glass,” that corresponds to Khormusta’s status as the supreme skydweller, and in which the host himself is seated on an eight-legged silver throne in the most important of the palace’s eighty-eight gilded rooms. Before the palace stands an openwork silver hitching-post (*barzhagar müngen serge*) with ninety-nine branches symbolizing Khormusta’s hospitality.

It is noteworthy that there is a folk belief connected to the gods’ prolonged feasting and carousing. After enjoying abundant libations and satisfying their gluttony, they fall into a prolonged sleep that sometimes lasts for several generations of human life. It sometimes happens that the soul of one of these *Tengris* does not await for him to awake: it descends to Earth and is born as a human, and then returns to the heavens when the skydweller awakens [10, p. 224].

The fullest picture of the epic gods’ feasting appears in the extensive description of the heavenly naadam festival (*tengeriin nair zugaa*) in the Mol’kin variant of the epic [11,

p. 40–50]. Both the western and eastern skydwellers, headed by the foremothers Manzan Gurme and Maias Khara, take part in these festivities. The “three manly sports” (*eryn gurban naadan*) — wrestling, archery, and horse-racing — are colorfully depicted, and the celebration culminates in a grandiose feast that unites all the skydwellers.

The skydwellers’ festival recalls the summer ritual of the *tailgan*. By all appearances, it is not accidental, due to the great antiquity of this tradition, that it became part of the sacred realm of the skydwellers’ society. The bards who created the myth rightfully inserted the *tailgan* into the Hesariad’s heavenly prologue, thereby giving it the status of a divine festival. At the same time, we see in the skydwellers’ feasts a reflection of certain historical realities connected to the cult of drinking and feasting among the Mongol peoples: the feasting traditions of the steppe nomads were accompanied by a specific etiquette based on ancient customs that were strictly observed.

For example, the ritual that governed feasting at the time of Chinggis Khan and his successors bears witness to this: one’s place at the feast, the order in which one received the banquet goblet and pronounced toasts, and the right to be treated to *chara-otok*, were strictly regulated on the basis of the social position of the feast’s participants [12, p. 58–59].

It comes as no surprise that the ancient sources indicate that the Mongols “find joy in drinking and feasting” [13, p. 85]. The Mongols’ wise attitude towards drinking as an important element in the sensation of the fullness of human existence is demonstrated by the “Conversation of the Orphan Boy with the Nine *Orluks* — the Companions of Chinggis Khan” — a work that is based on folklore sources and that contains genuine examples of folk poetry. It is curious that in this work, the author introduces different, at times mutually exclusive, opinions on the desirability of drinking, which are voiced by the nine *orkuks*. The orphan-boy, the central character of the tale, expresses the most reasonable point of view about drinking. He proposes that the problem lies not in the drink itself, but in its abuse. If one drinks in moderation and for a good reason, then this is “a pleasure and a satisfaction.” Chinggis Khan, a supporter of the “golden mean,” sides with the boy in his debate with the *orkuks*: he orders him to “drink a draft of the *rashiana* drink, which resembles honey” as a sign of approval and draws him close [14, p. 166–173].

Moreover, folkloric tradition attributes the invention of strong drink to Chinggis Khan himself. According to one legend that is spread by popular imagination, the beverage that he devised consists of nine precious jewels. Depending on which jewel influences a person the most, the man who becomes drunk on it becomes ill-tempered and aggressive like a mad dog or stupid like a sheep. Alternatively, he becomes frivolous and develops a weakness for women; or he might even be consumed by the drink and die. The blind develop the ability to see; the armless man is ready to strike his neighbor, and the legless man to stomp on a person he finds objectionable — such are the metamorphoses caused by the beverage’s charms [15, p. 91–92].

Nevertheless, as the legend says the milk vodka invented by Chinggis Khan turned out to be to the taste of his nomadic subjects, and they began to distill and drink it so zealously that he was forced to issue a decree forbidding the manufacture and use of *arkhi*. However, when Chinggis Khan discovered that despite prohibition the steppe-dwellers were continuing to “honor” this intoxicating drink just as before, and moreover that they were pouring libations to his protector-spirits as their own heavenly benefactors, he rescinded his decree [16, p. 20–21].

There is also a curious fairy-tale-like legend that recounts how Chinggis Khan himself experienced the irresistible effects of strong drink. Once he set off upon a hunt and encountered the king of the beasts, Arsalan the lion. During the hunt, Arsalan asked Chinggis Khan to help him in his struggle with Abarga-mogoi, the king of the serpents, whom he could not defeat. Chinggis Khan agreed and during a battle between these two kings, the king of the beasts and the king of the serpents, he seized an opportune moment and fatally struck the latter with a well-aimed arrow. As a mark of his gratitude, Arsalan carried Chinggis Khan home on his back. Upon parting, he solemnly warned the Mongol khan not to tell anyone that he had ridden on him, or he would pay for it with his life. But during a drinking-bout, Chinggis Khan became very drunk and blurted it out. Arsalan became aware of this, and having turned into a human, and went to Chinggis Khan and asked why he had broken their agreement. Chinggis Khan excused himself by saying that he had been drunk and did not remember anything, since he had been conquered by strong drink.

“What is strong drink?” the king of the beasts began to wonder, and he decided to try it himself. Chinggis Khan arranged a large feast for him. After the first barrel, the tipsy Arsalan began to really like this drink, and he emptied yet another barrel. He became so drunk that he turned from a human into a beast again and began to roll around on the ground and shake. Chinggis Khan then tied the feet of the king of the beasts to keep him from hurting himself, and left him to sober up. When Arsalan awoke the next morning, he could not understand why he was tied up and why his whole body hurt. Chinggis Khan told him everything that had happened; then his guest admitted “Yes, drink really is strong and can conquer anyone. So I will forgive you, and in the future you can tell people how you rode on me!” [15, p. 93–94].

It is noteworthy that one can observe a certain connection between Chinggis Khan and Khormusta as folkloric and mythological characters which is based on drinking and is noted in the chronicle tradition. The “Altan Tobchi” states that “Mighty *Khormusta-Tengri*” bestowed upon Chinggis Khan “a precious jade goblet full of the *rashiana* drink for his previous virtuous deeds.” The Mongol sovereign interprets this cup of drink as a divine gift that Khormusta has presented to him as a sign that he has chosen him. Chinggis Khan himself partakes in the *rashiana* with pleasure and, flushed with the intoxicating drink, discusses the meaning of feasts, their usefulness and their purpose [14, p. 165–166, 173]. The text of the “Altan Tobchi” contains many examples depicting Chinggis Khan’s favorable attitude towards feasts and his participation in them. It also illustrates a definitive resemblance to the image of Khormusta in the Buryat Hesariad.

It is worth keeping in mind that the mythologem of intoxicating drinks has broad parallels in various other mythologies, in which drink is not only an effective means of merry-making, but is also its “hero” as shown by the abundant libations of the Olympic deities and the other representatives of the “tribe of immortals.” As researchers have noted, there is a clear connection between intoxicating drink and thunder-gods. A close example in this connection is Indra, who performs heroic and at times reckless deeds while intoxicated by *soma* [17, p. 22]. By way of comparison, the Buryat rain god Khuran-noion, the mythological double of Khormusta, sometimes forgets about his responsibilities while he is under the strong influence of drink, and this causes droughts on Earth [18, p. 34]. The Vedic texts demonstrate that not only Indra, but the other gods are addicted to the heady *soma*. As one of the hymns states, when a libation of *soma* is being prepared, they rush to

take part in it and “all are intoxicated” [19, p. 71]. The motif of strong drink is encountered in Buddhist mythology in the depiction of Trayastrinsa that mentions the liana *asavati*: the *asavati* bears fruit once every thousand years, and contains a divine intoxicating drink whose effects last for four months [20, p. 524].

A comparison of Khormusta to the Greek and Indian deities inevitably leads us to the conclusion that the supreme gods, regardless of their ethnic tradition, are inclined to revelries and feasts, and that drinking exerts an influence upon their behavior. Often the gods, who employ all their might to safeguard the moral behavior of mortals, live in an atmosphere in which the moral order is constantly violated. Perhaps this phenomenon is a manifestation of the principle of the unrestrained freedom of gods and men that is typical of many mythologies, particularly Greek mythology. On the other hand, there are burlesque traits here that are inherent in many mythological traditions as well.

In this connection, one may assume that the pattern of Khormusta's behavior in the heavenly prologue of the Hesariad is in many cases rather like a parody of his image — a parody that has been provoked by a later adaptation of him in the Buryat religious and mythological tradition. This is graphically revealed in the Ekhirit–Bulagat version of the Buryat Hesariad, where Khormusta is disgraced by his tendency to indulge in drinking bouts. According to the plot, he bows out, as it were, from an agreed-upon duel with the head of the eastern *Tengris* Atai Ulan since he has gone on a drinking binge while visiting the foremother Manzan Gurme in order to seek her advice. Khormusta appears only at the council of the gods, where he arrives with a severe hangover just at the moment when they are deciding the question of sending his son Geser to destroy the earthly offspring of Atai Ulan, whom Geser has cast down to Earth in his father's absence. This same “disapproving” note about Khormusta and his “forgetfulness” — which is engendered by the same reason as in the preceding example — is present in the Unga version of the epic (in Paramon Dmitriev's variant), where he stays too long feasting with his relatives on his mother's side, the nine shamanizing *Tengris*, and as a result misses the duel with Atai Ulan.

Indeed, as Nadezhda Sharakshinova emphasizes [21, p. 23], Khormusta is portrayed somewhat “critically” because of his devotion to feasting and drinking. But in our view, this treatment of Khormusta's behavior is most likely ironic. It is well-known that irony has introduced a tragicomic note into lofty narratives by attributing human passions and weaknesses to the gods, and people could not help but find this attractive. It is plots just like this that are “the strong point of mythology as an unconscious literary creation of the world's peoples” [22, p. 141–142]. Indeed, the very heterogeneity of Khormusta's characteristics turns out to be a “productive basis” [23, p. 109] in forming our conception of him in the plot's dynamic.

Finally, in speaking of the “morality of myths,” we must keep in mind a certain contradiction here when it comes to many of the high-ranking mythological beings. Khormusta's image as creatively interpreted by the Buryat bards confirms the correctness of this proposition. The phenomenon of the “excessively merry” god in Buryat mythology, which has Eurasian parallels, does not lend itself to a single interpretation and reveals the specificity of this phenomenon in the context of the ethnocultural traditions of the Mongol peoples.

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Бурятская Гэсэриада: тэнгристская мифология и эпическая интерпретация

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В современных гуманитарных науках отмечается повышенный интерес к проблемам религиозной мифологии, определяющим духовные аспекты этнокультурной традиции

народов. Как известно, многие теологические представления древности сохранились в эпической интерпретации, о чем свидетельствуют известные мифологические поэмы Переднего Востока, Индии, Греции и т. д. Потому исследование сакрального мира бурятской Гэсэриады, представленного пантеоном эпических божеств, видится актуальным. При общей недостаточной изученности религиозно-мифологической традиции степного Востока впервые интерпретируется сложный комплекс уранических божеств бурятской мифологии в тесной связи с небесным генезисом эпического героя. В первую очередь в статье исследуется пантеон божеств в бурятской мифологии, связанной с культом неба. В сравнительном плане приводится характеристика мира богов, содержащаяся в небесном прологе эпоса «Гэсэр». Автор приходит к выводу, что в эпосе «Гэсэр» сохранились наиболее «наследственные» черты исконной эпической традиции Центральной (Внутренней) Азии и многие элементы древнего аксиологического фонда монгольских народов. В статье также рассматриваются аспекты образа Хормусты и его трансформация в системе бурят-монгольской религиозной мифологии и шаманистской традиции. Хормуста — высшее божество неба — получает многогранное изображение в «Гэсэре». Любопытным штрихом к «портрету» Хормусты является описание его склонности к пиришествам. В этом просматривается отражение определенных исторических реалий, связанных с культом вина и застолья у кочевников. Явление «слишком веселого» бога в бурятском эпосе отражает своеобразие этого оригинального фольклорного персонажа в контексте этнокультурной традиции монгольских народов. В целом образ Хормусты, являющийся продуктом исторически сложившихся обстоятельств, составляет его теологический феномен в галерее евразийских божеств.

Ключевые слова: бурятская мифология, эпос, сакральная традиция, Гэсэриада, Хормуста, культ неба.

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