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## **Interpretation of the Buryat Heroic Epic in the Libretto of Zh. Batuev's Ballets "Geser" and "The Son of the Earth"**

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*This paper examines examples of professional choreographic art of Buryatia – Zhigzhit Batuev's ballets "Geser" (1967) and "The Son of the Earth" (1972), created on the basis of national heroic epic (üliger). Connecting traditional methods of historical musicology with the techniques of literary analysis comprise a comprehensive approach to the study of folk and professional art. Comparison of the folklore source based on realizing shamanic mythology's plot motifs and images with the text of the libretto helped the researcher to identify the main stages in the dramatic development of ballets and reveal the specifics of the interpretation of national heroic and archaic epic in musical stage productions.*

*Keywords: Buryat heroic Epic of King Geser, shaman mythology, libretto interpretation, ballet, Zhigzhit Batuev, Namzhil Baldano.*

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The world literature dates back to ancient times. For many centuries myths and fairy tales, legends and tall stories have been progressively remade into extensive heroic epic cycles, which reflect the continuous process of national mentality creation. The epos forms people's knowledge about the historic past, while the main hero embodies the ideal mental representation of a nation about itself.

In the times when the Buryats created their own school of composition, the referral to the national heroic Epic of King Geser (hereinafter referred to as "Geser") was quite reasonable.

The choice is explained by a special role of the epic cycle in the artistic tradition of the nation. The epic cycle addresses the specifics of national thought, the character of society relationships, the peculiarities of a national paradigm and aesthetic representations of an ethnos, the distinct system of artistic images (see in detail: Belonosova, 2014). When it appeared in extreme antiquity, the epic tale Üliger (which is the general term given to tales and popular myths of the Mongols and Buryats) about the warrior Geser even today is an important part of spiritual culture of the nation. "The Hero of a time period" is not only

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the character of tales or stories, experiencing either real and historic or fictional events. The hero himself is also a historical or cultural event, as he is prominent and significant for individuals and whole groups, as he may be an incarnation, a frontier, a center of attention or repulsion between their life views and life, reference point in the system of constitutive values and meanings [Smaznova, 2008, p. 56].

Üliger about Geser is called by researchers an "Iliad" of Central Asia. "This grandiose poem is spread from the tropical river Gang to the cold Amur, from the sunny Yellow River (Huang He) to the dusky Lena. Throughout this huge territory one can hardly meet a man, who has not heard of or listened to the narration about Geser" [Chagdurov, 1980, p. 59].

Beginning of the epic event dates back to the era of the World Creation, when there was no earth or heavenly bodies and there was total darkness. "Great Burkhan", according to the mythological interpretation, the creator and demiurge of the universe, is depicted in the legend in the female form and called Ekhe-Ekhe-Burkhan (Great Mother Goddess). The beginning of the universe is associated with her noble mission. The mythological description of the universe creation is followed by the explanation of the origin *Tengris* (celestial creatures) traced back to myths; listing the causes of discord between Tengris and their division into two hostile camps. The origin of the western (light) Tengris remounts in mythological interpretation to *Manzan Gurmo*, conceived by the sunlight. The origin of the eastern (dark) has been associated with *Maias Khara*, emerged from the moonlight.

The dualistic division of celestial creatures into two warring camps, according to I.S. Urbanaeva [Urbanaeva, 1996, p. 56], has more recent origin than the beliefs of the existence of four cardinal points and four groups of Tengris – 99 southern (being in the front), 77 northern

(standing behind), 55 western (being in the right) and 44 eastern (being in the left). It seems that the origins of the archaic belief about four groups of celestial creatures are genetically related to the teachings of the holy quartet, i.e. the "four great" or primary elements that are the basis of all things: Fire, Water, Earth, Air.

Mythological content of actions and deeds of gods is a mandatory component of all the variants of the Buryat "Geseriad". Geser's earthly birth is associated with gods' strife that led eventually to the defeat of Atay Ulan, the chief of 44 eastern Tengris. His remains thrown to the ground formed a variety of monsters – *mangadhai*.

Events in üliger occur in indefinitely distant time. "Epic time" appears as the mythological era of the World Creation. "Epic space" has a mythological character. The surroundings of the epic hero are several worlds: lower, middle, and upper, in which the "World Tree", as the "World Mountain", acts as a bridge between different worlds. For example, one episode tells the story of how Geser slipped with his "black Khangai arrow" a top of a huge tree, standing in the desert. The attribute of the main character, with which he cuts away the top of the "World Tree" – "Khangai Arrow", has a certain connection with these two images (tree- mountain). It is known that the arrow in archaic traditions is one of the symbolic analogues or substitutes of the "World Tree", or, in other words, a modification thereof, which is also associated with phallic symbolics, present in both the image of the "World Mountain" and the image of the tree. The word "Khangai" clearly points to the sacred cult of Khangai Mountains, well-known to all the Mongolian peoples.

"Epic society" in üliger represents, along with mythological characters, zoo-antropomorphic beings who act as creators, patrons of the hero, or as his enemies and antipodes. Defining plot functions of these characters, the relations between their actions and characters reveal

many peculiarities of archaic epic tradition. The role of fairy and mythological elements is very significant there and above all the most significant is faith in the power of magic. Hence, the actions and deeds of the heroes of the epic are influenced by mythological creatures and magical objects.

However, the Buryat heroic epic has episodes, motifs and images, which are the result of a kind of artistic understanding of the actual situations and the national history. There is a turn to the depiction of social interactions. But these are only the first steps of the heroic epic acquiring realities, that does not allow concluding about the formation of the Buryat historical and heroic epic (though there appear some features of the so-called "*second stageal round*", which is represented by, for example, the historical epic "The Tale of Igor's Campaign"). Among the world epics the Buryat *üligers* can be attributed with good reason to the "*first stageal round*", called "*heroic and archaic epic*" [Golosovker, 1987, p. 4].

Researchers comparing the Buryat, Mongolian and Tibetan versions of "Geseriad" came to the conclusion that they are all very different in form and content, as they reflect a particular era and the environment, giving each version a distinct character.

Buryat *üliger* "Geser" in contrast to the Mongolian and Tibetan versions, for example, occupies a special place as it preserved the originality of the archaic spirit of the ethnic group in a full manner.

The very Buryat version reached us almost intact. One reason for this, according to scholars, was the fact that economic ties and social relations in forest tribes' communities for a long time remained the same, not actually going beyond the tribal communities. These tribes were far from the impact of unification tendencies developing into intertribal-state economic unions.

Lamaism did not have a considerable impact on the Buryat version of the epic, as it developed in the east and south of Buryatia and Mongolia. Therefore, the Western Buryat versions of the "Geser" have practically not experienced the influence of tradition of written literature, as well as ideological and religious system of Buddhism, in contrast to the Mongolian and Eastern Buryat *üligers*. The researcher of Mongolian versions of the "Geser" M. Khomonov observes that "... Buddhist Church has been intolerant to the system of national worldviews, which were based on shamanic mythology" [Khomonov, 1989, p. 81].

The heroic epic of the Buryats belongs to formal musical genre of folk art. In live performance gestures and facial expressions of an *üligershin* (a narrator) play an important role. His skill is primarily manifested in the ability to logically organize rich verbal material, adding it a substantial semantic and vivid figurative meaning.

In the past, *üliger* needed a strong incentive reason to be performed. The storyteller would not sing the *üliger* unnecessarily, for the curious spectators. The *üliger* was performed to successfully support the actions of people with different purposes. The storyteller was inspired not only by interested and attentive listeners, convinced in the need for performance, but also special appeals, which gathered people addressed to the narrator.

The storyteller has always been a respected and authoritative man. Performers of *üligers* are artistically gifted people with a phenomenal memory, having a special skill, eloquence, excellent diction. *Üligershin* uses acting talents, which turn the narration into a kind of one-man show.

Shamanism considered hereditary transfer of rights or skills mandatory, but the Buryat storytellers did not have this tradition. The right

of performance belonged to the most talented, although some uligershins were proud that their ancestors were famous storytellers, too.

A bad uligershin, according to the storytellers themselves, does not fulfill his responsibilities and cannot help with his performance and bring success. It is impossible to reduce *üliger*, modify it, make long pauses. It is not only the law, but also the criterion for evaluating performance.

The Buryat storytelling tradition is a very interesting phenomenon in the surprisingly diverse range of Siberian peoples' epic genres.

The Altai and Khakas people, as well as Shors perform epic with instrumental accompaniment. The researchers note that the Buryats have two traditions of the *üliger* performance – unaccompanied solo and with accompaniment of a stringed musical instrument *khuur*. In the latter case, the performers are popularly called *khuurchins*. The researchers of the epic tradition and ethnomusicologists find three local areas of *üliger* performance: Khorinsky, Unginsky and Ekhirit-Bulagatsky Districts<sup>1</sup>.

"Comparing the Ekhirit-Bulagatsky (Western Buryat – author's note) performance of the epic with the Khorinsky one (Eastern Buryat – author's note), Ts. Zhamtsarano picked out solo singing to one tune without instrumental accompaniment and called this phenomenon "the epic poem". This is significantly different from Khorinsky singing defined by him as "the epic drama" due to the melodic multitopicality (Cited by: [Dugarov, Sheikin, 1991, p. 38]).

The tradition of the epic performance in full had been lost by 1930s. The last performers like "The Last of the Mohicans" performed *üligers* alone. The reason for this, obviously, lies not only in necessity of constant repeating the texts, so as not to forget them, but also in the personal desire of storytellers to realize their creative ambitions.

Unfortunately, the Buryat folklore music is presented by a small amount of tape recordings



Zhigzhit Batuev

and musical notations of *üligers* performed by the known storytellers. Consequently, comparison of different performance traditions and styles, typical melodies and intonation expressions seems highly challenging. In addition, the researchers recorded only a poetic text for the heroic epic "Geser". But it attracted attention of the creators of ballets "Geser" and "The Son of the Earth".

In 1967, the composer Zhigzhit Batuev turned to Buryat heroic epic "Geser" and created an eponymous ballet for the libretto of Namzhil Baldano<sup>2</sup>. However, staging of the choreographer A. Batubaeva was declared unsuccessful, primarily due to an uninteresting, complicated and convoluted libretto, loose dramatic collisions, that, in turn, affected the choreographic performance. Unfortunately, the history of ballet shows many examples of failures due to the poor literary works, when the stage fate was grim.

Five years later, in 1972, Zh. Batuev and N. Baldano returned to the epic legend of the Buryats, creating a ballet "The Son of the Earth" on its basis. The ballet master M. Zaslavskii took part in the development of synopsis. In this work

the composer used the music from the previous ballet, recomposed many scenes according to the new plot, expanded the musical characteristics of the main heroes, and in doing so eliminated some minor characters.

The authors of the ballet had to rethink *üliger*, extracting from the material a convincing line of stage action. Naturally, it is impossible to carry out "a retelling" of "multi-round" (a term introduced by N. Poppe), far-reaching tale in all its diversity. In terms of compositional structure N. Poppe distinguished between "single-round" (forming one exhaustive episode) and "multi-round" epic works, where each "round" taken separately is the tale of "the simplest type" [Poppe, 1937]. The Buryat heroic epic "Geser" consists of nine branches with each "round" more or less complete, but certainly each one implies the need to be continued. The realization of a story in the ballet involves many difficulties, because there are always controversies that accompany the "invasion" of choreography in the area of so-called "big folk epic". Evidently the creation of both works has caused doubts among the supporters of "verbatim repetition" of the epic.

If you compare the libretto of the ballet and the folk source, you will find quite a free reading of the tale. Not by chance the programs for the performances indicate that the ballet is "based" on the epic "Geser". While the libretto for "Geser" was complicated, the literary part of "The Son of the Earth" has been unanimously recognized by critics as one of the most successful in the national ballet theater, as the events happen slowly, all the situations are interconnected, logically formed. The authors sought to express the main idea of the epic legend as clearly as possible: "Geser is the symbol of the people's power", which is reflected in the title of the ballet – "The Son of the Earth".

Ballet as a musical and stage work belongs to theater and follows its laws. In the 18<sup>th</sup>

century, a master of choreography J.G. Noverre wrote: "Since the essence of ballet is theatrical, they should be composed of the same elements as the dramatic works < ... >. Every ballet story should have exposure, introduction and climax. The success of this kind of spectacle is partly dependent on the successful selection of the plot and the proper distribution of scenes" [Noverre, 1965, p. 61]. In the script of the ballet drama "The Son of the Earth" opposing forces are the Middle World – a world of people who lead a happy life on the Earth, and the Underworld World, whose representatives are trying to destroy the people. The reason for the confrontation is typical of the epic tales: stealing of the magic sword, the boast of Alma Mergen's family; the latter is a bride of the hero. The conflict between the two worlds is shown in the opposition of good and evil, in comparison of the hero Geser and the monster Gal Nurman Khan. Each of them has his own circle of supporters. The circle of positive characters include Geser, Alma Mergen, Lusan Khan and the people; the circle of the negative characters unites Khara Zutan, Gal Nurman Khan, warriors-robots and bodyguards. The challenge for the hero is rather traditional for folk epic tales: it is the restoration of peace and well-being, which are threatened by the devil.

On this basis, the symbolic meaning of the time for action is determined: "the end of the good time" is connected with stealing of the magic sword (outset of the conflict); "the beginning of the bad time" happens when Khara Zutan gives the sword to Gal Nurman Khan and the war starts (the development of the conflict); "the end of the bad time" comes during the Geser's battle with the devil (climax); "the beginning of the good time" is associated with the defeat of Gal Nurman Khan (conclusion).

The ballet "The The Son of the Earth" opens with a scene in front of the Lusan Khan's palace

where competitions are held by Bators (fighters) and Mergens (archers) (Act I). The libretto of "Geser" tells about competitions in horse racing and archery (Act II, Scene 3). The winner's award is the marriage to Lusan Khan's daughter, beautiful Alma Mergen.

Another reward is a magic sword that turns enemies into stone. The numerous contestants include Geser and his uncle Khara Zutan.

Geser beats all his rivals, guesses three riddles, and enchanted by the beauty of Alma Mergen, leads her to the palace, forgetting about the magic sword.

Abai<sup>3</sup> Geser and Alma Mergen were left alone

In the gilded palace, in their own palace.

The wife picks Geser's hand,

The wife leads Geser to the rooms.

[44, p.34, branch/song episode VI]

This scene is almost identical in both ballet libretti, but in "The Son of the Earth" it is just an exposure of the main actors who gradually take part in action (Act I), whereas in "Geser" this scene presents only Lusan Khan, Zutan Khan and the people (Act II, Scene 1), as Alma Mergen and Geser appeared much earlier, in Act I.

Let us note that the ballet's plot twist in the scene in front of Lusan Khan's palace is very different from the one we see in the epic cycle.

The branch II of the epic narrates that before the meeting with Alma Mergen Geser had twice participated in the competitions of fighters, shooters and riders (so-called "three men merrymaking"), where one of his many rivals was Khara Zutan. "The steppe nomads have a special test for a groom; it is realized < ... > as a contest of three kinds: the fight (with frequent, though not obligatory death of the rival); archery competitions in distance or height of arrow's

flight (its popularity dates back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the oldest monument of Mongolian writing system – "The Stone of Genghis-khan"); and also the original form of trial of the groom's strength – bracing a heroic giant bow; finally, horse riding, namely competitions of wonderful horses" [Khomonov, 1989, p. 90].

As the winner of the competition Geser had to get married. According to the folk epic, his first wife was Tumen Zhargalan, the second one – Urman Gokhon, but the creators of the ballet did not include these heroines in the libretto.

In accordance with the epic cycle of the Buryats, there was no competition in front of Lusan Khan palace, since even before Alma Mergen and Geser's birth their fathers decided to betroth the children.

Thus, the epic recounts that Geser is not one of the marriage contenders for Alma Mergen, he comes to Lusan Khan not to compete, not to ask for marriage, but to long before arranged wedding, to the ready and affianced bride who becomes the third and the most favorite wife of the hero.

Poetics of the ballet libretto demanded to reject the tradition of "tripling", so characteristic of the epic folk genres, for the sake of the compression of stage time and the concentration on the main storyline and the main female character – Alma Mergen.

The conflict outsets of "Geser" and "The Son of the Earth" are identical – stealing of the sword by Khara Zutan.

The Buryat heroic epic states that Khara Zutan was angry with Geser after his two defeats in the competitions (see in detail: [Kolpetskaia, p. 143]).

One of the main characters of the epic and the two ballets is Gal Nurman Khan (in "Geser" – Act II Scene 2, Act III Scene 1 and Scene 3, in "The Son of the Earth" – Act II Scene 1, Act III).

The libretto of the ballet has no details regarding the description of the origin of

mangadhai, to which a large part of branch I of the epic is devoted. The legend tells of the battle between Khan Khurmas – the chief of the 55 Western and Atai Ulan – the chief of 44 Eastern Tengris. Khan Khurmas defeated and dismembered Atai Ulan. His right hand turned into the monster Orgoli, the left hand – into Sherem Minat Anhai, the head – into Arkhan Shudkher, his body – into the demon Abarga Sesen, his legs – into three sisters Enhaboi, his back – into black Loir Lobsogoldoi, and the neck – into the devil Gal Nurman:

On the back the devil has ten thousand  
eyes,  
On the crown the devil has a special eye,  
This eye is round, the eye is king size,  
With sticking out of mouth the only canine.

[Geser, Book I, 1988, p. 93]

It is in the realm of Gal Nurman, the country Khonin Khoto (in "Geser" – Act II Scene 2, Act III Scene 1, in "The Son of the Earth" – Acts II and III), where the main action happens :

In the country of cold, in the starving  
country,  
In the waterless country, in the barren  
country,  
In the infamous country, in the country  
cleared of grass,  
In the country shrouded in a dark mist...

[Ibid, p. 93]

In the country where all the trees are pulled  
out with the roots,  
In the country where everything is turned  
inside out...

[Ibid, p. 95]

In the libretto of both ballets Khara Zutan gives Geser's magic sword to Gal Nurman Khan, that became the reason for the war, which killed

many people and turned Geser's warriors into stones. The hero could not protect his country, as he was unarmed.

Culminations and resolutions in ballets have different realizations. In "Geser", Act III suddenly swans appeared, which ripped the sword from the hands of Gal Nurman and handed it to Geser. With the sweep of the sword the warriors turned into stone became alive. That is the end of the war and people praise their heroes.

In the ballet "The Son of the Earth", Act III people, gathering their strength, forged a new sword for the hero. Geser burst into the camp of the enemy and staggered the devil in a fierce fight. Alma Mergen followed her husband and killed Khara Zutan. People praise their heroes.

In the ballet "Geser" the authors refer to the fairy tale "swan" motif, while in the ballet "The Son of the Earth" they turn to the episode of "forging the sword", which is widely represented in the epic tales of various peoples. It seems that the departure from the folklore source in this case is related to the absence of characters, which are the main protagonists of the ballet – Alma Mergen and Khara Zutan in the branch IV of the Buryat epic (this episode is fully dedicated to Geser's battle with Gal Nurman Khan). In all variants of the legend the characters turn to Geser for help, different countries send to him their ambassadors and bogatyrs. After much persuasion, the hero agrees to fight mangadhai and embarks on a journey with his warriors. The combat between Geser and Gal Nurman Khan lasted a long time, since they could not beat each other:

They girm the teeth like wolves,  
Swoop on each other like hawks.  
The universe hums and goes in waves  
From the ground to the high sky.

[Geser, Book I, 1988, p. 336]

According to B. Putilov, "the epic conveys the tension of the battle, stretching it in time <...> by drawing untold power of the enemy, which, in the end, is completely destroyed by the hero..." [Putilov, 1996, p. 20].

The researchers of the Buryat heroic epic unanimously point out that storytellers are least interested in the inner world of characters, in mental movement and emotional processes that take place in their minds. All uligershins' attention is concentrated on describing external features like facial features, figure, posture, facial expressions, gestures, i.e. the portrait characteristics.

"... Almost all the poor range of feelings expressed by the hero of the epic relates to "negative expressions", while "positive emotions" occupy a very insignificant place. Feelings are represented by a few interrelated lines: fear, sadness, anger (of varying intensity)" [Nekliudov, 1984, p. 109]; they all are a kind of encouraging action momentum, and as the "action" of the heroic story (at least in its culminating point ) is always a fight, psychological preparation for this action is this very anger, particularly brightly portrayed by the narrator:

Here Abai Geser looked menacing,  
He shone like lightning.  
He shook the air in the universe,  
Swayed distant cliffs...

[Geser, Book I, 1988, p. 307]

Anger mobilizes the hero to his best, prompting him to activity and causing an unprecedented surge of energy. "Here we come to the most interesting paradox of the epic aesthetics: the hero of the epic narrative, who demonstrates primarily "demon-fighting" pathos, sometimes is likened to a demon himself" [Nekliudov, 1984, p. 110]:

Geser's eyes breathe fire,  
And he made his heart a stone.

[Geser, Book II, 1988, p. 23]

In addition, it should be noted that the storytellers do not skimp on a colorful and imaginative description of landscapes, battles, ceremonies, rituals.

That descriptive part of the epic narrative is one of the most fundamental in the study of the epic cycle, as it makes the authors focus on the creation of the musical text of the ballet. The more descriptions and details the literary work has, the more accurate and concise the characters' specifications are, the more often are the images of the composer and choreographer, which are able to continue their stage life.

Undoubtedly, "musical" or "not musical" character of the epic cycle is not measured and exhausted by the amount of story lines and text fragments of folklore source, used by the creators of musical and stage works. The poetic text of uliger often merges its own music with the "music" of words and natural sounds. The epic cycle "Geser" is full of "steppe music" – singing birds, owl hooting, gurgling streams, "strange sounds that swept from the high mountains", the howling wind, mysterious rustles. Clearly, therefore, the composer includes instrumental, picturesque and visual episodes like "The Country of Gal Nurman Khan" (Act II), "Entr'acte" (Act III).

Analysis of the libretto of the ballet discovers two lines of action in the literary program, there are: the heroic one, showing the struggle of Geser and people with Khara Zutan and Gal Nurman Khan (which comes to the fore), and the lyrical one devoted to the love of the hero and Alma Mergen.

Zh. Batuev and N. Baldano's turning to the Buryat epic cycle predetermined the peculiarities



of epic drama and musical language in the connection with the song and dance folklore and ballets "Geser" and "The Son of the Earth", the uligershins' artistic tradition.

<sup>1</sup> L. Dashieva distinguishes two main territorial traditions of the epic performance – Western Buryat and Eastern Buryat (see in detail: [Dashieva, 1998, p. 57].

<sup>2</sup> Namzhil Baldano is one of the biggest experts in the Buryat heroic epic. He created the consolidated text of "Geser (1959), which had previously been known in Buryatia in different versions.

<sup>3</sup> Abai is a form of respectful vocative to the famous and respected man.

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## **Интерпретация бурятского героического эпоса в либретто балетов Ж. Батуева «Гэсэр» и «Сын земли»**

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*В данной статье исследуются образцы профессионального хореографического искусства Бурятии – балеты Жигжита Батуева «Гэсэр» (1967) и «Сын земли» (1972), созданные по мотивам национального героического эпоса (улигера). Соединение традиционных методов исторического музыкознания с приемами литературоведческого анализа определили комплексный подход к изучению произведений народного и профессионального творчества. Сравнение фольклорного первоисточника, основанного на претворении сюжетных мотивов и образов шаманской мифологии, с текстами либретто позволило обосновать основные этапы драматургического развития в балетах и выявить специфику интерпретации национального героико-архаического эпоса в музыкально-сценических произведениях.*

*Ключевые слова: бурятский героический эпос «Гэсэр», шаманская мифология, интерпретация, либретто, балет, Жигжит Батуев, Намжил Балдано.*

*Научная специальность: 24.00.00 – культурология.*

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