

Appendix II

Gesar

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© January 2008

In the fall of 2005, when I made a third trip to Tibet, Sonam Chogyal of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences helped me interview Bsam-grub, one of the most famous bards who sing and chant out the Tibetan Buddhist tale of Gesar of Ling, in eastern Tibet. This is, by far, the longest folk epic in the world.

Gesar, whose name may have derived from the Caesars of the Western Roman Empire, was a semi-mythical frontier warlord/god who is said to have descended from the Heavens to cure the ills of Tibet around 1100 AD. Since then, to audiences young and old, it has been told how he and his armies fought and conquered the demons of Tibet and then those of the North, South, East and West. After his triumphs, he is said to have ascended back to heaven, from where it is naturally hoped he will return.

Local legends say that his wife, his generals (and presumably he, himself) played games on a stone board in Changdu in Qinghai Province to the east of the Lhasa area.

In a few versions, Gesar also plays divinatory go games before making crucial decisions. However, the 'Nine-Square Divination Board' that is in the traditional title of the first chapter (when it is written down by Buddhist monks) is unrelated to go—see Appendix III of my *Origins* article for its Chinese equivalent, which is based on magic squares and Nine-Star Divination.

However, Gesar's story is not a simple folk tale, as many Tibetologists have found, sometimes to their dismay. Some of its elements likely go back to European megalithic times, and his roots as a Solar God in Tibet are pre-Buddhist and even pre-Bon. On the other hand, in modern times, because the number of evil kingdoms he conquered could be embellished by each bard, in one version in the 1940s, he fought and defeated Hitler.

To most of Tibet, and in Western translations, Gesar is a Buddhist superhero, but for some religious sects and in certain areas, he is regarded with suspicion for geographical and historical reasons. For example, he is sometimes associated with Turkic peoples who once invaded Tibet.

There are also many other Gesars who range from Siberia to China to northern India to the Caspian Sea, where the basic story blends with local traditions and culture. In Mongolia and parts of China, his cult and association with Kuan Ti, the God of War, was established in the 1700s by the Qing dynasty. In Muslim Baltistan, he is an 'Anti-Christ' who will lose his final battle, but cannot die because he is a god. In the Buryat area of northern Mongolia and southern Siberia, the singers begin with a great battle between the gods who form the mountains, the seas and ultimately humankind with some of the parts of one of their fallen.



This is Bsam-grub wondrously singing and chanting in his home that the Academy has provided. 85 years old, illiterate, and wearing the traditional bard's hat that puts him into a trance, he is in Gesar's army, announcing to Sonam and I what is going on. After being

possessed by the Indian god Shiva at age 13, like most of his fellow bards, he spent much of his life wandering through countryside villages, palaces and monasteries, dedicated only to the recanting of the story.

In a profession which is often hereditary, other bards go into trances by looking at mirrors to 'see' the battles. Other illiterate bards, like the one that Alexandria David-Neel wrote about in *My Journey to Lhasa*, must have a blank piece of paper to 'read' from. One of the few female bards can be heard singing the god's praises in the movie, *Saltmen of Tibet*. There are not just battle stories, however. Gesar, like Solar Gods everywhere, is always heavily involved with women, often not his own, so there are plenty of intrigues, treacheries, clever strategies and side-stories.

After Bsam-grub's earlier tape recordings were unfortunately neglected and disintegrated, his recent version took him well over 2,000 hours to sing and chant from memory, and it was transcribed and edited by the Academy into 42 volumes of about 350 pages each(!)