

# THE EVOLUTION OF THE LEGEND OF KING GESAR OF LING

Maria Oliphant

## Introduction

In his lectures over the years on Tibetan and Mongolian literatures Professor Namkhai Norbu, of the Oriental Institute in Naples, would often expatiate on the significance of the ancient Tibetan oral cycle of epic tales whose hero is the legendary warrior king, Gesar of Ling (*Gling Ge sar rgyal po*). Invariably, he would emphasize the great love felt by Tibetans from all walks of life for these stories, and their conviction that Gesar and his saga represent the life-force of their native land.

In fact, his pioneering field study of the Tibetan nomads in eastern Tibet in the 1950's, *Byang 'brog gi lam yig*, or, as it is entitled in English, *Journey among the Tibetan Nomads* (1997), meticulously correlates their way of life with the customs of the society described in the legends.

At that time, Prof. Namkhai Norbu stressed the need for further study of the scattered texts of the epic which he regarded as an exceptionally valuable source for students of Tibet's culture and history.

Subsequently, a large number of international publications on Gesar have appeared. In recent years, contemporary scholars have progressed from the phase of collating the numerous versions of the legend to explore their own interpretations of the cycle, drawing in insights from other fields such as psychology and political science. To guide the interested reader in an initial examination of this abundant literature I thought it most useful to first recall certain authors who give an overview of the field and then to highlight some of the significant discoveries and translations along with the principal episodes of the east Tibetan epic. I have also attempted to indicate some of the changes in analytical approach to Gesar now considered significant.

## The early accounts of the Gesar legend

In the genre of such warrior epics as the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābarāta* in India, or the Arthurian legends and Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* in western culture, the ancient narrative featuring King Gesar of Ling is still renowned across the Tibetan and Mongolian cultural regions of Central and East Asia. Ling,

or gLing tshang, was the name of an independent kingdom, which, at its height, in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, encompassed a large part of eastern Tibet known as Kham, including the area which was later incorporated into the principality of Derghe. Some princelings in the region still claim descent from Gesar's brother.

The king-hero's name, which may be spelled either *ge sar* or *ke sar*, means Blossom Pistil, and is linked etymologically with *Kaiser* and *Caesar*, and, like the eulogies composed by the Romans to praise Caesar, the epic extols the greatness of King Gesar.

R.A. Stein, in his introduction to *Dzam Gling Ge Sar rgyal Po'I rTogs brJod (The Epic of Gesar)*<sup>1</sup>, writes that Gesar is a transcription of the, first Greek, later Turkish, title *kaisar* ('king' or 'emperor'). He traces an earlier parallel to Gesar back to Caesar, king of Rome. Later, Stein maintains, Gesar was regarded as one of the four monarchs of the four directions, to be claimed as an ancestor by the rulers of the principality of gLing tshang. In 1856 W. Schott<sup>2</sup> compares the name Gesser to the Sanskrit term *késara*, which indicates a lion's mane.

Since fiction, in the accepted Western sense of the word, does not exist in Tibetan culture, it seems probable that a historical king called Gesar lived in east Tibet in the eleventh or tenth century and that his deeds, perhaps embellished by those of other kings, are the source and inspiration of the works. The dates of Gesar's life are uncertain. Both Dudjom Rinpoche<sup>3</sup> (1904-1987) and Professor Khetsun Sangpo<sup>4</sup> seem to agree on the fact that he was born in the earth-tiger year (1038 A.D.) and died, at the age of 88, in the wood-dragon year (1124 A.D.). These dates, however, are disputed by other Tibetan sources.

Though some contemporary Tibetan scholars like Tulku Thondup and Namkhai Norbu, long regarded by the Dalai Lama as the foremost authority on Tibet's indigenous pre-Buddhist culture, believe that the historical reliability of the epic proves that King Gesar was an extraordinary, but none the less real, figure, and his victories true events, others have doubted his very existence. Gedun Choepel (1905-1951), a historian and leading Tibetan intellectual figure, expressed a different point of view:

*The snow lion exists nowhere.*

*King Gesar is nothing but*

*A phenomenon that appears to fabricating minds,*

*Material proper only for poetic composition .<sup>5</sup>*

1 Stein,R.A. — "Introduction to the Gesar Epic" , in Tobgyel and Dorji 1979,1, pp.1-20; reprinted in Tibet Journal, 6,1 (1981), 3-13.

2 Schott,W. — "Gesser-Khan", in *Ersch und Gruber's Allgemeine Encyclopadie der Wissenschaften und Kunste*, 1., section, 64. Teil, Leipzig, 1856, pp.340-344.

3 Dudjom, Rinpoche — *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, London, Wisdom Publications 1993, vol.1, p.952.

4 Khetsun Sangpo — *Bibliographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism*, Dharamsala, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives 1973, 14 vols.

The great saga of Gesar's life — from the harsh circumstances of his youth to his climactic days of heroic adventures and campaigns against the demonic or non-Buddhist enemies of the four directions — originally consisted of perhaps two or three epic songs known as Drung (*sgrung*). Everything tends to confirm that the Drung glorifying Gesar were transmitted only orally at first. The cycle was recreated and amended over time by inspired bards (*babs sgrung*), usually illiterate and of nomadic background, who, enriched by their personal vision, sang versions deriving from the numerous traditions which recount the exploits of the warrior king. Many Drung texts were considered to be mind treasures (*dgongs gter*); that is, knowledge concealed in the mindstream of an appropriate person by a spiritual master. This secret is destined to be rediscovered through the awakening of the recipient's 'wisdom mind'. Famed among the discoverers of Drung texts were the adepts Do Khyentse (1800-1866) and the celebrated scholar Ju Mipham Gyatso (1846-1912).

In a period yet to exactly determined, many songs were collected, written down, and grouped according to subject, though no literature about Ling written at the time of Gesar is known to have survived. Most of the extensive literary output of the epic works in verse dates from centuries after the time of Gesar. There is no standard text of the national saga.

Notwithstanding this, Gesar's is extremely widely known and might be considered an influence on spiritual and social life today in many parts of Tibet, as well as Mongolia, Buryatsia, Kalmykia, and Tuva. In certain areas of eastern Tibet, such as Kham, Amdo and Golok, he is regarded as an ancestor-hero, and the epic is regarded as an expression of martial and heroic qualities. Communities are still entertained by professional bards (*sgrung khan*). For hours they chant these *Drung* or stories in magnificent poetry as though describing events taking place before their very eyes. New episodes are still being performed and written down, mostly following a standard pattern. A great many writers, gifted in language and imagination, have produced fictional Drung on the life of Gesar of Ling. Among the Khampa, richer families take great pride in owning manuscripts of the epic, and of which woodblock editions were commissioned by monasteries in the nineteenth century.

R.A. Stein, in his earlier mentioned introduction to *The Epic of Gesar*, suggested that a ritual text, written in Mongolian in A.D. 1600, may have been the earliest surviving written version. In 1836 I.J. Schmidt compiled a summary of another Mongolian version<sup>6</sup>, the first to be brought to the notice of western scholars. This text was later translated into English by Ida Zeitlin and published under the title *Gessar Khan* in 1927.

---

5 Choepel, Gedun — *The White Annals*, translated by Samten Norbu, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala 1978.

6 Schmidt, I.J. — *Die Thaten Bogda Gesser Chan*, Saint Petersburg 1839.

Tarhang Tulku, a contemporary Tibetan philosopher who has focused on the epic in his writings, presented a new version of *Gessar Khan* entitled *Gesar! The Wondrous Adventures of King Gesar* in 1991. He comments, “Interpreted symbolically, King Gesar, representing freedom and liberation from the bondage of ignorance, is the King of the human mind. The kingdom of Ling is the realm of restless experience that must be unified and strengthened. The treasure to win and protect is our own understanding. The enemies that we must conquer are emotionality and ignorance”<sup>7</sup>.

The late Chögyam Trungpa, inspired by the inscrutability and fearlessness of this hero, dedicated poems, conferences and in particular his book *Shambhala: The Secret Path of the Warrior* to King Gesar, drawing its imagery and inspiration from the warrior society of ancient Tibet and from its cultural mirror, the mythical kingdom of Shambhala. According to the legends, the kingdom of Shambhala was a place of peace and prosperity, governed by wise and compassionate rulers, where the citizens were equally kind and learned so that, in general, the kingdom was a model society. Trungpa in a poem entitled “To Gesar of Ling” , dedicates these words,

*Your dignity, oh warrior  
Is like lightening in rain clouds.  
Your smile, oh warrior  
Is like the full moon.  
Your unconquerable power  
Is like a tiger springing ...<sup>8</sup>*

Gesar stories exist in numerous versions, in different languages, including various dialects of Mongolian and Chinese, but it is in the east Tibetan manuscript or printed versions that we encounter the most elaborate expression of the tradition. The full extent of the cycle has only emerged in the last thirty years. Tibetan refugee communities in India have printed many of the major episodes, while, in Bhutan, a complete collection in thirty-one volumes now exists. In the People's Republic of China, following a “Save the Gesar epic” campaign, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, about sixty versions of various episodes were published in Tibetan, mostly from blockprint and manuscript sources, but some were based on oral performances by contemporary epic bards.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Gesar Magazine: Buddhist Perspective*, Summer/Fall 1979, Journal of the Nyingma Institute, Dharma Publishing, Berkeley.

<sup>8</sup> Trungpa, Chogyam — “To Gesar of Ling” , *LOKA 2: A Journal from Naropa Institute*, Rick Fields (ed.), Garden City, New York, Anchor Books 1976, p.155.

According to Namkhai Norbu, in his introduction to *Journey among the Tibetan Nomads*, the most famous stories of the epic cycle form a body of work known as “The Eighteen Fortresses” (*rDzong chen bco brgyad*)<sup>9</sup>. When he was a boy in eastern Tibet his father would often recount these legends. At that time, it was very difficult to find manuscripts or printed versions of the epic yet Professor Norbu managed to procure the following episodes:

1. *Lha gling* (Ling and the divinities): Gesar's journey to the land of the divinities.
2. *'Khrungs gling* (His birth at Ling): Gesar's birth in the land of Ma, the area surrounding Machu in north-eastern Tibet.
3. *rTa rgyugs* (The horse race): how Gesar became king.
4. *Ta zig nor rdzong* (The fortress of the riches of Tasig): the war between Ling and Tasig, a kingdom to the west of Tibet, sometimes identified as Persia.
5. *Kha che g.yu rdzong* (The turquoise fortress of Kache): the war between Ling and Kashmir.
6. *Mön gling* (Ling and the land of Mön): the war between Ling and Mön, a region in south-eastern Tibet, bordering Bhutan.
7. *Jang gling* (Ling and the land of Jang): the war between Ling and Jang, a region that corresponds to the present day province of Yunnan.
8. *rGya gling* (Ling and China): the war between Ling and China.
9. *Sog gling* (Ling and Mongolia): the wars between Ling and Mongolia.
10. *bDud gling* (Ling and the demons): the war between Ling and Dud, a class of demonic beings corresponding to Mara in the Indian tradition.

---

9 Norbu, Namkhai — *Journey among the Tibetan Nomads: An Account of a Remote Civilization*, translated by Maria Simmons-Oliphant, Dharamsala, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives 1977, pp.xi-xii.

11. *Hor gling* (Ling and Hor): the war between Ling and the Hor, the peoples once settled in present-day Xinjiang Uighur.

12. *Gru go'i go rdzong* (The fortress of the armors of the Drugu): the war between Ling and the Drugu, peoples of Turkish origin who lived in the western part of eastern Turkestan.

13. *dMyal gling* (Ling and hell): Gesar's descent into the hell-realms.

Beside these, Prof. Norbu's father had also located:

14. *Mi nub dar rdzong* (The silk fortress of Minub): the war between Ling and Minub, probably a region of Yunnan inhabited in ancient times by a people of Thai origin.

15. *Zhang gling* (Ling and Shang-Shung): the war between Ling and Shang-Shung, an ancient kingdom of western Tibet.

16. *Bye ru'i byu rdzong* (The coral fortress of Cheru): the war between Ling and Cheru, probably the Islamic region of Ning Xia that borders Mongolia.

17. *A drag* (Adrak): the war between Ling and Adrak, a country as yet unidentified.

The last episode of “The Eighteen Fortresses”, the only one which Prof. Norbu did not find in the 1950's, was entitled *Riche*. According to the other tales *Riche* contained stories of the wars between Ling and Riche, probably a region belonging to Khotan. Prof. Norbu states that these works, apart from their mythical or legendary aspects, contain important historical information on the customs and lifestyles of the ancient peoples of Tibet. The veracity of what is communicated is confirmed by the fact that almost all the usages and life patterns of the nomads of today correspond to those described in the epic.

The numbers of the main episodes, according to a later compilation by Wang Yinuan (1985)<sup>10</sup>, are reported by Geoffrey Samuel, who has undertaken extensive research on the saga. He enumerated these episodes in an article entitled “The Gesar Epic of East Tibet” .

---

<sup>10</sup> Wang, Yinuan — “Incomplete Statistics of Sections and Lines in the Tibetan king Gesar”, *Gesar Yanjiu* [Gesar Research] 1:184-211, 1985, [in Chinese].

1. *Lha gling* (The gods and Ling): Threatened with destruction by the four great demon kings, the people of the land of Ling (identified as Lingsang near Derghe) appeal to the gods for help. The gods decide to send one of their number to be born on earth so as to rescue Ling.

4. *'Khrungs gling* (The birth): Gesar is born to Gogmo, a *naga* or dragoness princess and Singlen, a chief of the tribes of Ling. His wicked uncle Todong tries, but fails, to murder him. (A *naga* is a snake or dragon said to belong to the species of demi-gods that inhabit oceans, streams, lakes and are reputed to possess fabulous treasures).

8. *rTa rgyugs* (The horse race): Gesar tricks his wicked uncle into arranging a horse race. The prize is to become ruler of Ling and gain the hand in marriage of Dugmo, the daughter of the chief of Kyalo. Gesar wins the race, becomes the monarch and weds Dugmo.

10. *bDud 'dul* (The Defeat of the demon-king of the North). Meza Bumkyid, another of the wives of Gesar is abducted by Lutsan, the demon-king of the North, the first of his four great enemies. Helped by the female warrior, Atag Lhamo, Gesar overcomes the demon-king and converts the dwellers of his realm to Buddhism, making them allies of Ling.

11. *Hor gling g.yul 'gyed* (The war of Hor and Ling): meanwhile the three demon-kings of Hor have invaded Ling and abducted Drugmo. Gesar returns to his homeland to defeat Hor, forcing that kingdom to become an ally.

13 and 14. *'Jang gling g.yul 'gyed* (The war of Jang and Ling) and *Mon gling g.yul 'gyed* (The war of Mon and Ling): two further episodes featuring demon-kings. Once more, Gesar proves victorious. (The Jang people have been identified as the Naxi of present-day Yunnan).

18. *Nag po rgya gling kyi le'u* (The China episode): On a peaceful visit to China, Gesar wins the hand of a Chinese princess, using his wisdom and magical capacities.

106. *dMyal gling* (Hell and Ling): Gesar ventures into the underworld to rescue his mother (or in some versions Atag Lhamo). On his return Gesar declares his mission on earth to be over, and he departs for the realms of the Gods.<sup>11</sup>

---

11 Samuel, Geoffrey — “The Gesar Epic of East Tibet”, in *Tibetan Literature. Studies in Genre*, Ithaca, Snow Lion Publications, 1996, pp.358-367.

The numbering used by Wang suggests the existence of many other episodes. An average episode in manuscript contains 5000 to 10,000 lines of verse (fifty to one hundred songs) linked by a spoken narration, although some episodes are considerably longer. Something resembling a standard pattern can be discerned in the epics: Ling enters into conflict with a neighboring people, usually non-Buddhist, and invariably the aggressor. Gesar gathers his loyal forces and goes to war. Sometimes using magic, his warriors prevail and subdue the fortress or administrative center of the enemy ruler. He and his subjects become converts to Buddhism and allies of Ling.

Probably the best known of these episodes are the *sTag gzig nor rdzong* (Iranian Cattle Fortress, Wang's n. 16), *Sog stod rta rdzong* (Upper Mongolian Horse Fortress, n.20) and *Sog smad khrab rdzong* (Lower Mongolian Armor Fortress, n. 21), *Ka che g.yu rdzong* (Turquoise Fortress of Kashmir, n. 26) according to Kaschewsky and Tsering<sup>12</sup>, *Gru gu'I go rdzong* (Weaponry Fortress of the Turks, n.30), *Sum pa mdzo rdzong* (Dzo [bull-female yak hybrid] Fortress of Sumpa, n.35) in Kaschewsky and Tsering<sup>13</sup>, and *Ri nub (or Mi nub) dar rdzong* (Silk Fortress of Burma, n. 103).

Another, entirely oral, epic tradition exists in the far western regions of Tibet. This so called Ladhaki tradition first became known to occidental scholars through A.H. Francke, a Moravian missionary, at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>14</sup>. G.N. Roerich (1874-1947) writes in *Trails to Inmost Asia* that "Ladakh is regarded as the birthplace of Gesar Khan"<sup>15</sup> and Luciano Petech states that according to the "Chronicle of the Ladhaki Kings" (*Ladag Gyelrab*)<sup>16</sup> the first Ladhaki kings were descended from Gesar. Although this seems improbable, it shows that many places claim to be the birthplace of Gesar. Furthermore, according to Maria Phylactou in her dissertation on household organization and marriage in present day Ladhak several places in Ladhak are associated with Gesar and Ladhaki marriages are said to be explicitly modeled on the marriage of Gesar<sup>17</sup>.

The consensus among leading authorities is that a core of main episodes exists, common to both eastern and western Tibetan versions. These relate the birth of Gesar, his childhood, his marriage and his

12 Kaschewsky, Rudolf and Tsering, Pema — "Gesars Anwehrkhamf gegen Kaschmir" , *Zentralasiatische Studien* 6, 273-400, 1972.

13 Kaschewsky, Rudolf and Tsering, Pema — "Zur Frage der Historizität des helden gesar" in Heissig, 1987, pp.390-405.

14 Francke, A.H. — "A Lower Ladakhi Version of the Gesar Saga" , *Bibliotheca Indica*, 1543, Calcutta 1905-1941.

15 Roerich, George N. — *Trails to Inmost Asia. Five Years of Exploration with the Roerich Central Asian Expedition*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1931, pp.102-125.

16 Petech, Luciano — *The Kingdom of Ladakh*, Rome, I.S.M.E.O (Serie Orientale Roma 51) 1 1977.

17 Phylactou, Maria — "Household Organization and Marriage in Ladakh-Indian Himalaya" , Ph.D dissertation, London School of Economics 1989.

becoming ruler of Ling and including his wars against the kings of Hor (a Turkic people). According to Damindsuren these tales also occur in the first printed Mongolian version of 1716<sup>18</sup>.

A number of episodes have been quite recent additions. At the beginning of the century Ju Mipham Gyatso, besides editing a version of the Gesar epic based on manuscripts found in the library of the king of Ling (a man who claimed to be actually descended from the family of Gesar), created numerous ritual practices dedicated to Gesar. Here is a brief excerpt from one of these known as *The Warrior Song of Drala*, reproduced in the article, “A Smoke Purification Song” by the Nalanda Translation Committee<sup>19</sup>. In this ancient ritual known as the *lhasang* prayers are accompanied by the burning of fragrant substances, usually juniper boughs, sometimes mixed with other woods and incense. Here Gesar, in the guise of warrior God of Tibet, is invited to descend the smoke trails and bless the place.

Kye

Lha ki ki ki *and* so so so

*Father Gesar the king, god of war,*

*At the time when enemies fill the kingdom,*

*Lord Dradul (Dga'drul, “Tamer of enemies” ) don't be idle, don't be idle.*

*I put my hope in no other protector but you.*

*A tsi tsi your hosts of troops are awesome.*

*A li li they are youthful, wearing splendid accouterments.*

*A ya ya the great men are very mighty.*

*The powerful warrior fathers are on the right.*

*The beautiful maidens, so lovely and perfumed,*

*Wherever you gaze at them, they are as if smiling,*

*Wherever I direct my mind, it goes to them.*

*The lovely warrior mothers are on the left ...*

---

18 Damindsuren, Ts. — “On the New Edition of the Mongolian Version Geseriada” , in Heissig 1985, pp.593-9.

19 Ju Mipham Gyatso — *The Warrior Song of Drala*, Nalanda Translation Committee (trans.), “A Smoke Purification Song” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice* (Princeton Readings in Religion), Princeton University Press p.402.

Subsequently, two new episodes recounting the conflicts between the kingdoms of Ling and `Jar and Ling and Uyan were composed by Ven. Khamtrul Rinpoche the VIIIth (1929-80) resident in Tashi Jong, India. Another contemporary lama, Ven. Kalu Rinpoche (1906-89) has written a tale of Gesar and Yama, the King of Hell.

Eastern Tibetan versions were first recorded by Francke at the start of the twentieth century, as was mentioned earlier, but it was Alexandra David-Neel, the famed French Buddhist writer and explorer who brought these to the attention of a wider readership. She and her adopted son Lama Yongden produced the first summary of these eastern Tibetan tales based on manuscripts in the author's possession along with her notes written down following the songs of the different bards she encountered on her extensive travels. This was first published in French in 1931<sup>20</sup>. The descriptions of society in the epic bear many similarities to those of pastoralist tribes described in Robert Ekvall's ethnographies and novels of Amdo in the 1930's<sup>21</sup>.

G.N.Roerich in *The Epic of Gesar of Ling* (1942) presented a detailed analysis and historical study of the epic, linking it to the wars between the Tibetans and the Turkic peoples, claiming that, though the epic was formed in Imperial times the background is pre-Buddhist<sup>22</sup>.

In 1956 R.A.Stein writing in French, published an edited translation of three of the principal episodes and then went on in 1959 to produce the most authoritative study to date analyzing the epic role of the bard, *Recherches sur L'épopée et le Barde au Tibet* in which there is also an interesting allusion to the Tibetan version of the story of King Midas and his donkey ears<sup>23</sup>. Stein's work, like that of Hermanns in 1965<sup>24</sup>, speculated on the historical background. In these early analyses the myths were seen as a repository of allegorical instruction, a recounting of the triumph of Buddhism and a source of spiritual revelation. A number of episodes were also made available in German versions by Pema Tsering and Rudolf Kaschewsky in the 1970's and 1980's. These were, for the most part, simple re-editions and abridged translations.

---

20 David-Neel, Alexandra and Lama Yongden — *La Vie Surhumaine de Guésar de Ling, le Héros Thibétain, Raconté, par les Bardes de son Pays*, Paris, Plon 1931.

21 Ekvall, Robert B. — *Cultural relations on the Kansu-Tibetan Border*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1939.

Ekvall, Robert B. — *Tibetan Skylines*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Young 1952.

Ekvall, Robert B. — *Tents against the Sky: A Novel of Tibet*, London, Victor Gollancz 1954.

22 Roerich, George N. — "The Epic of King Kesar of Ling" , *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 8:277-311.

23 Stein, R.A. — *Recherches sur L'épopée et le Barde au Tibet*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, (Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 13) 1959.

24 Hermanns, Mathias — *Das National-Epos der Tibeter Gling König Ge sar*, Regensburg, Verlag Josef Habel 1965.

After the first phase of collection, translation and historical clarification of the origin of these legends, studies with a more particular focus were to follow. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz in his work *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* described the pantheon of wrathful protective spirits, referred to as drala and werma, who are the war-gods and representatives of the lineages of ancestral warrior protectors surrounding Gesar<sup>25</sup>.

In an effort to open a new approach to Gesar interpretation, Robert Paul in *The Tibetan Symbolic World* investigated the significance of the legend in a Freudian framework, exploring notions of kingship in general and in particular symbolic patricide in the tale of Gesar slaying Lutsan, the demon king of the North<sup>26</sup>.

John Bellezza, in his work *Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilization in Tibet*, explores the symbolism of the numerous geographical formations on the western Tibetan plateau associated with Gesar<sup>27</sup>.

Two studies, one by R.A. Stein on Tibetan culture entitled *Tibetan Civilization*<sup>28</sup> and the other a work by David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson entitled *A Cultural History of Tibet*<sup>29</sup>, provide an excellent anthropological and historical background for understanding the epic. Thus, numbers of scholars, both Tibetan and Occidental, have focused on this remarkable cycle, presenting the fruit of their research in essays and articles and in translations of episodes of the text itself. The epic has also proved a source of inspiration for artists, poets, musicians and film-makers. Songs of the various characters are at the heart of the Gesar epic and these were first examined in depth from a literary and musicological viewpoint by Mireille Helfer in *Les chants de l'épopée tibétaine de Ge-sar d'après le livre de la Course de Cheval* in 1977<sup>30</sup>. The chamber opera "King Gesar" was commissioned by the Munich Biennale at the behest of Hans Werner Henze. The music was composed by Peter Lieberson and the libretto, which was written by Douglas Penick, has been published under the title *The Warrior Song of King Gesar*.

---

25 de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René — *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, Graz, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt 1975.

26 Paul, Robert — *The Tibetan Symbolic World: Psychoanalytic Explorations*, University of Chicago Press 1982.

27 Bellezza, John Vincent — *Divine Dyads. Ancient Civilization in Tibet*, Dharamsala, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives 1997.

28 Stein, R.A. — *Tibetan Civilization*, translated by J.E. Stapleton Driver, Stanford, Stanford University press 1972.

29 Snellgrove, David and Richardson, Hugh — *A Cultural History of Tibet*, Boston, Shambala 1968, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Boulder, Prajña Press 1980)

30 Helffer, Mireille — *Les chants dans l'épopée tibétaine de Gesar d'après le livre de la Course de Cheval*, Paris and Geneva, Librairie Droz 1977.

Calling on the Power of Goodness in our Hearts:

An Invocation to the Imperial Drala, Gesar, King of Ling

*The white smoke of the juniper arises  
Fragrant and dense from the burning coals,  
Billowing into an empty shining sky,  
A vast mirror-like expanse  
Unclouded by the shadow of birth or fear or death.*

*There, descending on this perfumed bridge of smoke and longing,  
Swirling and roaring in the smoke clouds, as in a gathering storm,  
Surrounded by a host of mounted Drala and Werma warriors,  
Whose golden armor and steel sword blades glitter like lightning,  
Rides the great and ever-youthful conqueror  
Gesar, king of ling, lord of the four kinds of warrior,  
Destroyer of the four great demons who enslave men's minds.  
He rules over the high snow mountains and the rolling plains.  
He conquers fear, doubt, corruption and deceit in the hearts of men.  
And is the great friend and protector of the life of all.*

*His reddish- brown face is implacable and his dark eyes fathomless  
His ferocious tiger smile is enticing.  
His crystal helmet blazes like the sun.  
His silver shield shines like the moon.  
His chain-mail armor glitters like the stars.  
He wears a tiger-skin quiver and his arrows are lightning itself.  
His sharp crystal sword is the invincible wisdom of spontaneous liberation.  
With his right hand, he raises a terrifying whip that slashes through all deceptions.  
And with his left, he raises a victorious banner the colour of the dawn.  
With saddle and bridle of pure white jade, he rides the miracle horse,  
Kyang Go Karkar, who is the power of confidence, the wind of winds.*

*Gesar and his host of warriors gallop down the bridge of billowing Smoke  
Like a thunderstorm sweeping across a desert plain.  
The thunder and roar of their charge overwhelm the fearful,*

*And their violent cries of KI and SO paralyze all cowardice.  
Gesar comes like a wheel of iron rolling across the sky,  
And the earth becomes still.*

from *the Warrior Song of King Gesar* by Douglas J. Penick<sup>31</sup>

A performance film of the opera with elaborate sets and choreography is available on video, as well as on compact disk.

An intriguing and relevant new angle on the study of the Gesar tales has emerged in the current political and anthropological examinations of the cycle which have taken up the theme of kingship and political authority within parameters set by the work of the social philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and the ethnologist Pierre Clastres. They first raised the question of whether Gesar is a “just king” or “noble bandit”, or indeed both<sup>32</sup>. The fortress that Gesar so frequently attacks and destroys is discussed as a symbol of centralized authority, since in Tibet the nomads' patterns of behaviour were often in stark contrast to the deference and obedience demanded by the ruling class in Lhasa.

Although Gesar has long been regarded as a Buddhist hero, and the legend as a triumph of Buddhism over the cults of Bön, Hinduism, sorcery, demonic power and base human selfishness, the work has recently been interpreted somewhat differently by Geoffrey Samuels in *Civilized Shamans*<sup>33</sup>. Samuel argues that Buddhism in the epic is not simply a 'pure' ethical code with enlightenment as its goal but offers a source of magical or shamanic power as well. Gesar the hero is not averse to using trickery, cunning strategies or even his tantric powers in overcoming the obstacles to his goals. Gesar is anarchic, an outsider and a subversive, and therefore the embodiment, as well as the celebrator, of nomad tradition.

This reflects a growing tendency among scholars in the field to acknowledge the influence of earlier shamanic beliefs and practices derived from Bon in shaping Tibetan Buddhism. This view was once considered somewhat heretical as Buddhism was believed to have entirely replaced the 'primitive' Bon cults, which had for so long sustained the nomads. It might be said that one of the fruits of these studies on Gesar has been to bring this question into sharper focus.

---

31 Penick, Douglas J. — *The Warrior Song of King Gesar*, Boston, Wisdom Publications 1996.

32 Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix — *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1987.

Clastres, Pierre — *Society against the State*, New York, Urizen 1977.

33 Samuels, Geoffrey — *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press 1993.

Over the years, many of the functions that the modern intellect ascribes to myth, in Joseph Campbell's use of the term, have been applied to the Gesar cycle. At different moments the epic has been presented as an attempt to explain the world of nature, as a poetical fantasy, or as a source of allegories, a way to convey metaphysical insight and spiritual revelation. Further, it is now also a locus of debate on the nature of leadership and authority, the struggle between the shamanic and the religious, the "wild" and the "tame". The beauty and strength of the cycle is that none of these interpretations are unfounded.