

Khukhedei's Arrow

A Geser Tale in Verse

and

Selected Poems

by Bair Dugarov

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When a poet is born,

God smiles

And the devil winks.

Khukhedei's Arrow

Introduction from the Poet

The epic tale about Abai Geser is the best-known and most popular story in the Buryat folk tradition, passed down orally from storyteller to storyteller, generation to generation. Here the motif is the ancient struggle between good and evil, a struggle won by Geser, who is an incarnation of life and light.

A key aspect of Geser's identity is his celestial origin. Sent down from heaven, Geser becomes a son of the Earth, a defender of the human race, a guarantor that it will flourish and prosper. Every version of the Geser tale, regardless of which Mongolian ethnic group tells it, whether orally or in writing, presents the hero as the personification of their wish for a universal just ruler.

In my academic career, I spent many years studying the Buryat heroic epic, especially the sacred universe of the Geseriad and its pantheon of celestial deities. I published many articles and several books on the topic, though it was little examined by Russian Federation folklorists. Now, as a poet, I have attempted to present my own cherished rendition of the Geser saga, under the title "Khukhedei's Arrow." The poem is based on the plot of the Ekhirit-Bulagat version of the Buryat Geser tale as told by Manshud Imegenov. This is widely accepted as the oldest version, with its roots at the mythological source of the epic tale form, part of the Tengrist oral tradition of the first millennium A.D. This version tells that Khukhedei Mergen, the thunder god, hands down lightning, his own celestial weapon, to his son Geser, who wields it as Khukhedei's arrow to cleanse the Earth of everything evil.

To preserve the aesthetic sense of the steppe, I adhered to the Mongolian epic-tale tradition of placing rhymes and alliterations at the start of lines, as opposed to the end rhyme more common in the European tradition.

*Geysers seethed beneath the strata of centuries, ancient legends.
Great aoidoi born of the steppe breathed life into the sacred word.
Geser's song burst into life, yearning for all that is perfect and eternal.
Grandiose peaks rose from the pebbles laid in memory of those before us.
I spread the scent of burning incense across the blue sky and ancestral lands.
I swirl the smoke over Lake Baikal, embracing taiga and steppe.
I speak the Word and genuflect to my people's stories and wisdom.
I sing once more the song of Geser, warrior of the Light.*

Bair Dugarov

In times too distant for any to recall
Baikal glowed turquoise
in the cosmic dark,
Everest velvety white
in the murky sea.

In times too distant for any to recall.

When flames burst forth on dry land,
When sparks recoiled from steadfast continents
To make the constellations,
When blue-and-white clouds and threatening black ones
Whirled between the heavens and earth...

Part 1

1.

Khukhedei, god of thunder and lightning, raced along on his blue-black horse,
Hooves raising thunderclouds that billowed like dust.
A shadow slid over the horizons of creation,
A shudder seized the leaves on trees clinging to the hills.

The lash of the god's blinding whip was a fright,
The crash of his thunder rocked all mute Creation —
Now the thunder god's stallion reared and roared,
Now the echo resounded through grim vales and pine groves.

Nobody could shoot like the thunder god,
Notice the power as he draws his bow.
An arrow of lightning splits through space —
An ornament for the distant reaches
Unadorned in the gloom of night.
Wretched beings born of the dark
Retreat to the abyss, seared by heaven's arrow.

So Khukhedei the thunder god soared through the skies,
Secret keeper of the skies,
Sacred warrior and lord of his realm,
Shaking out thunder with his mighty hands,
Shaking heaven and earth for his tambourine.

Every flash of lightning was Khukhedei's arrow,
Every flash piercing the dark to its depths.
Again quiet reigned in the realm of the heavens
Again blissful quiet, undisturbed...

2.

A ribboning rainbow encircled the earth.
A riveting calm and peace pleased the gods.
They lived in palaces of the whitest stone.
The life-giving breeze streamed over the clouds.

The gods were adorned in dark blue silk,
The gods strolled evenings in the Milky Way.
They gathered on the Moon to converse, unhurried,
They gathered in the Pleiades to hear the stars sing.

They did not count their years in the world.
They knew not the bonds of mortality.
Like men in the sky, they lived like men,
Like days on earth they spent their celestial days.

Surely the sky gods lived merrily,
Sure of good fortune and immortality,
Sheltering under curtains of green leaves from the heat,
Shivering under gusts of cool breeze in the night.

Perched in the middle of the sky
Perfectly plumed and magical
Performing its song: a cuckoo bird, in a gold and silver grove,
Clocking the time through endless ages,
Clucking an eternal life free of cares.

It sang and the light emerged all around,
It sang and the grass grew green on the ground.
The earth drank the soft blue light of the sky.
The leaves, soft and bright, reached up to the light.
Rhyming with the cuckoo's endless chirping
Rays of sunlight embraced the world
Raining good fortune down on the earth,
Radiant with the song of life itself.

Never could such a place have beginning or end.
Never-ending rivers of wealth filled each cup.
Never did gods or humans know hatred,
No evil or sorrow touched heaven or earth.

3.

A riveting calm and peace pleased the gods.
A ribboning rainbow linked the mountain tops.
The gods lived in a paradise of eternal spring
Their garden unblemished by suffering.

Leading a life of leisure and play,
Living forever in a holiday,
When the gods grew weary of feasting, they rode,
Wending through valleys on their light copper steeds.
Without second thoughts, the gods lived like gods,
Wishing for nothing as they lived their free lives
Throwing great feasts both day and night,
Thriving on every type of milk and meat.

And, to multiply their herds on the land,
The gods began striving to help mortal men.
Sheep pens appeared in the empty steppe,
Sheep drifted cloudlike across the plain.

The nomads invented customs of sacrifice,
Offering the best lambs for the gods' delight.
More pleasure than ever lit the palaces of heaven,
More favor did the gods show mortal men.

And the gods never tired of their lengthy feasts,
And the patriarchs above kept their goblets full of wine,
And wet their lips with kumiss like silver,
And went to bed on blankets stitched with gold...

For heaven, a golden age of peace and calm.
For centuries it lasted, none could say for how long.

4.

Ruling the sky was wise Esege Malaan,
Righteous and wise was this heavenly khan.
He lived his own life and let others have their freedom,
Beloved was he by the gods for that reason.

Kind and revered, this celestial sire,
Kindly he ruled, until he grew tired
Of the weight of the crown.
He decided to step down.
Retire,
Retreat from his daily cares.

He left his post with an untroubled heart.
He could not know what trouble would result.

Esege Malaan had two strong sons.
The oldest was Atai, and other Khyormos.
Atai should have taken his father's place,
But Khyormos was too proud to let that take place.

Two sons met in a furious battle,
Two sky dwellers who surpassed all the rest.
Shaking the sky, shaking mountain peaks,
Shattering the peace in every corner of the land.

Stallion to stallion, the riders clashed.
Stalwart Khyormos, whose will was the stronger,
Struck a deadly blow with his lance
Striking Atai
Straight from his saddle.

And so Atai was tossed out of heaven.
And so Atai was tossed to the earth.
Had justice been served with this victory?
Heaven's air, and earth too, reeked with enmity.

Selected Poems

Reflection

I
adore
the hours of dawn.
The glow in heaven's face
Summer's pine-scented breath
Birds trill, the stillness everyplace
Clouds sail and sail across the blue sky
as if their flight might retard the river of time

My hand reaches — gently — to touch the grass
A butterfly arrives from the distant past
My words desert me, leaving merely
gesture as a sole response
And to carry my cross
and weight of light
come
I

Four

Might I dissolve in the dark, perchance?
Moments of mine see millennia pass.
My hue in every blade of grass,
My trace in every winding path.

Five

How is Tengri's handwriting?
Calligraphic or chaotic, sweeping,
Like willow branches in the breeze.
And the night, an unfinished playscript,
Sparks with ellipses in the deep...