THE THREE-SISTERS IN THE GE-SAR EPIC

—Siegbert Hummel

In its Mongolian version, as published by I.J. Schmidt in German translation 1, as well as in the Kaluuk fragments which were made known as early as 1804/05 by Benjamin Bergmann 2, the Ge-sar saga repeatedly mentions three sisters who prompt his actions during his life on earth, who urge him on or rebuke him 3. Not only Ge-sar, but also the giant with whom he enters into combat and finally kills, has three maidsens as sisters, and, as can be understood from the action, they are a kind of goddesses of fate who dwell in trees which are to be regarded as the seat of the vital power (Tib.: bka) of the monster, i.e. as so-called bla-gnas or bla-shing. Consequently the giant is brought to the point of ruin by the killing of the maidsens and the destruction of the trees.

The three sisters are in all respects to be distinguished from the well-known genie of man who are born together with him and who appear in the Tibetan judgment of the dead where the good genius, a lha (Skt.: diva), enumerates the good deeds of the deceased by means of white pebbles, while the evil one, a demon (Tib.: drek), counts the evil actions with black pebbles 5. Nor are the three sisters to be identified with the personal guardian deities of the Tibetans, the 'go-ba'i-lha, with whom they have certain traits in common. The group of 'go-ba'i-lha normally has five members. When only three of them, usually pho-mo, and diga-lha, appear, only me-lha, as is the case in the full set of five, is female 6. Besides the sisters, Ge-sar occasionally (Schmidt, p. 117) invokes an indefinite number of guardian deities. The latter is not unusual for the Tibetans and the Mongolians. However, only three guardian deities are mentioned by name in the epic.

Concerning the names of these three guardian deities (cf. Schmidt, 1836, p. 81: Saka'igubun) who are born with Ge-sar from the same mother (Schmidt 1915, p. 11 ff.), a certain amount of information is provided by the East Tibetan, the so-called Giling version of the epic, while Ligei still considered them to be inexplicable 7. In Schmidt (p. 81 and p. 112), they are called Boa Dongga-sang Garpo, Arjawalor Lzapi, and Dzamtsus Dari Dran. Stein (f.c.) gives the Tibetan spelling Dung-chung-dkar-po for the first, and Tha-le-od-phra for the third. As a variant of Dung-chung-dkar-po is found Dung-khyung-dkar-po, and for Tha-le-od-phra also Tha-le-od-dkar. Arjawalor, however, is called Klu-sbrul od-chung. Only Tha-le-od-phra is designated or invoked as sister. All three guardian

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deities appear in the text published by Stein more or less as in Schmidt (p. 11), where the entire passage, however, gives the impression of being hopelessly confused. Thus the three sisters are supposed (p. 13) to have been simultaneously with Ge-sar and likewise of the same mother, viz. as metamorphoses of three of the thirty-three Tengri, no doubt an attempt to assimilate the idea of the three sisters to the popular religion of Mongolia. On pp. 85, 108, and 230 in Schmidt (1935), the sisters are called Dachamboo Dari Urdan, i.e. the third female guardian deity has been identified with the sisters. Again, on p. 106 one of the three sisters are identified with Boa Dongtsong Garbo (cf. the Mongolian text, Schmidt 1836, p. 72).

Of the three guardian deities, the first two are male; only the third, Dachamboo Dari Urdan, is female. Thus Boa Dongtsong Garbo, in the story of the birth of the guardian deities (Schmidt, p. 13), announces his appearance with the voice of a boy. Here there may certainly be hidden a reminiscence of the three Tibetan guardian deities, viz. pho-, mo-, and dgra-lha, perhaps also of the Tibetan version of the epic. In this connection it is thus extremely interesting that the first of the three tutelary deities in Schmidt comes forth from the top of the mother’s head, the second from her right arm-pit, and she third from the navel; further that concerning to Tibetan beliefs the dgra-lha has its seat in the top of the head, the pho-lha in the right arm-pit, and the mo-lha in the abdomen. Certain variations in the localization of all these personal guardian deities will not be discussed here (cf. no. 6). In a version of the epic from Ladakh, Ge-sar invokes, not the aid of his sisters, but that of nine guardian deities who had been born together with him.

The three sisters of the Mongolian Ge-sar epic thus present us with an entirely unique tradition which is not to be derived from the Mongolian concepts of the Orqort or the Solde [tengri]. Nor are we dealing with the Sakti-gubun in their capacity of spirits of the dead or dwelling in amulets. It would rather appear that we are dealing with a new creation, perhaps aided by the Mongolian concept of the D TAGET-GRI TENGRI. These D TAGET-GRI, who are also invoked as KESIK (‘good fortune), are a kind of Masters of Fate, ‘Those Whose Concern is Fate’, so to speak. However, thereby we have not explained why there should be the question of three sisters. Here another tradition must have been assimilated, a tradition which in many respects (at least as a parallel development) reminds us of the three Parcae of the Romans. These likewise have the fate of the individual in their hands, and are called Parca, Nona, and Decuma, later Nona, Decuma, and Morta, the Three Spanning Sisters. The connection of fate with spinning (Gree: epiklothei) is also, as is well known, to be found among the Greeks.
whose goddesses of fate — Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos — are present as Moirai at births and weddings. Correspondingly, three spinning fairies are present on the wedding day in the German fairy tale of the three spinning women.

The concept of the spinning of fate is also known to the Tibetans. Presumably the binding of a rope at births and weddings also belongs here, even though in the mythology of the Tibetans the emphasis, as far as this rope is concerned, is rather on the importance of a living connection between the earthly and the heavenly, i.e. the original, spheres, and not so much on fate. For example, the binding of a rope took place at the wedding of the father of the half-legendary systematizer of the Bon religion, gShen-rab-mi-bo. Among the Na-khi, who are related to the Tibetans and inhabit the south-eastern Tibet-Chinese border areas, the heavenly woman Muan-na-ssu-ma-mi spits the white thread of life, while at weddings the rope of life (Na-khi: ssu-ber) is bound between the couple and a basket (Na-khi: ssu-dry), the dwelling of the life-god (Tib.: rong-lha; Na-khi: ssu). In any case, according to the beliefs of Bon, the dwellers of heaven also bind the rope of good fortune, in other words a kind of rope of fate, the cutting of which brings disaster.

Certainly the three sisters of the Ge-sar epic are not in all respects similar to the Parcae or the Moirai. In connection with the giant it is clear that as opposed to the Parcae etc., they are connected with a single individual; that they are born together with him; and that under certain circumstances they may be destroyed either alone or together with their bearer by a superior antagonist. In spite of this, a tradition seems to exist which, no matter how faded and distorted, nevertheless allows certain traits to be discerned with sufficient clarity to suggest relations between this idea, so unique and heterogeneous in the Tibetan and Mongolian concept of man, and the goddesses of fate, as transmitted to us from Antiquity. The variations and changes of emphasis may be explained by the difference in cosmology and anthropology, whereby motifs which had been accepted in new system of ideas could not be adopted without undergoing certain changes.

In any case, our study of the three sisters in the Mongolian version of the Ge-sar epic suggests that we are dealing with a heterogeneous tradition which has not been able fully to obliterate the old Tibetan concept of personal guardian deities; on the contrary, it was influenced by it and, in the Mongolian milieu, influence by the Dzogchen-tengri as well. This tradition can only have been incorporated—not always equally convincingly—after the completion of the Tibetan version. This would seem to be indicated by the idea of the sisters as a metamorphose of the three guardian deities and by the unsuccessful attempt to
bring the three goddesses of fate, who evidently are somehow related to each other as sisters, into some kind of relationship with Ge-sar, in the Schuchert MS (ed. W. Heinig, cf. no. 2) they are once, as in Schmidt, the elder sister of Ge-sar and like him the offspring of Xormusa, but in the other instance they are the aunts of the hero, i.e., sisters of this god, who accordingly is called Ge-sar’s uncle. The idea of the three mistresses of fate was also greatly changed in the process of adoption. Their origin must for the time being be sought in all probability be sought in late Antiquity if not even earlier, as has been considered in the case of other Greek-Ionian Asian mythological parallels[16]. While one among the Greeks, however, again and again may witness the powerlessness even of the gods against the Moral, with whom may be in certain respects compared the self-created Davagai-tengeri, the three sisters in the Mongolian Ge-sar epic are response to Xormusa, the highest of the thirty-three tengeri, among whom they are reckoned after their entrance into the heaven of the gods (Schmidt 1915, p. 4), a fate which in this connection is shared with them by Ge-sar. For this reason their function as the sources of fate has faded away and has been replaced by that of urging on or of rebuking[16].

NOTES

1. Die Thizen Bogda Genen ‘Chun’s, St Petersburg 1839; 2nd ed. Berlin 1915. Beyond doubt this version, printed in Peking in 1716, is based on a Tibetan prototype (cf. G.N. Roerick, The Epic of King Gesar of Ling in: JRA VIII, 1942, p 777 ff.) In this connection see the remark “unser Tibet” in the version published by Schmidt in 1915, p 44—The Mongolian text had already been published by Schmidt in 1836 in St Peterburg as “Erzählungen von dem wohltätigen göttlichen chine Gezer Mergen”.

2. Benjamin Bergmann’s Nomadische Streifenreiten unter den Kaimakmen, Riga 1804-45; reprint with introduction by S. Hummel, Oosterhout 1940, III, p 222: Bohdo Gansanchan—8th chapter of the Mongolian manuscript version of which Schmidt only has seven chapters,—cf. also the Mongolian manuscript from which W. Heinig published two songs (cf. “Helden—, Hellenfahrts- und Schelmengeschichten de: Mongolen”, Zurich 1961, p. 137: the three sisters; p 148 conceived having yellow hair!).

3. Schmidt, passim, in particular cleft 1-5, ed. 1915 i.a. p 85, 106 and 173.

5. Cf. Mong.: burun and cikle-ku.—In the Book of the Dead, of the chöpt Srit-Pa 'lhar-dö.—P. Pouche, Das tibetische Totenbuch (in: Archiv Orientali) XX, Prague 1951, p. 146. consider an Iranian-dualistic influence to be possible—cf. also the K’uljêsems.

6. Cf. S. Huenmel, Die Gottheiten der Schuler in Tibet (in: Rivista degli Studi Orientali XXXIV, Rome 1959, p. 183 ff). A connection between the ‘go-ba’l-pha with the two genii is probable, at least as far as the basic ideas are concerned. According to the studies of the shoulder-deities (i.e.) the ‘go-ba’l-pha could represent a more recent development. Both genii dwell on the shoulders of man, which is also said to be the case with two of the five guardian deities. The bha resides on the left shoulder, the ‘bre (Stein, i.e.: dual) on the right. Cf. K.A. Stein, Le linge des Dames Masopoms Lamasiques et la théorie des Ames (in: Liebenthal Festschrift, Sino-Tibetana Studia, V, 3-4, p. 1 ff).—As for the ‘go-ba’l-pha, see also D. Schuh in: Senta Tibet-Mongolia, Wiesbaden 1973, p. 315 (Die Relegionen des tibet, Enykmopala-ditten Kon-sprul Bl-gros Mcha-yu uber oser: Hoffenzeitsbrunche).


8. However, in fact only the three guardian deities come to the world together with Gesar from one mother (p. 11), presumably it is then that Derhamstoe Dari Udan is identified with the three sisters.


10. Concerning this group of guardian deities, the nine dgrwa-pha related to the Mongolian datsn (datsn-wa) tergri,
see at length S. Hummel, *Die lamaistischen Melerien und Bilddrucke im Linden-Museum* (in: *Tribus*, 16, Stuttgart 1967, p. 86, no 23777). Stein, I.e., p. 59, likewise mentions this group, which is invoked as a subsidiary group by Ge-sar.—A dgra-tha from the class of wer-ma with the name Dung-khyung-dkar-po is to be found in R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, 3. *The Hague* 1939, p. 134.—According to Rinchen, En marge du culte de Guesar khan en Mongolie (in: *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne*, 40, Helsinki 1955, p. 11), the three sisters also appear in a Mongolian cultic dance (Tib.: Ge-sar-cham). There will also be found material showing that the aversion of the reformed school of the dGe-lugs-pa against the Ge-sar epic (cf. the bibliography in : S. Hummel, Anmerkungen zur Ge-sar-Sage, in: *Anthropos*, 54, p. 510 no. 13) can only be accepted with certain reservations (e.g. Ge-sar-grva-stshang, exorcism in the name of the hero, identification with deities of the lamaist pantheon, prayer to Ge-sar etc. among the dGe-lugs-pa).


I have shown that the idea of a rope of heaven (Tib.: dnu-skas) and that of a ladder of heaven (Tib.: dnu-skas) represent two different traditions. In the concept of the rope of heaven there may be contained, beside the idea of the thread of life, i.e., the nave-string, also that of the rope bridge. Regarding the ladder, cf. also the opinion of the Lepchas of Sikkim, according to which the priestess (mon) enters the realm of the dead (nun-lyang) by means of a ladder (K.de Nébelsky-Wojkowitz, Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas, in, The Extern Anthropologist, V., p. 36).— Cf. also Okada, the rope-maker of classical antiquity: Cf. J.J. Bachofen, Versuch über die Griber symbole der Alten (Joh. Jacob Bachofer, Gesammelte Werke, Vol. IV, 3rd ed., Basel 1854, p. 356 ff.)

To the extent that the three sisters are meant by Dechambo Døi Yukam, it may likewise be said of them that they were born together with their protectors, for the three guardian deities were born together with Ges-ar (Schmidt, p. 11).

Hercules saga (certain parallel) deeds as child and as man, descent to hell, the Odyssey (i.e. Polyphem, Kirke, Sisyphus, the beggar's robes, Laer cas and Eumios, Zarykleis, Nausikai), and the Illiad (Helesia, the battle of Troy).— In addition to the summing up in Ehrn. Zeitschrift Zurich (Der Wunderbare Hirsch im Ge-sar-Epos, i.e.) of all mythological motifs dealt with by me up to then in the Ge-sar epic, one may in addition refer to the golden staff which runs about on the golden hill and which, like the golden mill which rotates there, points to the hero's gamos which takes place there; cf. the threshing-floor as place of wedding in Aesop, rich in magico-thick traditions, or the woman Babylor as threshing-floor in Jeremiah 51:13. — Concerning my interpretation of the concept of Ge-sar, Rigo Ros, in Anthropos 60, p. 317 and no. 18, I would like to add that after he has freed her, Ge-sar gives his spouse to a limping one-eyed figure (Schmidt 1912, p. 273); cf. regarding the limping figure S. Hummed, Ekjata in Tibet (in: Asiatische Studien, XXII, 1968, p. 110 ff. with bibliographical reference): thunder-god, solstice, divine smith. To the one-legged the-u-rang belongs occasionally also Pe-har as their leader, likewise with one leg (cf. S. Hummed, Pe-har in: East and West, 13, 1961, p. 316). - Regarding Co-tong as the moon (Anthropos 60, p. 838), cf. G.N. Roerich, Le Tarler de l'Anodo, Rome 1957, p. 66. Co-tong wears his hair in three knots.

Concerning the motif of the "gold-digging ants" (Schmidt, 1912, p. 51) cf. D. Lauffer, Die Sage von den goldgrabenden Ameisen (in: T'oung Pao, IX, 1903, p. 429 ff.): Concerning the myth of the lasso, with which sun and moon are caught (Schmidt, 1912 p. 51), cf. A. Kuan, Sonne und Mond in den Mythen der tschinesen (in: Attribus Asiae, VI, 1-3, 1936, p. 73 ff.)

16. Concerning the relationship between gods and fate, cf. the Odyssey III, 136, V, 41; Iliad VII, 69, XX, 177, 200, XXII, 220, Herodot I, 91, even though Zeus on the other hand is considered to be moiraiakes, wherein may be discerned an approximation to the relationship of the three sisters to Xemeta; cf. also the expressions Moira theon, or Hei, Theogony 901-906: Zeus as father of the Moirai.

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