

THE THREE-SISTERS IN THE GE-SAR EPIC

—Siegbert Hummel

In its Mongolian version, as published by I. J. Schmidt in German translation¹, as well as in the Kalmuk fragments which were made known as early as 1804/05 by Benjamin Bergmann² the Ge-sar saga repeatedly mentions three sisters who prompt his actions during his life on earth, who urge him on or rebuke him³. Not only Ge-sar, but also the giant with whom he enters into combat and finally kills, has three maidens 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. : bla) 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 maidens and the destruction of the trees⁴.

The three sisters are in all respects to be distinguished from the well-known genii 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. : deva), enumerates the good deeds of the deceased by means of white pebbles, while the evil one, a demon (Tib. : 'dre), counts the evil actions with black pebbles⁵. 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 dgra-lha, appear, only mo-lha, as is the case in the full set of five, is female⁶. Besides the sisters, Ge-sar occasionally (Schmidt, p. 125) 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. 83 : Sak'igulsun) who are born with Ge-sar from the same mother (Schmidt 1925, p. 11 ff.), a certain amount of information is provided by the East Tibetan, the so-called Gling version of the epic, while Ligeti still considered them to be inexplicable⁷. In Schmidt (p. 11 and p. 122), they are called Boa Dongtsong Garpo, Arjawalori Udgari, and Dschamtso Dari Udam. Stein (l.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. Arjawalori, however, is called Klu-sbrul 'od-chung. Only Tha-le-'od-phram is designated or invoked as sister. All three guardian

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.5) 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 Mongolia⁸. On pp.85, 208, and 210 in Schmidt, (1925), the sisters are called Dschamtso Dari Udam, 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, Dschamtso Dari Udam, is female. Thus Boa Dongtsong Garbo, in the story of the birth of the guardian deities (Schmidt, p.11), 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 the 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 Ladakh⁹, Ge-sar invokes, not the aid of his sisters, but that of nine guardian deities who had been born together with him¹⁰.

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 Onggot or the Sulde [-tengri]. Nor are we dealing with the Saki'gulsun 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 Dayagaci-tengri. These Dayagaci-tengri, who are also invoked as K'esik' (=good fortune), are a kind of Masters of Fate, 'Those Whose Concern is Fate', so to speak¹¹. 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 Spinning Sisters. The connection of fate with spinning (Gree: epiklothein) 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 women¹².

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 Tibeto-Chinese border areas, the heavenly woman Muan-na-ssa-ma-mi spins 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-dtv), the dwelling of the life-god (Tib.: srog-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 disaster¹³.

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 antagonist¹⁴. 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, influenced by the Dayagaci-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 Scheuter MS (ed. W. Heissig, cf. no. 2) they are once, as in Schmidt, the elder sister of Ge-sar and like him the offspring of Xormusta, 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 adaptation. Their origin must for the time being in all probability be sought in late Antiquity if not even earlier, as has been considered in the case of other Greek-Inner Asian mythological parallellisms¹⁵. While one among the Greeks, however, again and again may witness the powerlessness even of the gods against the Morai, with whom may be in certain respects compared the self-created Dayagaci-tengri, the three sisters in the Mongolian Ge-sar epic are response to Xormusta, the highest of the thirty-three tengri, among whom they are reckoned after their entrance into the heaven of the gods (Schmidt 1925, p. 5), 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 rebuking¹⁶.

NOTES

1. Die Thaten Bogda Gesser Chan's, St Petersburg 1839; 2nd ed. Berlin 1925. Beyond doubt this version, printed in Peking in 1716, is based on a Tibetan prototype (cf. G.N. Roerich, The Epic of King Gesar of Ling in: JRAS VIII, 1942, p 277 ff.) In this connection see the remark "unser Tibet" in the version published by Schmidt in 1925, p 44—The Mongolian text had already been published by Schmidt in 1836 in St Peter sburg as "Erzahlung von dem wolthatigen gottlichen chane Geser Mergen".
2. Benjamin Bergmann's Nomadische Streifereien unter den Kalmuken, Riga 1804-05; reprint with introduction by S. Hummel, Oosterhout 1969, III, p 252: Bokdo Gassarchan=8th chapter of the Mongolian manuscript version of which Schmidt only has seven chapters.—Cf. also the Mongolian manuscript from which W. Heissig published two songs (cf. "Helden=, Hollenfahrts- and Schelmenge schichten der Mongolen", Zurich 1962, p. 157: the three sisterso; p 148 conceived having yellow hair!).
3. Schmidt, passim, in particular chapt 1-5, ed 1925 i.a. p 85, 106 and 123.

4. Schmidt 1925, p 146. The nine trees correspond to mythological enumeration. As to bla-gnas, cf. S. Hummel, *Der Wunderbare Hirsch im Ge-sar-Epos* (in: *ethn. Zeit schrift* Zurich, 1973, 1).
5. Cf. Mong.: burzan and cidk'ur.—In the *Book of the Dead*, of the chapt Srid-Pa'i-bar-do,—P. Poucha, *Das tibetische Totenbuch* (in: *Archiv Orientalni* XX, Prague 1953, p 146) considers an Iranian-dualistic influence to be possible -Cf. also the K'uliyesun.
6. Cf. S. Hummel, *Die Gottheiten der Schulter in Tibet* (in: *Rivista degli Studi Orinetali* XXXIV, Rome 1959, p 183 ff). A connenction between the 'go-ba'i-lha with the two genii is probable, at least as far as the basic ideas are concerned. According to the studies of the shoulder-deities (l.c.) the 'go-ba'i-lha 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 lha resides on the left shoulder, the 'dre (Stein, l.c.: dbud) on the right; cf. R.A. Stein, *Le linga des Danses Masquees Lamaïques et la Theorie des Ames* (in: *Liebenthal Festschrift, Sino-Tibetan Studies*, V, 3-4, p. 1 ff.).- As for the 'go-ba'i-lha, see also D. Schuh in: *Serta Tibeto-Mongolica*, Wiesbaden 1973, p 315 (*Die Darlegungen des tibet. Enzyklopa-disten Kon-sprul Blo-gros Mtha'-yas uber osttibet. Hochzeits-brauche*).
7. Cf. L. Ligeti, *Un episode d'orgine chinoise du "Geser-quan"* (in: *Acta Orientalia Hung.* I, 2-3, Budapest 1951, p 354, no. 24). R.A. Stein, *L'Épopee Tibetaone de Gesar*, Paris 1956, p 51 ff., the so-called Gling-version (with Tibetan text) Schmidt 1836: Dschamtsso=Irdamsso.
8. However, in fact only the three guardian deities come to the world together with Ge-sar from one mother (p 11); presumably it is then that Dschamtsso Dari Udam is identified with the three sisters.
9. A.H. Fracke, *Der Fruhlings- und Wintermythus der Kesar sage* (*Memoires de la Societe Finno-Ougrienne*, XV, Helsingfors), reprint Osnabruck 1968 (review S. Hummel in; *ZMR*, 1971, 1): *Der Wintermythus*, p.46.
10. Concerning this group of guardian deities, the nine dgra-lha related to the Mongolian daicin (daisud-un)- tengri,

see at length S. Hummel, *Die lamaistischen Melereien und Bilddrucke im Linden-Museum* (in: *Tribus*, 16, Stuttgart 1967, p. 86, no. 23757). Stein, l.c., p. 59, likewise mentions this group, which is invoked as a subsidiary group by Ge-sar.—A *dgra-lha* 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*, 's-Gravenhage 1959, p. 334.—According to Rinchen, *En marge du culte de Guessar khan en Mongolie* (in: *Journal de la Societe Finno-Ourgienne*, 60, Helsinki 1958, 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. 520 no. 13) can only be accepted with certain reservations (e.g. *Ge-sar-grva-tshang*, exorcism in the name of the hero, identification with deities of the lamaist pantheon, prayer to Ge-sar etc. among the *dGe-lugs-pa*).

11. *Dayagaci* [-*tengri*], literally: those deities who are concerned with the bringing about of fate. Concerning these deities, see W. Heissing, *Die Religionen der Mongolei* (in: *Die Religionen Tibets und der Mongolei; Religionen der Menschheit*, vol. 20, Stuttgart 1970, p. 358 ff.); there (p. 353). In my *Anmerkungen zu Zentralasien und die Etruskerfrage* (in: *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, Rome 1974, p.) I have, dealing with the Etruscan *Tages*, pointed out parallels passing via *Zurvanism* with the *White Old Man* (Tib.: *rGan* [*sGam*] *po-dkar-po*, Mong.: *Cagan-ebugen*), and understood him, among other things, also as a god of time and as such also of fate. In a Mongolian text *Cagan-ebugen* says of himself: "I administer the length and shortness of the life of man" (cf. W. Heising, *Mongolische volksreligiose und folkloristische Texte*, Wiesbaden 1966, p. XX, XXI). I can also refer to my interpretation of the terms *Cak-un cagen arsalan* (= *The White Lion of Time*) and *Cak-i* [un] *cagan ebugen* (= *The White Old Man of Time*) in S. Summel, *Zervanistische Traditionen in der Ikonographie des Lamaismus* (in: *Etudes Tibetaines*, Paris 1971, p. 161, no. 5).
12. *Bruder Grimm, Kinder- und Hausmarchen*, vol. III (Note no. 14), *Universal-Bibliothek*, Reclam, No. 3446-3450.

13. Cf. S. Hummel, *Das Motiv der Habschur in Tibet* (in: *Antaios*, IV, 6, Stuttgart 1963, p. 572 ff.) See also R.A. Stein, *Les Tribus Anciennes des Marches Sino-Tibetaines*, Paris 1959 p. 61 J.F. Rock, *A Na-Khi-English Dictionary*, Vol. I, Rome 1963, p. 280 ff.; vol. II, Rome 1972, p. 43—In “Notes on Tibetan Temple Building” (in preparation).
- I have shown that the idea of a rope of heaven (Tib.: *dmu-thag*) and that of a ladder of heaven (Tib.: *dmu-skas*) represent two different traditions. In the concept of the rope of heaven there may be contained, besides the idea of the thread of life, i.e. the navel-string, also that of the rope bridge. Regarding the ladder, cf. also the opinion of the Lepchas of Sikkim, according to which the priestess (*mun*) enters the realm of the dead (*rum-lyang*) by means of a ladder (R.de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas*, in: *The Eastern Anthropologist*, V, 1, p. 36).—Cf. also Oknos, the rope-maker of classical Antiquity: Cf. J.J. Bachofen, *Versuch unter die Gräber symbolik der Alten* (Joh. Jacob Bachofens *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. IV, 3rd. ed., Basel 1954, p. 352 ff.)
14. To the extent that the three sisters are meant by *Dschamtso Dari Udum*, it may likewise be said of them that they were born together with their protege, for the three guardian deities were born together with *Ge-sar* (Schmidt, p. 11).
15. Kathe U. Kohalmi (*Griechisch-sibirische mythologische Parallelen*, in: *Acta Orientalia scient. Hungar.*, XXV, 1972, p. 137 ff) has in other connections pointed out mythological parallels between Greece and Inner Asia. She mentions *Apollon Smintheus* (cf. *Ge-sar* as the archer who drives away pestilence), *Heracles*, and *Orion*. A possible connecting link might be the *Scythians*. Regarding *Herakles*, cf. also O. Manchen-Helfen, *Herakles in China* (in: *Archiv Orientalni*, VII, 1935, p. 29 ff). Also cf. I. Trencsenyi-Waldapfel, *Apollon Smintheus in Innerasien ?* (in: *Acta Orientalia Hung.*, XV, 1-3, p. 343ff.): *Orion as hunter in Inner Asia*. *Manchen-Helfen* likewise regards the *Scythians* as conveying or possessing the *Herakles* myth. Thereby we would probably find ourselves in the area of the *Pontic migration*. Already B. Julg (*Über die griechische Heldensage im Wiederscheine bei den Mongolen*, in: *Verhandl. d. 26 vers. deutscher Philologen u. Schulmänner in Würzburg*, Leipzig 1869, p. 58 ff.) has brought to notice certain parallels to the *Ge-sar* epic in motifs from the

Herakles saga (certain parallel deeds as child and as man, descent to hell), the Odysseus (i.a. Polyphem, Kirke, Kalypso, the beggar's robes, Laertes and Eumios, Eurykleia, Nausikaa), and the Iliad (Helena, the battle of Troy).— In addition to the summing up in *Ethn. Zeitschrift* Zurich (*Der Wunderbare Hirsch im Ge-sar-Epos*, l.c.) 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 heroes' games which takes place there; cf. the threshing-floor as place of wedding in Hauran, rich in megalithic traditions, or the woman Babylon as threshing-floor in *Jeremia* 51.33. — Concerning my interpretation of the consort of Ge-sar, Rogmo Goa, in *Anthropos* 60, p. 837 and no. 18, I would like to add that after he has freed her, Ge-sar gives his spouse to a limping and one-eyed figure (Schmidt 1925, p. 279); cf. regarding the limping figure S. Hummel, *Ekajata in Tibet* (in: *Asiatische Studien*, XXII, 1968, p. 110 ff. with bibliographical references): thunder-gods, solstice, divine smiths. To the one-legged the 'u-rang belongs occasionally also Pe-har as their leader, likewise with one leg (cf. S. Hummel, *Pe-har in: East and West*, 13, 1962, p. 316). - Regarding Co-tong as the moon (*Anthropos* 60, p. 838), cf. G.N. Roerich, *Le Parler de l'Amdo*, Rome 1958, p. 66: Co-tong wears his hair in three knots.

Concerning the motif of the "gold-digging ants" (Schmidt, 1925, p. 51) cf. B. Laufer, *Die Sage von den goldgrabenden Ameisen* (in: *T'oung Pao*, IX, 1908, p. 429 ff. - Concerning the myth of the lasso with which sun and moon are caught (Schmidt, 1925 p. 51), cf. A. Khun, *Sonne und Mond in den Mythen der Indochinesen* (in: *Artibus Asiae*, VI, 1—2, 1936, p. 73 ff).

16. Regarding the relationship between gods and fate, cf. the *Odysseus* III, 236, V, 41; *Iliad* VIII, 69, XX, 127, 300, XXII, 210, *Herodot* I, 91, even though Zeus on the other hand is considered to be moiragetes, wherein may be discerned an approximation to the relationship of the three sisters to Xormsta; cf. also the expressions *Moirai theon*, or *Hesiod*, *Theogony* 901-906: Zeus as father of the *Moirai*.

(Translated from German by Dr. Per Kvaerne of the University of Bergen)