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Triplicated Triplets: The Number Nine in the *Secret History* of the Mongols

By

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Introduction: Numbers Related to Politics and Religion

Among the Inner Asian peoples, especially the Türk and Mongols, the numbers three and nine have possessed special religious significance from earliest times, according to present-day scholars (Eliade 1964: 274; Solomon 1954: 253) and travelers of other eras (Yule 1929: 390). Of even greater weight, is the combination of the two numbers in the formula $3 \times 3 = 9$ (Eliade 1964: 274).

Eliade, Harva, and others believe that the two numbers and their combinations are important to the religious cosmology and ritual practices of Shamanism (Roux 1965: 44). In shamanist cosmology, there are, for example, three realms, heaven, earth, and the underworld. In both heaven and the underworld there are nine stages. The highest stage of heaven, the ninth, is the realm of Tengri, the celestial force without anthropomorphic form. The shaman reached this stage only rarely in his ecstatic flight, and only the most powerful of shamans may commune with Tengri. A shaman's search for the lost souls of his patients rarely takes him beyond the sixth stage of heaven. The ninth stage is removed from the vision and power of the weaker shamans, especially the " black " shamans whose flight is most often limited to the realm of the underworld.

In politics and law in Inner Asia it has been shown that the number nine is likewise of great importance. Rites and ceremonies related to the investiture of Qaghans required the performance of actions in sequences of nines, or presentations of gifts in units of nine. For example, the Uigur and Kitan, of the eighth and tenth centuries, based their tribal organizations on units of nine clans (Wittfogel and Feng 1949: 205).

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The T'o-pa, Tü-chüeh, Kitan, and Mongol Qaghans submitted to ceremonies of investiture which included nine sun-wise revolutions on a carpet held aloft (Boodberg 1939: 243). Gifts of animals and other items of wealth were presented in units of nine and tokens of submission were presented in the same number. As recently as Manchu times, the Ch'ing emperor continued to be presented tribute in the form of nine white animals by Mongol chieftains. Mongol customary law after the seventeenth century provided for punishments in terms of nine, either payments of fines or corporal punishment (Riasanovsky 1965: 165)

There is, thus, a long history of the significance of the number in both religion and politics. At some time in the past there may have been a blending of religious shamanistic numerology and chancellery practices in different eras in Inner Asia. In the earliest Mongolian historical record, the *Secret History of the Mongols* of the thirteenth century, the occurrence of the number nine [*yisün*], or certain of its combinations with three [*qurban*], gives evidence of being used to deliberately indicate that the events described carry special if not sacred meaning. In this paper, I am attempting to explore those events in the *Secret History* for a possible indication that shamanistic symbolism was given to certain happenings in the life of Chinggis Qaghan.

It should be noted that the usage of three and nine in the *Secret History* may occur for a variety of reasons other than shamanist symbolism:

> First: The composer of the *Secret History*, an unknown bard, may have used the numbers as alliterative or mnemonic devices to aid in his narrative.
> Second: The numbers may have been used as literary devices to express stereotyped aspects of time and space, or the aggregation of large numbers of people. That is to say, the numbers three and nine may be used to exaggerate.
> Third: The narrator himself may have been a story-teller whose usual methods of expression were conditioned by ritual hyperbole of stereotyped usage of numbers.

An examination of occurrences of nine (*yisün*) as an alliterative device shows that it is so used only twice, in paragraphs 195 and 267 (de Rachewiltz 1972: 342). These will be discussed later. *Yisün* also occurs in the alliterated paragraphs 76 and 80 (de Rachewiltz 1971: 136–139), but it is not necessary to the alliteration in either case.

Three (*qurban*) occurs in a greatly disproportionate ratio to *yisün*. It appears 116 times as the number three alone and an additional eleven

times in the numbers 13, 30, 1300, and 3000 (de Rachewiltz 1972: 342).

In almost 80% of all cases, the number three is used in a stereotyped manner. Movements of armies, small groups, or individuals are usually accomplished in stages of three days and nights. A traditional enemy, the Merkit, are almost always referred to as the Three Merkit. The comrades of Chinggis' early career are repeatedly referred to as the "three comrades," or "these three." Likewise, constant reference is made to Jöchi, Chagatai, and Ögödei, as the "three sons" or "the three." These repeated references are curious in light of the obvious fact that Chinggis had four sons and four comrades. Sixty-five percent of the occurrences of three involved these four stereotypes, while another 15% refer to "three towns," "these three together," and so forth. It occurs endlessly in alliterated passages, especially in narrative passages describing battles. These are clearly literary formulae or necessary usage and do not carry religious or symbolic meaning.

Chinggis and the Symbolic Meaning of "Three"

Only when three (*qurban*) is used in conjunction with nine (*yisün*) do the events described take on a symbolic meaning. As I have said, the number nine occurs only twenty times in the entire *Secret History*. The place of its insertion into the text is extremely interesting. It does not appear in the first 59 paragraphs nor in the last 18 of the total 282 paragraphs. Those 77 paragraphs in which it does *not* occur are the sections that come before and after the career of Chinggis. He is introduced by a nine in paragraph 60 and departs with four nines in paragraph 267, just prior to the section dealing with the career of Ögödei, his son and successor (de Rachewiltz 1972: 364). The absence of the sacred number nine in the text in the non-Chinggisid sections is simply too striking to be coincidental. All the other numbers occur at random throughout the text, in no determinant pattern. Also striking is the fact that nine is used only in connection with momentous events or deeds directly related to Chinggis' life and career.

Nine (*yisün*) is inserted at critical points in the Qaghan's life, at major turning points where a qualitative difference in his status takes place. Most of these events are also linked in some way with a 3×3 equation. From the introduction of Chinggis with a nine in paragraph 60 down to the convening of the Quriltai of 1206 [paragraphs 202–245], and finally, it occurs four times in paragraph 267, the paragraph which describes events just prior to the death of Chinggis.

These last four occurrences are not combined with events in multiples of three. They do, however, occur at Chinggis' death and usher

him out of the text. They also describe the rendering of tribute in multiples of nine, acts which are not recorded for any other ruler conquered by Mongols, at least in the *Secret History*. The use of nine is thus greatly circumscribed.

What follows is a survey of the occurrences and an examination of the events surrounding each occurence.

Nine (*yisün*) is used in the first two paragraphs concerning Chinggis, paragraphs 60 and 61. Although paragraph 59 describes his birth, the author moves immediately in paragraph 60 to events which took place supposedly at age nine, rather than a straight narrative of the years in between:

> 60. From Hö'elün of Yisugei-ba'atur were born the four sons: Temüjin, Qasar, Qaci'un, and Temüge. When Temüjin was nine, Joci-qasar was seven, Qaci'un-elci was five, Temüge otcigin was three and Temülün was in the cradle.
> 61. When Temüjin was nine Yisügei-ba'atur saying "I am going to ask for the hand of a daughter from the törgüt olqunu'ut, maternal relatives of Hö'elün" and taking Temüjin, he set out. While en route, he met dei-secen, the Onggirad, halfway between cekcer and ciqurgu. (de Rachewiltz 1961: 129)

Putting the age of Chinggis at nine when these events took place, seems to be a deliberate introduction of the number for purposes other than historical accuracy. Much of the confusion over the actual year of his birth stems from this insertion of a nine. In fact, Chinggis was perhaps as old as thirteen at the time, not nine (de Rachewiltz 1970: 69).

After his father's death, the fortune of the clan declined to a point at which Chinggis and his full brothers, the three of them, quarreled with their half-brothers, killing the one called Bekter. The death resulted in Chinggis acquiring his first wealth, the nine horses of Bekter, the third nine in the text. The quarrel with Bekter and acquisition of the nine horses seems to symbolize the victorious resolution on an inter-clan quarrel, and the control of the new wealth and power of the clan by Chinggis. Too much so, because this event brought the rising new prince to the attention of his tribal enemy the Tayichi'ut who soon came to destroy him.

At this point, there occurs in the text one of two straightforward symbolic events in which the equation of three threes and a nine is used to point out a major turning point in Chinggis' life. Rather than simply narrating the capture of the fugitive, the story-teller constructs an involved 3, 3, 9 equation in the following manner.

Chinggis, in fleeing the Tayichi'ut who intend him harm, took

refuge on the Tergüne Heights of Burqan Qaldun. The heights were the place of his birth and were part of the escarpment which had been sacred [Burqan] and central to the entire history of the Mongols to that point in the life of Chinggis (Perlee 1958: 16).

After three days Chinggis attempted to leave the thicket in which he had hidden but the saddle girth slipped allowing the saddle to fall from his horse. Because the girth and chest straps of the fallen saddle were still fastened Chinggis felt he had been warned by the celestial force, Tengri (Tenggeri) (de Rachewiltz 1971: 138).

With this warning, Chinggis returned to the thicket for three more days before attempting to leave again. On his second attempt, a white rock of great size, as large as a tent, fell in front of him blocking his path. Again he believed Tengri had warned him to stay in hiding.

After three more days on the mountain without food he cut his way out of the thicket around the white rock, ignoring Tengri's warning in the process, and was taken captive by his Tayichi'ut enemies. The progression of events through the formula of $3+3+3=9$ seems obvious, as does Chinggis' punishment for not obeying the omens or warnings from Tengri. His punishment was a period of captivity from which he narrowly escaped alive.

After a period of captivity he escaped, only to be tested again in a 3 by 3 equation. In this instance, eight of nine horses taken from Bekter were stolen. In pursuit of the ninth horse, Chinggis traveled three days, at the end of which he met one of his later life-long companions and greatest general, Bo'orcu, and his father. Chinggis and Bo'orcu rode on three more days and recaptured the nine horses. Chinggis then returned home in three days, an impossibility if it took him three days to reach Bo'orcu and three more days to reach the horses in the beginning. The threes here are clearly not valid. What seems to be a simple tale of heroics is a major event which led to an alliance with the major power of the contemporary steppe, Ong Qan of the Kereyit.

But before becoming embroiled in the wars of re-unification and empire which occupied the last forty years of his life, one more event with shamanist overtones appears. In a sudden war with the Merkit, Chinggis was forced to take flight, abandoning his wife Börte. He eluded the Three Merkit by taking refuge again on Burqan-Qaldun, the sacred mountain. In pursuit of him, the Three Merkit tribes rode three times around Burqan Qaldun before abandoning the chase. Whereupon, Chinggis, from his refuge, sent out his three comrades to make sure the enemy army had fled. When he was certain they were gone he descended the mountain and spoke to his army thus:

I climbed the Burqan
On a hobbled horse, following deer tracks;
A hut, built of elm twigs,
I made my home.
Thanks to Burqan-qaldun
I saved my life, a louse's life.
Fearing for my life, my only life.
I climbed the Qaldun
On one horse, following elk tracks;
A hut of broken willow twigs
I made my home.
Thanks to Qaldun-burqan
I shielded my life, a grasshopper's life.
But I was greatly frightened. Every morning I will sacrifice to Burqan-qaldun, every day I will pray to it: the descendants of my descendants shall be mindful of this and do likewise! He spoke and facing the sun, hung his belt over his neck, put his hat over his hand, beat his breast with his fist, and nine times kneeling down towards the sun, he offered a libation and a prayer. (de Rachewiltz 1971: 149)

This seems to be a shamanic ritual involving elements common to Inner Asian practice such as the use of willow branches, belt, cap, ritual nakedness, prostrations, libations, and prayers, all of which are common to the Altaic shaman. It is an altogether curious manner of behavior for a politico/military commander of the steppe.

The major event of Chinggis' pre-imperial career—the Quriltai (congress) of 1206—at which he became ruler of the peoples of Mongolia—sees the introduction of seven nines into the *Secret History*. The first is the raising of the nine tailed standard, which symbolized the unification of the multitudinous peoples of the steppe. The next five nines have to do with Chinggis' rewards to his faithful friends and generals, Shigi Qutuqu, Bogorcu, Jelme, Boro'ul, and Sorkhan Shira. Each was exempted from punishment for nine crimes, in other words they were elevated to a position above the law. The reason for the exemption is that each had three times saved Chinggis' life, or that of those near to him, or had performed three acts of exceptional valor.

The last two usages of nine at the Quriltai occur in the context of Chinggis' quarrel with the powerful shaman Teb Tengri. Chinggis, according to the text, lost control of the peoples of the nine dialects [the term occurs twice] to Teb Tengri. In other words his power over the people was challenged by the shaman to the extent that some tribes

left the new Mongol-ruled confederation. This challenge was met by sending three wrestlers to break the shaman's spine and Chinggis' power was restored.

The remaining 37 paragraphs of the *Secret History* deal with the era of conquest after 1206. They are largely free of nines. Only four more occur, all in the same paragraph, and all in the last year of the Qagan's life. All deal with rendering of tribute and seem not to be couched in the same sacred or symbolic meter.

SUMMARY

In summary then, the number nine in the *Secret History* is used only in reference to Chinggis. It occurs often in combination with threes. In some contexts it appears to have sacred tones and casts Chinggis in behavior patterns that carry shamanistic overtones.

The use of the nine falls into three categories:

First: It is used to point to major events;
Second: It is used as hyperbole to point to masses of people;
Third: It is used with three to point to the involvement of Chinggis in mythic behavior.

It seems clear from this examination of those events involving the number nine that no historical validity may be safely attached to the actions of the people involved or to the matters described. They are of a different *genre* than history and probably fall in the scope of folklore or epic history. Further examination is warranted of the events linked to the number nine, and to the use of the other numbers in the *Secret History*.

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