

SITTING “*UNDER THE MOUTH*”:  
DECLINE AND REVITALIZATION IN THE SAKHA EPIC TRADITION *OLONKHO*

by

ROBIN GAIL HARRIS

(Under the Direction of Jean N. Kidula)

ABSTRACT

The Sakha epic tradition, *olonkho*, features the longest and most complex epic tales of all the Siberian peoples. In its most traditional form, *olonkho* is a solo genre comprised of both dramatic narrative poetry and unaccompanied song alternating throughout the extensive, multiple-evening performance of the work. This work explores the current revival of interest in *olonkho*, examining what led to its decline during the Soviet era as well as the factors currently playing a role in its revitalization. It addresses the transformations of *olonkho* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and identifies keys for its long-term sustainability. These four areas—attenuation, revitalization, transformation, and sustainability—are the primary research categories.

In order to more effectively posit potential future directions for *olonkho*, I trace *olonkho* performance practice historically, exploring the ways it interacted with the contextual milieu of each time period, beginning with those times immediately before and during Soviet power. The research questions are organized around the elements of *time*, *place*, and *event*. The *event* parameter is further divided into three areas of inquiry: the *performers*, *audiences*, and *content* of the *olonkho* tradition.

The literature addressing these themes is drawn, not just from the discipline of ethnomusicology, but also from anthropology, comparative literature, culture studies, musicology, performance theory, post-Soviet and post-colonial studies, area studies, and sociolinguistic models. Data collection in the field largely relied on ethnographic interviews, documented in first person accounts, both in the text and the accompanying DVD. Conclusions from the research indicate that audience reception for olonkho is still weak, however, a strong revitalization effort by the Sakha Republic's government and its educational institutions is beginning to strengthen audience appreciation for olonkho. While people's response to "sitting under the mouth" is undeniably different than it was a century ago, if Sakha people will focus on vigorous transmission and innovation during this period of revitalization, it will help to bolster viability of the genre, giving hope that olonkho will survive to be enjoyed by future generations.

**INDEX WORDS:** Epic, Epos, Ethnomusicology, Manas, Masterpiece, Neocolonialism, Olonkho, Oral tradition, P'ansori, Post-Soviet, Revitalization, Russia, Safeguarding, Sakha, Siberia, Sustainability, UNESCO, Yakutia

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. First, to my beloved husband, Bill, whose support never flagged during the arduous process of coursework, exams, and writing, and whose professional videography skills masterfully captured the interviews of my fieldwork; to my adult children, James and Katherine, who spent a childhood in Russia and still cheer me on (sometimes in Russian); to my siblings and parents-in-law, who supported me emotionally, financially, and spiritually; to my mother, Joyce Persón, who prays for me daily and whose courage in hard times inspires me; and to the memory of my father, Robert W. Persón, who, although he didn't get to see the final draft, instilled in me the love for music, cross-cultural work, and life-long learning that set me on this road.

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## NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION FROM RUSSIAN AND SAKHA

I use the Library of Congress system for transliteration with a few minor adaptations for clarity and ease of reading for non-Russian speakers: The Sakha *Yŷ* is rendered *ü*, and I omit the ligatures for the Russian letters *iu*, *ia*, and *ts*, as well as the Sakha *ng*. The soft sign diacritic is also omitted, and the so-called soft *ĭ*, which appears frequently at the end of Russian words, is omitted after *y* and otherwise changed to *i*. In quoted text, the transliteration remains as provided in the source. The romanization of proper nouns is as follows unless there is strong precedence in print for another spelling (such as the *Y* in *Yakutsk* or *Nyurgun*, which are rarely spelled with an *ia* or *iu*) or in cases where people have indicated a preferred spelling of their name.

Аа	a	Мм	m	Шш	sh
Бб	b	Нн	n	Щщ	shch
Вв	v	Оо	o	Ыы	y
Гг	g	Пп	p	Ээ	è
Дд	d	Рр	r	Юю	iu
Ее	e	Сс	s	Яя	ia
Ёё	ë	Тт	t	Ѓѓ	gh
Жж	zh	Уу	u	Һһ	ng
Зз	z	Фф	f	Өө	ò
Ии	i	Хх	kh	Һһ	h
Кк	k	Цц	ts	Үү	ü
Лл	l	Чч	ch		

The Library of Congress website <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsol/roman.html> provides standard romanization charts for various languages. Russian can be found at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsol/romanization/russian.pdf> and Yakut (Sakha) is at <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsol/romanization/nonslav.pdf>.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
DDT	Diagnostic Decision Tree
EGIDS	Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale
ELC	Ethnolinguistic Community
GIDS	Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale
GMSS	Graded Music Shift Scale
ICH	Intangible Cultural Heritage
IGI	<i>Institut Gumanitarnikh Issledovaniy i Problem Malochislenikh Narodov Severa, Sibirskogo Otdeleniia Rossiskii Akademi Nauk Respubliki Sakha (Yakutia)</i> Institute of Humanitarian Research and Problems of the Minority Peoples of the North, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Sakha Republic (Yakutia)
SVFU	<i>Severo-Vostochny Federalny Universitet</i> North-Eastern Federal University (formerly Yakutsk State University) named after M. K. Amosov, in Yakutsk, Yakutia.
PPA	Performers, Performances, and Audiences
RF	Russian Federation
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
RS(Y)	Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)
SIL	Formerly “Summer Institute of Linguistics,” SIL International is a faith-based nonprofit organization serving language communities worldwide as they build capacity for sustainable language development. SIL ( <a href="http://www.sil.org">www.sil.org</a> ) does this primarily through research, translation, training, and materials development.
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROSPECTUS

#### Introduction

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is located in northeastern Siberia in Russia.<sup>1</sup> Its largest group of indigenous inhabitants are the Sakha, who until recently were referred to as “Yakut.”<sup>2</sup> The Sakha are the second largest indigenous group in Russia (Lincoln 1994, 283) and their language is Turkic-based, with Mongolian and Russian influences.<sup>3</sup> Sakha language and culture were strongly affected by the Russification that came with tsarist expansion into Siberia beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Lincoln 1994, 52–53, 62).<sup>4</sup>

The Sakha *olonkho* is a complex epic tradition in which a combination of drama, lyric song, and poetic narrative tell the stories of the great heroes and legends of the past. This unaccompanied solo genre has been performed for centuries by specialists known as *olonkhosuts*. Each of these epics may have up to tens of thousands of lines of text performed in alternating sections of narrative poetry and song. Olonkho has a strong connection to the history and culture of the Sakha. Traditional themes of olonkho center on the exploits of early Sakha heroes and heroines as they interact with the spiritual and physical world around them in battles of good versus evil.

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<sup>1</sup> Yakutia is the historical name of this region, although it was known as the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic from 1923 until 1992. Although the official name is now the “Republic of Sakha (Yakutia),” it is commonly called by its historical name, *Yakutia*.

<sup>2</sup> “Sakha” is their official self-designation, but most Sakha continue to use “Yakut” in casual conversation.

<sup>3</sup> The official name of the language is Sakha, but it is listed under the commonly-used Russian term, “Yakut,” which is used informally by Russians and Sakha alike.

<sup>4</sup> Yakutsk, the capital city of Yakutia, was founded in 1632.

Before the period of Soviet power, peripatetic singers entertained Sakha families during the long, dark winters of the Siberian North, as they sat “*syngaakh annygar*” (literally “under the mouth”), intently absorbing the riveting narratives of olonkho.<sup>5</sup> During the 20th century, the number of olonkhosuts greatly declined in Yakutia. As the carriers of this oral tradition died off, new musicians were not trained to take their place. In 2011, there remained only two acknowledged master performers of the olonkho genre recognized for their improvisational mastery: Pyotr Reshetnikov (Figure 1.1) and Afanasii Solovëv (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.1: Pyotr Reshetnikov, master olonkhosut (June 16, 2009).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> From correspondence with Tatiana Argunova, February 22, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> All photographs taken by William Harris, unless otherwise noted. Used by permission.



Figure 1.2: Afanasii Solovëv, master olonkhosut (June 20, 2010)

With the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, a remarkable resurgence began to occur in expressions of Sakha culture, religion, and language. In particular, revitalization for olonkho began to accelerate when UNESCO, in November 2005, proclaimed the Sakha olonkho a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In accordance with the program's requirements for an action plan, the Sakha Republic declared an "Olonkho Decade" (2006–2015) with accompanying programs for preservation of the olonkho tradition.

#### Objectives for research

Although there is an increasing amount of scholarly work by Russian and Sakha ethnomusicologists on the topic of olonkho, their work does not address in depth the

issues of revitalization and sustainability.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, I will explore the current revival of interest in olonkho, examining what led to its decline during the Soviet era as well as the factors currently playing a role in its revitalization. I will also discuss the transformations of this genre as it adapts to audiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and seek to identify keys for its long-term sustainability as a performed genre. These four areas—attenuation, revitalization, transformation, and sustainability—are the categories primarily explored in this project.

### Research questions

In order to understand the present realities of olonkho and to more effectively posit possible future directions, it is important to trace olonkho performance practice historically, exploring the ways it interacted with the contextual milieu of each time period, including those times immediately before and during the period of Soviet power. In an adaptation of Timothy Rice's (2003) multi-dimensional model, my research questions are organized around the three elements of *time*, *place*, and *event*. The *event* parameter is further divided into three areas of inquiry: the performers, audiences, and content of the olonkho tradition. This framework allows for a diachronic study of olonkho, while at the same time, following several streams of inquiry within an historical approach. While a full list of research questions is found in Appendix A, a brief outline of my approach in gathering the research data follows:

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<sup>7</sup> "Russian" in this research will refer, not to people within the geographically-defined borders of Russia (or the Soviet Union), but people who might be term "ethnic" Russians, which, while a problematic term, will serve for the purposes of this research. The term will thus include people of Jewish, Ukrainian, and other descents who would likely self-identify as "Russian" if you asked them to state their nationality.

1) Time: What are the periods of history onto which we can plot the process of change in olonkho performance? What political, social, cultural, and musical influences define these periods? What are the nodes of change around which these periods can be conceptualized?

2) Place: What were the changing contexts of olonkho performance practice during each of these periods? If the concept of *place* is defined by Rice in his model as encompassing “individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual” spaces (2003, 12), how did these multifarious and shifting spaces reflect and influence the way olonkho is conceptualized, created and/or re-created, and performed?

3) Event: The questions about the performance *event* are comprised of three aspects: a) Who were (and are) the *performers*? b) Who were (and are) the *audiences*? c) What was (and is) the *content* of performance as it is negotiated and shaped by the performers and audiences? The research questions thus center on the performers, audiences, content, and contexts of olonkho as they changed over time. This provides insights for the four areas of my research objectives: understanding the attenuation, revitalization, transformation, and future sustainability of olonkho performance practice.

While partial answers to these questions are contained in the Russian- and Sakha-language literature describing the historical performance practice of olonkho, the interviews carried out during fieldwork over a period of three years, expand on that data significantly. In addition, interviews are important for a holistic view of historical realities, due to the ideological limitations of works written during the Soviet period and beyond (Tichotsky 2000, 1).

### Need for study

Fieldwork in Siberia during the summers of 2009 and 2010 and in December 2011 confirmed that Sakha people perceive this research as beneficial to Yakutia as it intersects with the wider world. In interactions with my respondents, I often received unsolicited comments regarding people's hopes that this project would contribute to the future vitality of olonkho by not only documenting their efforts toward revitalization, but by making the information accessible to the English-speaking world. Scholars in Yakutia affirm there is an absence of English-language resources addressing this topic. Although there are increasing numbers of resources being written about other living epic traditions in English and other languages, there are only a few short articles in English specifically about olonkho. Most of the currently existing English resources are reviews and summaries of Russian-language books and articles.

Most importantly, there are no resources (in any language) that adequately address the questions this project brings to the study of the olonkho epic tradition. The resources extant in Russian, Sakha, and English address a variety of characteristics of olonkho, such as the musical, poetic, narrative, structural, thematic, semiotic, religious, political, functional, and other facets of olonkho performance. No one, however, is analyzing the process of change over time for olonkho—the processes of attenuation, revitalization, and transformation—providing perspective on the sustainability of the genre. The lack of resources is demonstrated in the literature review below.

## Literature review

The literature relating to this research will be presented in several sections, beginning with broad categories and moving to those narrowly focused on olonkho. The broadest category contains resources providing general theoretical approaches, analytical models, field methods, and perspectives from a variety of approaches, including post-Soviet and post-colonial works. The second category (oral and verbal genres) provides a context for understanding epics and the ways in which they fit into the broader category of oral-verbal arts. The third category (the Sakha cultural context) places olonkho within its contextual space, both historically and culturally. The last two categories (Sakha music in general and olonkho specifically) help to place olonkho in relation to the rest of Sakha music.

### *Literature at the intersection of relevant disciplines*

The literature one brings to bear when writing on a topic such as olonkho includes resources drawn, not just from the discipline of ethnomusicology, but also from anthropology, comparative literature, culture studies, musicology, performance theory, post-Soviet and post-colonial studies, Russian and Eurasian area studies, and sociolinguistic models. The general resources from the field of ethnomusicology that have helped to lay a foundation for my research, fieldwork, and writing are classic works such as Miriam (1964), Nettl (2005), Rice (1987), and Seeger (1962, 1987). These resources stress field methods such as participant observation, anthropological approaches to cultural and musical analysis, ethnographic writing styles, the importance of historical grounding and theoretical rigor. Another foundational writer, Blacking,

points out that an analysis of extramusical processes is an important part of understanding that context (1973, 89). While these works do not always find their way into the quoted text, I owe much of my general approach to their influence.

Situating this research within the realm of applied ethnomusicology are works by Titon (1992) and Fenn and Titon (2003), which describe the applied approach as being community work and advocacy together, “applying knowledge about music in the public interest in order to assist people and communities to reach their goals. The applied worker can provide information to communities about their music and its history, and can aid music-cultures in their efforts to document, interpret, and promote their music” (2003, 126). The applied approach has inspired some of the desired outcomes of this research and informs its methods.

### *Oral-verbal genres*

The literature addressing oral genres contains only fleeting and infrequent references to olonkho. These resources, therefore, primarily provide tools and ways of understanding epic performance and reception. For example, one of the works that examines specific epics in multi-faceted detail, providing material for comparing and contrasting olonkho with other traditions is Lord’s (2000) *Singer of Tales*, written in collaboration with his mentor Milman Parry. Lord’s work explores, through an analysis and comparison of Homeric poems and a South Slavic epic tradition, how oral narrative poetry is composed. It provides insights into oral formulaic theory, significant because of its similarity to the means by which the master olonkhosut re-creates, in the moment, his or her performance of olonkho.

Although the English-language literature on epic traditions is extensive and does not need to be fully summarized here, the following works provide a broad understanding of epics and approaches used in researching them: Abusch (2001; Gilgamesh), Ahmad (1963; Persian and Hindi epics), Biebuyck (1976; African epics), Bynum (1968; Serbocroatian epics), Clark (1900; History of European epics), DeVries (1963; the “heroic” in epics), Finnegan (1978, 1996, and 2005; various traditions), Jansen (2001; the *Sunjata* epic), Johnson (1980; Mandekan epics), Kim (2004; Korean epics), Kruks (2004; Latvian epic), Lutgendorf (1989; *Rāmacaritmānas*), Mori (1997; epic elements), Seydou and Biebuyck (1983; Bambara and Fulani epics), Smith (1977; *Pabuji* epic of India), Vansina (1971; historical methodology in oral tradition), and Weeda (2005; Russian *byliny* epics).

*P’ansori* is a Korean epic performing tradition which parallels olonkho in many ways. Literature on *p’ansori* is therefore especially pertinent to this research, providing insight into how the formulaic nature of *p’ansori* performance determines the training of its performers (Pihl 1993, 1994). Park’s (2000, 2003) description of *p’ansori* reveals some similarities to olonkho. For example, she addresses the important role of verbal audience response during performance, as well as the Korean government’s revitalization of *p’ansori* to promote national aspirations of identity. Killick (2003) “road tests” a version of Rice’s multi-dimensional “time–place–metaphor” model on two derivatives of the *p’ansori* tradition, demonstrating the usefulness and flexibility of this model for analyzing an epic genre such as olonkho.

Other resources describe Central Asian epic traditions related to the same Turkic roots as olonkho such as the Kyrgyz *Manas*, Mongolian *Tuuli*, and Tibetan *Gesar* epics.

The English-language resources on these topics include Oinas's collection of articles on epics (1978—African *Sundiata*, Kyrgyz *Manas*, Russian *byliny*), Slobin's translation of Beliaev (1975—Uzbek *dastan*, Turkmen *destan*, Kazakh *jir*, and the Kyrgyz *Manas*), and Chadwick and Zhirmunsky (1969—*Manas*). In addition, Levin (2006) documents an extensive interview with a *manaschi*, a performer of the *Manas*, while Pegg (2001) describes the *Geser* and other heroic epics as well as outlining the official Soviet policy toward epics and folklore during the early 1980s. Shoolbraid (1975) briefly describes the plots of ten epic traditions from Siberia, with more detailed descriptions of the form and general content of the Burjat-Mongol *Uliger* and the Turkic *Manas*. Particularly relevant in this regard are the perspectives of Thompson et al. (2006), Reichl (1992), and Van der Heide (2008), whose ethnographic works not only describe current performance practice of *Manas*, but also provide theoretical models and approaches for the study of epic genres undergoing change, including attenuation in the past and current revitalization.

Jansen and Maier's (2004) *Epic Adventures* brings together fourteen essays on various epic traditions from four continents. Included in this collection are essays on Siberian Buriat epics (by Hamayon) and the Kyrgyz *Manas* (by Van der Heide), epic traditions which are particularly relevant for comparative purposes in the study of olonkho. These resources provide a broad understanding of the Central Asian and Turkic-language epics. None of them, however, contain more than cryptic descriptions of olonkho. This project allows olonkho to be included alongside other Central Asian epics.

The resources addressing performance theory deal with the interaction between the work, its performance, and the societal context. Bauman describes the structure of the performance event as “a product of the interplay of many factors, including setting, act

sequence, and ground rules of performance” (1975, 299). Each of these factors inform my project, as does his division of the structure of performance events into three primary types of roles: “the participants, performer(s), and audience” (1975, 299). He also describes the emergent nature of the event structure, where the rules for performance are negotiated by participants. Foley (1995) makes connections between oral-formulaic and performance-centered theories, an approach I adopt in my work.

Jang (2001) outlines characteristics of contemporary *p’ansori* performance which parallel those of *olonkho* performance, in particular the political and identity-related functions which have usurped its role as entertainment. Kapchan (1995), as well as Bauman and Briggs (1990), explore the role of form, function, and meaning in de-contextualization and re-contextualization, concepts related to the process of revitalization, in which new forms are adapted to fit changing performance contexts.

Finnegan’s 1996 work discusses terms used in the study of oral traditions such as the epos. She provides theoretical perspectives for understanding verbal arts by offering an overview of the definitions of “epic” and problematizes the terms used in the definitions (1996, 150–151). Finnegan’s (2005) text establishes the complexity of the performance event in its multiple channels of communication—not just music, text, or narrative, but a unique intermixing of these three facets to communicate meaning.

One of the key issues of epic traditions and revitalization concerns identity. Harvilahti’s writings (1996, 2000) explore a variety of epic traditions in which negotiations of national, ethnic, ideological, and religious identities and values play a central role, often superseding the actual perceived enjoyment of the performance event. On epos and national identity, Harvilahti traces the sustainability of epic traditions to

their functions in society. He points out that Lord's research on the South Slavic epics showed that epics invoke the past to comment on the present, making them useful "as a productive pattern adapting to new situations" (1996, 38). He also discusses the transformations of epic models, especially as they are used for nationalistic ideologies. Harvilahti's conclusions are based on studies of epics such as Latvia's *Bear Slayer* and Tibet's *Geser*, a cycle of epic poems "known in Tibet, Inner Mongolia (in China), Buryatia (in Russia), and Ladakh (India)" (1996, 40) as well as other places. Harvilahti's (2000) description of the role of formula in the Altai oral epic is especially useful in that it depicts a tradition closely related to olonkho. These resources collectively point out the ways in which perceptions of identity and the changing functions of epics play a central role in the shifting contexts of epic creation and performance.

#### *UNESCO programs and sustainability*

Because the revitalization of olonkho appears to have been accelerated by the UNESCO Masterpiece award (UNESCO 2005) and the resultant safeguarding programs put in place by Yakutia, the literature on the UNESCO awards is an essential component of this project. The UNESCO resources often contain brief summaries of the awarded genres (UNESCO 2009b, 2009c, 2010). UNESCO literature reveals several other epic traditions identified in the list of Masterpieces.<sup>8</sup> In 2011, they included the Hezhen *Yimakan* tradition from China, the Moorish epic *T'heydinn* from Mauritania, the *Hilali* epic from Egypt, the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, the *Hudhud* of the Ifugao community in the Philippines, the *Darangen* epic of the Maranao people in the Philippines, *P'ansori* from Korea, *Gesang* epic tales of ethnic Tibetan, Mongolian and Tu communities in western

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/>. Accessed February 25, 2012.

and northern China, the Mongolian *Tuuli*, and the storytelling arts of the *Meddah*, Turkish storytellers. The total number of epic traditions highlighted by UNESCO awards in 2011 was at least ten,<sup>9</sup> all of which were experiencing at least some of the sustainability issues similar to those which olonkho faces in Yakutia.

Due to the close connection between the UNESCO awards and sustainability issues, this literature review includes current research on sustainability. In particular it gleans from the multi-year research project of Huib Schippers, “Sustainable Futures,” launched in 2009. Schippers’ project is conceptually based in part on the UNESCO “Declaration on the promotion of Cultural Diversity” (2001) as well as applied approaches to ethnomusicology which commit to “applying the knowledge gained in consultation with and for the benefit of the communities studied” (Schippers 2008, 4). His project examines nine traditions from around the world, seeking “to increase understanding of the dynamics of survival for music cultures from the perspective of five key domains, delivering tools for supporting the musical diversity of Australia and beyond” (2008, 1). The five domains Schippers explores are: 1) musical content and structure, 2) becoming/being a musician, 3) communities, contexts, and constructs (attitudes), 4) infrastructure and regulations, and 5) audiences, media, and markets. Schippers asserts that “there are some significant gaps in the documentation and understanding of sustainability of musical cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (2008, 9). My research on olonkho parallels Schippers’ work on other traditions, and aims to discover keys for sustainable growth for music genres that are endangered.

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<sup>9</sup> There are actually more traditions which could be considered “epic-related” in that they feature either extended narratives, heroic or “epic” content, a series of tales related to one heroic character, or an improvised, formulaic character common to epics around the world. I have chosen to mention only those items which either claim to be epic or have many of the characteristics important to the genre.

### *The Sakha cultural context*

It is important to provide a background for olonkho that places it within its cultural and historical context. One of the oldest monographs on Yakutia's history comes from Seroshevskii, who was exiled to Yakutia where he lived among the Sakha and wrote an early ethnography of Sakha culture (1896 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1993]). Other writers contributing to the literature on the Sakha cultural context were anthropologists, explorers, and folklorists such as Dunn and Dunn (1963), Jochelson (1933), Kirby (1980), Kreuger (1962), and Tokarev and Gurvich (1964), as well as the archaeologist Okladnikov (1970), who includes a comparison of olonkho with the epics of other Siberian peoples. These resources provide a multi-faceted view of the history of the Sakha Republic and its people, helping to document change in music genres and other expressions of culture. Although some of these authors were writing from within the Soviet Union and thus experienced ideological constraints, they nevertheless produced works worth mining for their insight and observations.

Modern anthropologists and other scholars studying and writing in English about the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) in the last three decades include Argunova (1992), Bremmer and Taras (1993), Cruikshank and Argunova (2000), Gogolev (1992a, 1992b, 1992c), Jordan and Bychkova (2001), Kempton (1996), Khazanov (1993), Robbek (1998), Slezkine (1994), Tichotsky (2000), Vinokurova (1995a, 1995b), and Vitebsky (1987, 2005). Their works provide perspectives on the cultural, political, religious, educational, and every-day realities of life in the Sakha Republic since perestroika and the fall of the Soviet Union. Music and arts are mentioned in these works, but do not play a central role and are not analyzed in great detail.

The most prolific scholar writing about Yakutia in English is the American anthropologist Marjorie Balzer, whose connection to Yakutia stretches back more than two decades. While she rarely addresses musical issues in detail, her writings provide an overview of the Sakha context. Her (1991) entry in the *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, at the time of its writing, was one of the most concise English-language overviews of the history and culture of the Sakha. Balzer's later (1993) article on religion and atheism in Yakutia notes the beginnings of a cultural revival in the early 1990s, but does not mention olonkho, which was fairly dormant at the time. Her 1995 work outlines the roots of this growing cultural revitalization and its connections to language, spiritual belief, and identity. In addition, she also reports on the economic, political, and "national" relations with the federal government. Her 1996 article with Uliana Vinokurova discusses nationalism, inter-ethnic relations, and federalism in Yakutia, providing some early post-Soviet historical information. Other writers such as Batalden and Batalden (1997), Forsyth (1992), Lincoln (1994), and Service (2009) offer invaluable background in Eurasian anthropology, history, and the demographics of various regions of Siberia and Yakutia in particular.

Russian-language resources from various ethnographers, folklorists, and scholars describing and analyzing the Sakha cultural context include N.A. Alekseyev's (2008) work on the ethnography and folklore of the peoples of Siberia, and the volume by N. A. Alekseyev et al. (1995) on the stories, legends, and myths of the Sakha. These resources place olonkho within the context of other legends, tales, and myths. Crate (2002) discusses the role of oral history in contemporary survival strategies, and Bragina (2005) examines the ethnic and ethnocultural processes in Yakutia from the 1970s to the 1990s,

a period of decline for olonkho. Kulikova (2009), Leete (2005), and Leete and Firnhaber (2004) discuss religious processes and change in Siberia during periods of upheaval.

One of the newest and most comprehensive resources is an 872-page full-color encyclopedia by Ivanov et al. (2007) describing Yakutia in text, charts, maps, illustrations, and photos. In addition to a fifteen-page section specifically on olonkho, it includes the following sections: 1) Nature: geography, geology, climate, and natural resources; 2) History: Yakutia from ancient times to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Yakutia as part of the Russian state in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Soviet Yakutia; 3) Ethnography: the Sakha, the Russians, and Northern minority peoples; 4) Modernity: modern life in Yakutia; and 5) a bibliography. This resource provides not only a broad foundation for understanding the cultural context of Yakutia, it places olonkho within that context and provides a scholarly summary of the genre.

### *Sakha music in general*

Although Sakha and Russian folklorists produced works in Russian in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are few resources before the 1960s describing and analyzing the broad spectrum of Sakha musical resources. Ergis (2008) provides essays on Sakha folklore, but little is tied specifically to olonkho. Although olonkho is not traditionally performed with dancing, Lukina (2005) examines the semantics of fundamental movements of ritual dances, tracing their connections to olonkho. Samoilovich (1936) writes on Sakha folklore and discusses the history of writing and orality among the Sakha. His chapter on olonkho outlines early 20<sup>th</sup> century observations on performance practices, informing the historical portions of this research.

Larionova's two books on the major Sakha singing styles of *dègèrèn* (2000) and *dièrètii* (2004) present genre-thematic classification of the artistic resources of each style, as well as an in-depth description of their musical, textual, poetic, and regional stylistic distinctives. In addition to providing a broad description of Sakha musical resources, these works are pertinent for this study in that they describe how the singing styles of *dièrètii* and *dègèrèn* are employed in olonkho. Mukhoplëva (1993) also summarizes the classification of Sakha musical genres, primarily dealing with ritual songs and related aspects such as spells and dances. Although it does not have any major sections dealing with olonkho, this work provides insights for understanding the broader musical contexts in which olonkho is performed.

Eduard Alekseyev, born in Yakutia and living in Boston at the time of this writing, has authored over 150 works on various facets of Sakha music, including musicological aspects of olonkho.<sup>10</sup> He is one of my primary collaborators, contributing perspectives from decades of experience as a researcher and writer on Sakha music as on other related Central Asian traditions encountered in his fieldwork (Levin 2006).<sup>11</sup> Some of his writing (1969 and 1988) touches on the changes that occurred in Sakha folklore and musical resources during the Soviet years, offering an historical perspective from the viewpoint of an ethnomusicologist who struggled to work within the constraints of the Soviet system, ultimately stretching the boundaries of the system and eventually escaping it altogether. His other books and articles (1989a, 1989b, 1996) as well as the digitalized

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<sup>10</sup> For a full list of Alekseyev's publications, see the bibliography in Russian on his site at <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/author4.html> or a shortened list in English at <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/author6.html>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Alekseyev was a member of the first Soviet-American joint ethnomusicological expedition in 1987, joining Ted Levin and Zoya Kyrgys in their fieldwork in Tuva, documented in Levin's book *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing* (2006), which has been recently published in Russian translation.

field recordings in the holdings of the Harvard music library, provide information on Sakha music in general and olonkho research specifically.<sup>12</sup> His doctoral dissertation expanded on Grant Grigorian's (1957) initial documentation of the "unfolding mode" of the Sakha.

English-language articles which describe the complexities of Soviet ethnomusicology practice before the fall of the Iron Curtain include Kosacheva (1990) and Krader (1990). Kosacheva demonstrates that social and political conditions during Soviet rule had a strong influence on folklore and folk music, Westernizing, in many cases, folk music to conform more closely to the ideals of the State. She asserts that folklore performances became professionalized, propagandized, decontextualized, and placed into contexts that were oriented to presenting a unified Russian face to the world. Especially significant for olonkho were the ways the improvisational nature and normal length of performances were curtailed. Krader's article (1990), although it affords a somewhat contrasting picture to Kosacheva's in regard to the politicization of folklore during the Soviet period, includes a unique resource for this project—a discussion of some widely used Russian terms in the field of ethnomusicology, clarifying certain concepts and theories which are central to the development of music research up to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Sheikin's (2002) comparative-historical study of the musical cultures of the people of Siberia avails an in-depth perspective on how Sakha musical resources can be compared to those of other Siberian groups. Although the book is in Russian, an English-language summary is included. Another useful English-language resource is a DVD by Maltzev and Howard (2008) documenting some features of Sakha music, dance, and

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~mus00023>. Accessed February 28, 2012.

ritual. Although it primarily focuses on the music of the Buriat, the largest indigenous group in Siberia, this DVD helps to set up the broader Siberian context in which olonkho is performed.

### *Olonkho resources*

Of the resources which describe, analyze, and explore various characteristics of the olonkho performance tradition, the vast majority of materials are in Russian, the primary language of academic discourse in Russia.<sup>13</sup> A key document for this research is the legislation for the “preservation, study, and propagation of the Yakut [Sakha] heroic epos olonkho for 2007-2015” which passed into law on March 15, 2007. This document provides proposed budgets, outcomes, and programs for olonkho revitalization.

Danil Burtsev (1998) proposes four important features of olonkho: its place in the context of Russian folklore studies, its content as an integrated functional system, characteristics of the form of olonkho and its performance practice, and the genre of olonkho as a self-regulating, self-renewing process of folk art. Analyses of the plots of olonkho stories have been done by Pukhov (1962), Reshetnikova (2005), and Emelianov (1996, 2000), who in his latter work outlined the plots of several epic tales, providing parallel texts in Russian and Sakha. Putilov (1997) and Trepavlov (1995, in English) discuss the social status of the epic hero and the heroic typology of the olonkho. Gabysheva (2009) explores the semiotic systems of Sakha music and how they function as mnemonic devices in olonkho and other forms of folklore performance. She also examines aspects of olonkho performance not commonly addressed in the literature, such

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<sup>13</sup> In this section, all works not in Russian will have an indication after the date.

as the importance of the “entreaty to perform” addressed to the olonkhosut and the role of gestures during performance.

New forms (derivatives) of olonkho are being published. For example, Maria Kononova (2007) wrote a lengthy poem on the biblical story of creation which reflects elements of olonkho. In addition, olonkho themes are often reflected in the visual and plastic arts (Appendix G), often in connection to written versions of olonkho (Appendix D).<sup>14</sup> Aelita Egorova (2008), a high-school student, wrote and illustrated a new olonkho tale, and Ivanova-Unarova (2000) published a collection of Vladimir Karamzin’s art with commentary. Karamzin’s images have been widely used, not only as illustrations for the literary versions of olonkho, but widely in Sakha society; they have become iconic representations of olonkho. Vasiliev et al. (2009) document the creation of a wiki-site in which digitized information on olonkho is being collected and outlines how this project connects to the revitalization efforts of Yakutia’s UNESCO-related legislation in 2007.<sup>15</sup>

Emsheimer (1991), Krueger (1963, in English), Pukhov and Ergis (1985), and Pavlova (2006, in English) present historical information on the performance practice of olonkho and the lives of its performers. The 1962 recording of Gavril Kolesov performing Oiyunskiy’s olonkho, *Nyurgun Botur the Swift* also played a crucial role in the revitalization of olonkho. This historic recording was remastered to a set of nine CDs in 1997.<sup>16</sup> Skrybykin (1995) provides an English translation of the first section of this tale as well as a glossary of important terms. He also highlights several metaphors used in the

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<sup>14</sup> Plastic arts are defined as “artistic activities like ceramics or sculpture which have three dimensions.” <http://www.yourdictionary.com/plastic-arts>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.olonkho.info>.

<sup>16</sup> P.A. Oiyunskiy. *Nyurgun Botur Stremitelniy: Yakutskii geriocheskii épos – olonkho* [*Nyurgun Botur the Swift: The Yakut Heroic Epos of Olonkho*]. Performed by Gavril Kolesov. Recorded in 1962 by Leningrad Recording Studio. Remastered in 1997 by Studiya Poligram [KYDYK].

text, giving insight on poetic expressions and the literary style used in the recitation of olonkho. Appendix F contains a fragment of another translation of *Nyurgun Botur* currently being undertaken by the North-Eastern Federal University (SVFD).<sup>17</sup>

Two Russian-language encyclopedic resources addressing a broad range of issues related to olonkho can be found in the series *Monuments of Folklore of the Peoples of Siberia and Far East*, hereafter “*Monuments*” (1993, 1995, 1996, 2003). Dmitri Sivtsev–Suorun Omolloon<sup>18</sup> (2003) also gathered articles on olonkho-related topics, many of which are translated from Sakha into Russian. Because of the difficulty of publishing scholarly works after the fall of the Soviet Union and the resultant financial difficulties in Yakutia, there are few in-depth publications in Russian on topics that address olonkho revitalization. There have been, however, various conferences and forums touching on this topic; I therefore relied on the published collections of papers resulting from these gatherings. These resources are represented by such reviewers, authors, editors, and compilers as Biliukina (2006), Heda (2001), Ivanov et al. (2006), Larionova (2010), Makharov (2000), Sysoliatina (2006), Tomskaya (2006), Vasilieva (2006), and Yamashita (2006). Other than interviews and first-hand observation, these resources are the primary written sources that deal with current trends and future trajectories of olonkho.

### Theoretical orientations

Theoretical orientations addressing the research objectives are outlined according to an adaptation of Rice’s (2006) multi-dimensional model. This adaptation uses time,

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<sup>17</sup> This pre-production fragment of the olonkho *Nyurgun Botur* in Appendix D is provided for research purposes through the kind permission of Alina Nakhodkina, the project director.

<sup>18</sup> Suorun Omolloon is a Sakha pseudonym; Sivtsev is often referred to by this pseudonym.

place, and event to formulate and organize the research questions. Rice's emphasis on a *diachronic* study of change relates to the questions on "time" and contributes to an understanding of the revitalization of olonkho. It thus grounds current realities in an historical perspective of the socio-political and cultural context of Soviet influence.

Regarding "place" (context), a *structural functionalist* approach explores the broad context of Sakha values, worldviews, and societal interactions connected to the genre of olonkho. Stone describes this theory as one which allows for "studying music in a way that integrates it with the sociocultural complex around it" (2008, 45). The importance of context cannot be overemphasized. In Blacking's work, *Music, Culture, and Experience*, he concisely summarizes how cultural expressions (such as olonkho) are closely tied to its context and the people that create and perform it:

Music is *not* a universal language. As public communication, musical systems are more esoteric and culture-specific than any verbal language. They cannot be translated and become publicly accessible and intelligible to strangers, as can speech in foreign languages at conferences or political meetings be understood by all present with the help of efficient interpreters. (1995, 239)

A related approach, *ethnoscience*, privileges local classifications and points of view. In Stone's evaluation of ethnoscience, she asserts that a weakness of this approach is that it does not "emphasize variations among people's knowledge" (2008, 54). This weakness can be mitigated by gathering data from a variety of collaborators in the Sakha Republic and by presenting their various opinions and views even when they seem contradictory. I therefore present analyses and observations of Russian and Sakha ethnomusicologists *in situ* as they reflect on the history, current practice, and possible futures of olonkho. The resulting polyvocality provides a broad picture of perceptions about olonkho.

My exploration of the content of olonkho uses *communication* and *cognitive theories* (Stone 2008, 130) for analyzing its performance practice and the “active, constructive nature of cognition” (Nauta 1972, 5). *Semiotic-cybernetic* approaches are useful because in addition to the processing of meaning in a performance, they emphasize the “feedback loop from receiver back to sender. This critical feedback then serve[s] to modify further the performance by the original sender” (Stone 2008, 130). Interviews with olonkhosuts in Yakutia indicate that the length of performances as well as the personal satisfaction they receive as performers is directly related to the physical and vocal responses of their listeners, so this element is explored in this research.

“Event” is explicated through the application of *performance theory* models, highlighting strategic devices which enhance performance intensity (Stone 2008, 137). For example, key to understanding olonkho performance are concepts such as *indeterminacy* and *emergence* (Stone 2008, 140; Bauman 1977, 38).

*Ethnicity* and *identity theory* infuse all three research questions (time, place and event), and are key frameworks for evaluating olonkho performance. As an indigenous group living in a post-Soviet state, the Sakha face many challenges in negotiating their identity as it touches on ethnicity, religious beliefs, and their relationship to the Russian State. Olonkho, believed by many Sakha to be their quintessential traditional genre, plays a prominent role in the process of construction, maintenance, and negotiation of boundaries in relation to Sakha identity (Stokes 1994, 6; Osipova 2011).

Closely related to topics of identity and ethnicity, *post-colonial* and *post-Soviet* theoretical frameworks may also elucidate effects of Soviet political ideology on olonkho, especially in issues related to agency and domination (Stone 2008, 205–207).

For example, Hechter (1975) and Said (1994) problematize commonly understood concepts of colonialization and offer alternative models. Hechter proposes the term “internal colonialism” (1975—in the title of his book) to describe the kind of relationship that countries such as Russia have had with the peoples who inhabit their borders. Said outlines Russia’s departure from a geographical definition of colonialism to encompass expansion through conquest into adjacent territories (1994, 10).

Ashcroft et al. (1995, 381) and Moore (2001, 112) use the concept of the “neocolonial mode” to describe retrenchment from once-held freedoms. Rather than assuming a state of affairs in which colonial influence is in the past, Ashcroft posits neocolonial approaches which address “the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges throughout this diverse range of societies, in their institutions and their discursive practices” (1995, 3). Bhabha (2006) comments on the hybridity and complexity of post-colonial cultural expressions, while Battaglia (1995), Rethman (1997), Renan (1990), and Fanon (1967) explore how people in post-colonial contexts negotiate identity and positionality, creating hope for their own future, providing models for consideration in understanding the post-Soviet Yakutian context and its response to the olonkho tradition.

On the recent Soviet past and current trends in Russia, Crate (2006), Levin (2002), Slezkine (1991), and Zemtsovsky (2002) offer varying perspectives on the effects of Soviet ideology on the music cultures of its minority peoples. Writers such as Fanning (2005) and Kosacheva (1990) also provide insights on historical realities for olonkho. They outline Soviet attitudes toward musical culture and point out that official Soviet policies toward indigenous musical resources, largely focused on control, had a double-

edged effect, both positive and negative. Balzer (2006) reports on the resumption of central control coming out of Moscow and the resulting attenuation of regional power and autonomy, an additional factor in considering Moscow's neocolonial relationship with Yakutia. Oushakine talks about responses of *remake* and *revival*, further theorizing on the post-Soviet responses of indigenous peoples as well as Russians in general (2000).

Finally, in an approach which integrates all three aspects of time, place, and event, I examine the interaction of *continuity* and *change*, providing another useful lens for understanding olonkho in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Coulter's model (2007, 2011) for measuring musical change (which he calls "music shift") is based on sociolinguistic models (Fishman 1991, Lewis and Simons 2010) and is key to measuring the changes in olonkho over time. An essential model related to issues of continuity and change comes from Schrag's reflections on how the interactions of stable and malleable infrastructures create dynamism and lead to enduring traditions of creativity (2005, 2009, 2012). Further insights have come from Ricoeur, whose view of tradition is intimately tied to living transmission (1984, 68), as well as Louis (1958), Turner (1980), and Connerty (1990), who apply these theories of change to oral traditions.

### Research methodology

The methodology employed in this research has included several complementary approaches. In my olonkho-related fieldwork in Yakutia during 2009, 2010, and 2011, I recorded audio and video footage of performances and interviews with a wide variety of participants. My respondents included musicians, poets, ethnomusicologists and other

scholars, religious leaders, olonkho audiences, relatives of deceased olonkhosuts, and living olonkhosuts of varying levels of performance ability.

The interviews quoted in this work were conducted in Russian, the language spoken by over 99 percent of the population of the Russian Federation (Russian Census, 2010). Although I personally regret that my Sakha language abilities are limited to musical terminology and some commonly used words, I agree with Ted Levin, a respected scholar of Siberian and Central Asian musics, in his observation that while it reflects the “dark side of Soviet language policies, the ubiquity of Russian as a language of scholarship in the former U.S.S.R. has made it an indispensable tool for musical ethnography” (2006, xxi). I found that my respondents, when given the choice of using a Sakha translator, chose to dialogue with me in Russian rather than endure the slower pace of using a translator.

My heart connection to Yakutia stretches back to my youth, when I read avidly about people imprisoned in Siberian gulags for their faith or political beliefs. But my deeper understanding of Yakutia began in 1995, when I moved with my two young children and husband to Yakutia in connection with his work as a consultant on intercultural relations for a local organization. We lived four years in Yakutia, followed by more summers and short trips. During those years, although I was primarily occupied with home-schooling our two children, I was able to do an intensive study of Russian language, eventually becoming fluent. Those years of association with people in Yakutia provided a base of knowledge and relationships upon which my dissertation research was built. For example, it provided a first-hand look at the period of cultural revival following the end of the Soviet Union, as well as close relationships with Sakha people who later

helped me with my research. Most importantly, it also created in me (a classically trained musician) the beginnings of an appreciation for the discipline of applied ethnomusicology and its crucial role in mediating issues related to Russian hegemony, an approach which infuses and motivates my work.

My three years of periodic olonkho-related fieldwork involved taking a participant-observer role for a variety of events: two olonkho festivals (Borogontsi and Berdigestyakh), the Ysyakh summer festival near Yakutsk, private performances in two villages, speaking at a three-day international conference on Eurasian cultural issues (including olonkho), and staying in the homes of two olonkhosuts for two to three days at a time. Other methodological approaches for this project have included translations and annotations of sections of Russian-language written resources.

One key approach that sets this research apart is that in reporting my results, I foreground the voices of my respondents, providing a translation of their first person narratives as they recount their perceptions of historical events related to olonkho performance. In doing this, I draw on Levin's (2006) model, in which he recounts the direct speech of his research participants; this inspired me to allow my respondents' voices to speak for themselves. Since I translated each of the interviews I did from Russian, I have also included a DVD with video or audio clips of the voices I have quoted in this work as they respond to my questions in Russian; these media clips are noted in the corresponding footnotes, clearly identifying the source as an interview. Copies of the DVD are available for inter-library loan through the UGA Hugh Hodgson School of Music or from the author.

### Chapter organization

Following this chapter, this work is divided into seven more chapters, examining in more detail the musical, historical, and theoretical models grounding my conclusions. Chapter Two explores definitions for important terms related to epics and olonkho in particular. I describe various categories of olonkhosuts and how oral formulaic theory explains the improvisational, emergent aspect of olonkho. I also discuss the interaction between the verbal and musical facets of the genre, outlining characteristic features of its narrative mode and music-related materials.

In Chapter Three I touch on the importance of a diachronic historical approach and propose a variation of Rice's (2006) tripartite model as a structure for this research. I preface the historical section by underscoring the oral nature of olonkho and its role as an embodiment of worldview and values. The history of olonkho is outlined, beginning with the pre-Soviet era, touching on the cultural and historical roots of olonkho as well as the structure and elements common to many olonkhos. I then outline olonkho's transition into the Soviet era and changes which occurred during three periods of Soviet rule—from the Revolution to World War Two, the 1940s and 50s, and the 60s through the 80s.

Chapter Four begins with observations on the politics of cultural revitalization, then describes the fascinating story of an indomitable woman who led Yakutia in a quest to bring olonkho back from “forgotten” and have it recognized as a Masterpiece by UNESCO. I describe olonkho reception at the time of the Masterpiece declaration, and compare it with olonkho reception at the current time, noting key elements of change. I also report my respondents' prognoses for revitalization of olonkho, paying special attention to general trends which emerge from their reflections.

In Chapter Five addresses the role of UNESCO in olonkho revitalization, outlining its Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) program and three important concepts/terms related to the 2003 Convention (*intangible cultural heritage*, *safeguarding*, and *masterpiece*). I compare the desired outcomes of UNESCO's ICH program with Yakutia's plan of action and evaluate how closely Yakutia is tracking with its plan.

Chapter Six explores the issues of continuity and change in revitalization. I recommend Coulter's model for measuring music shift (the Graded Music Shift Scale), and propose a diagnostic decision tree I have created to accompany his model. This diagnostic decision tree demonstrates that transmission and innovation are key factors for determining music vitality. Delving deeper into topics of continuity and change, I explore Schrag's model of the interactions between stable and malleable infrastructures, applying it to olonkho performance.

Chapter Seven summarizes the changing contexts in which olonkho is conceived and performed, addressing in particular the change in the primary function of olonkho from entertainment to ethnic identity marker. I examine the role of colonial and post-colonial identities in relation to olonkho and show how neocolonial dynamics are resulting in a negotiated identity and future for the Sakha. I show how the dynamics of malleable and stable infrastructures in olonkho enable it to endure the pressures of societal change and instability. The chapter closes by outlining lessons learned from the revitalization of other epic traditions such as *Manas*<sup>19</sup> and *p'ansori*, and reflecting on the common challenges that these epics face in revitalization.

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<sup>19</sup> *Manas* is capitalized in this research because it is the name of the protagonist in that epic cycle. The term *p'ansori*, like olonkho, is normally not capitalized, as it refers to a genre, not a person.

Chapter Eight provides some reflections on the nature of revitalization and how the “deeply flowing waters” of an oral tradition can sometimes be obscured by the temporary “foam” that accompanies large-budget government efforts at revitalization. I outline three paths for the future, based on varying levels of transmission and innovation, and remark on a few hopeful developments, including the role of mediated forms in fostering more appreciative audiences for olonkho. In my recommendations, I suggest ways in which levels of innovation and transmission can be fostered for olonkho, giving the genre a chance for a sustainable future. Finally, I discuss questions and topics related to olonkho which have not been addressed by this research, and close with a reflection on how my findings may apply to the sustainability and revitalization of other genres facing decline or extinction.

## CHAPTER 2

### OLONKHO: A MULTI-GENERIC EPIC TRADITION

Olonkho is an epic poetic tradition comprised of alternating sections of narrative and song. Epic poems are not unique to the Sakha; they have been performed in various cultures for over 4000 years. The oldest known poem, the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, dates back to 1700 B.C. (Abusch 2001, 614). Homer's *Illiad* and *Odyssey* continued this tradition in their poetic recounting of the events surrounding the Trojan War. Today, epic poetry can be found in many other countries such as India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Tibet (Emsheimer 1991, 210) and in various regions of Russia, including Tuva and Altai. The Sakha epic tradition, olonkho, has the longest and most complex epic tales of all the Siberian indigenous groups.<sup>20</sup>

The term “olonkho” is used widely to mean both the broad genre of olonkho epic style and the individual stories which make up the genre (Larionova 2004, 43). Divergent definitions of what constitutes an “epic” (and why) abound in the literature about epics.<sup>21</sup> Since structural traits and contextual features are important for a good definition of “epic,” I embrace Johnson's definition which asserts: “Structural characteristics include poetic language, narrative style, heroic content, great length, and multigeneric qualities. The contextual traits include legendary belief structure, multifunctionality, and cultural,

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with the relatives of Roman Alekseyev: Liubov Shelkovnikova, Gavril Shelkovnik, and Anna Andreeva in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 20, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Biebuyck does not address structural issues as much as common themes in his definition of an “epic,” asserting that an epic normally includes some form of miraculous conception and birth (including the special heroic gifts and abilities with which the hero is born) as well as “Herculean deeds, extraterrestrial journeys, fierce individual battles with heroes, divinities, animals, dragons, and monsters; possession of extraordinary magical devices; tests of strength and intelligence; games” (1976, 25-6).

traditional transmission” (1992, 6–7). In defining “epic” it is also crucial to address the interaction of the various stories of an epic and their relation to one another. For example, literature about epics is not always clear about the differences between an epic *cycle*, an epic *tradition*, and an epic *tale*. More often than not, these categories are discussed separately (cf. Bynum 1980, 330; Nas 2002, 140; Park 2003, 14–15) rather than compared, contrasted, and defined.

I use these three terms in the following manner: 1) epic *cycles* describe traditions like the Kyrgyz *Manas* and *Sunjata* from Mali, a series or sets of stories related to one cultural hero; 2) epic *traditions* are a style of story-telling which include multiple tales not necessarily related to one central hero, such as the Korean *p’ansori* and the Sakha *olonkho*; 3) epic *tales* are the various performances, literary variants, or constituent parts of these cycles and traditions (for example each book of *Manas* and each of the five *p’ansori* narratives are a *tale*, as are the various literary versions of *Sunjata* and the various stories in the genre of *olonkho*). In this research, the collection of *olonkho* stories is referred to as an *epic tradition* and the individual parts of it as *stories* or *tales*.

The term *epos* is sometimes used interchangeably with *epic*, and they are linked very closely by their dictionary definitions, which define *epos* as: “1) an epic; 2) epic poetry; 3) a group of poems, transmitted orally, concerned with parts of a common epic theme; or 4) a series of events suitable for treatment in epic poetry.”<sup>22</sup> While both *epos* and *epic* terms have their roots in the Greek language (*epos* and *epikós* respectively), the term *epic* can be used either as a noun or an adjective; *epos* is always a noun. Within those grammatical constraints, the use of *epos* is interchangeable with *epic* and more a matter of style than definition.

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<sup>22</sup> See <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epos>. Accessed January 10, 2012.

Olonkho is not an “epic cycle” such as *Manas* or *Sunjata*, in which there is one main hero to which all the episodes of the cycles are related. Instead the images of the heroes in the olonkho epics are independent of one another and generally not connected (Larionova 2004, 42). Each olonkho story is named after the main protagonist. For most stories, this is a male warrior-hero, called a *bogatyr*, for example *Nyurgun Botur the Swift* or *The Longsuffering Ėr Sogotokh*. In some cases it is a female hero, such as in *Kyys Debelie* or in *Tuiaaryma Kuo*.<sup>23</sup> Most of these olonkho stories share a similar compositional structure, including the following elements:

- 1) Exposition: a lengthy description of the hero’s homeland and its holy tree, as well as the hero’s riches and weapons: i.e., a portrait of the warrior;
- 2) The Call: the motivation for the warrior’s expedition and exploits;
- 3) The Development of the Action: overcoming hindrances in the expedition;
- 4) Culmination: a battle with enemies and victory over them, the hero-warrior’s duel and single-handed combat connected to his matchmaking;
- 5) Further Development of the Action: the return path of the warrior-hero toward home, overcoming difficulties on the way, and the punishing of his vanquished enemies and those related to them;
- 6) Conclusion: the arrival of the warrior-hero to his homeland and concluding lines about how the hero lives happily and richly ever after with his wife (and relatives and children), multiplying and proliferating the line of the Sakha nation (Emelianov 1980, 11–12).

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix E for short summaries of the plots for these olonkhos.

### Features of olonkho performance

Olonkho, in its historical form, is an unaccompanied solo epic genre comprised of both dramatic narrative poetry and song which alternate throughout the extensive, multiple-evening performance of the work (Okladnikov 1970, 263). It is often referred to by Sakha people as *teatr odnogo cheloveka* (a one-person theater), but it has no props.<sup>24</sup> It is normally performed in a seated position, often with legs crossed at the knees and hands resting on the knees or one hand cupped to the ear. The singer of olonkho, the *olonkhosut*, uses a Sakha narrative poetry style (often referred to as *recitative*) for the “telling” sections, while the direct speech of the characters in the story is sung (Larionova 2010). A gifted olonkhosut is able to maintain a balance between the alternating textures of song and recitative as the story unfolds during performance.<sup>25</sup>

Each of the characters in the olonkho (including animals such as the hero-warrior’s horse) has its own leitmotif, vocal register, and intonation when it “speaks” (sings), i.e., its own musical language. But even the recitative sections are more than just simply poetic narration. They contain elements that can be considered musical, including a central tone and other pitch-related factors such as rising and falling contours, rhythmic and temporal characteristics, and are organized according in phrases.

### Epic performers

In the living epic traditions I have studied there are two general categories of performers. Reichl labels these two categories “reproductive” (performing memorized sections) and “creative” (able to improvise within the structure of the genre), adding the

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<sup>24</sup> Interviews with Schischigin (2010), Burtsev (2010), and Larionova (2010) in Yakutia.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with head of the Olonkho Department at IGI, Agafia Zakharova in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 4, 2011.

caveat that “some singers can be clearly classified as either ‘creative’ or ‘reproductive,’ others can be less easily put in one or the other category” (1992, 82). This is an important distinction, but I prefer, rather than thinking of these as distinct categories, to see them as two poles on a continuum. This continuum stretches, for example, from a Sakha child who memorizes a short 10-minute fragment of olonkho, to an 80-year old master olonkhosut who can recite an entire olonkho in an improvisatory manner over a period of several days. It often happens that over a lifetime, performers begin at one place on the continuum and move in the direction of master-performer as they learn fluency in the art of oral formulaic expression. For the sake of clarity, however, and in acknowledgement that most performers lie on one half or the other of the continuum, I employ the following terms: *olonkho performer* (for those who do not improvise but perform memorized versions), *master olonkhosut* (to refer only to those performers able to improvise within the aesthetic boundaries of the genre), and *olonkhosut* (if I am not emphasizing one aspect or the other, but referring to olonkhosuts in general).

Olonkho is sung by both men and women; there do not appear to be any cultural taboos against women becoming olonkhosuts, although in general there are fewer women performers than there are men. This may be due to the fact that historically, women did not earn their living by performing, as male olonkhosuts did.<sup>26</sup> So while they were not forbidden to become master olonkhosuts, there were no financial or societal structures providing the necessary support for them to travel extensively and earn a living in that way. In 2005, at the time of the Masterpiece Declaration for olonkho, there were two acknowledged master-performers—one man and one woman. The woman, Darya Tomskaya (now deceased), spoke Sakha and performed in Sakha, but was from a smaller

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<sup>26</sup> Personal correspondence with Eduard Alekseyev, February 25, 2012.

indigenous group in Yakutia, the Evenki.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the primary qualifications for olonkho performance appear to be limited less by gender than by talent. That talent is widely described by Sakha people as including phenomenal gifts in the areas of both verbal and melodic expression. It also includes the improvisational ability of being able to perform *iz sebia* (from oneself) rather than just reciting a pre-memorized version.<sup>28</sup> When these abilities are present in a person who has also had long-term exposure to the live performances of others, that person may develop the necessary capacity for becoming a master olonkhosut.

#### Oral formulaic theory and improvisation in olonkho

There is a significant difference between the *master olonkhosut*, who has the ability to improvise and the olonkho *performer* who produces a pre-memorized concert. While the master olonkhosut's abilities are described by Sakha people as being "improvisation," they are actually a special kind of improvisation, codified in literature on epics and best understood in terms of *oral formulaic theory*. This theory, postulated by Milman Parry, was continued after his death by his collaborator and student, Albert Lord, who published the seminal work in the field of epic studies, *The Singer of Tales*. Originally published in 1960 (with a second edition in 2000), this work became not only a classic text "for the general study of oral and written literatures but has also evolved into a standard textbook within folkloristics" (2000, xix). It documents how Parry and Lord studied the oral tradition of epic singing in Yugoslavia, seeking to understand how

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with master olonkhosut Pyotr Reshetnikov in Cherkëkh, Yakutia, on June 16, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

the singers “compose, learn, and transmit their epics. It is a study in the processes of composition of oral narrative poetry” (2000, xxxv).

This ground-breaking work was the first to formulate definitions of several key concepts which are now considered foundational in epic studies. For example, Lord defines *oral epic song* as “narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the use of themes” (2000, 4). He further defines *formula* as being “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (2000, 4).

The creation of epics through formulas is a flexible system that relies less on memorized text than it does on the linguistic “grooves” that Lord describes, among other things, as patterns of melody, meter, syntax, parallelism, and word order. He explains the learning process for the language of formula as being similar to normal spoken language, in that as one becomes skilled at the syntax and word forms, one grows in the ability to express thoughts using formulas. Even his analogies for the way singers absorb their craft makes use of linguistic metaphors. He asserts that the patterns of oral poetry are its “grammar,” superimposed onto the particular grammar of the language (such as Sakha) being used in the narrative, stating,

The speaker of this language, once he has mastered it, does not move any more mechanically within it than we do in ordinary speech... He does not “memorize” formulas, any more than we as children “memorize” language. He learns them by hearing them in other singers’ songs, and by habitual usage they become part of his singing as well. (2000, 36)

For that reason, two performances of an epic are never the same, nor even two performances by the same person. Lord summarizes this uniqueness of oral epics with this observation: “The picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it” (2000, 29).

The linguistic parallels continue. Lord goes on to point out that there is usually “a large group of formulas known to all singers, just as in any speech community there are words and phrases in the language known to and used by all the speakers in that community” (2000, 49). It is important to note that these formulas are sometimes clumped together into “clusters” of words, phrases, melodies, meters, and parallelisms. Lord posits that “these clusters of formulas or of lines, which are frequently associated together and are recurrent, also mark one of the characteristic signs of oral style. They are useful to the singer; for they emerge like trained reflexes” (2000, 58).

The second important concept in understanding epics, the notion of *theme*, refers to “repeated incidents and descriptive passages in the songs” (2000, 4) or “groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style” (2000, 68). The singer’s task in using the themes is

to adapt and adjust [them] to the particular song that he is re-creating... the theme is in reality protean; in the singer’s mind it has many shapes, all the forms in which he has ever sung it, although his latest rendering of it will naturally be freshest in his mind. It is not a static entity, but a living, changing, adaptable artistic creation. (2000, 94)

Even with that malleability in mind, there is an instinctive grouping of themes that occurs in stories, causing Lord to remark, “We are apparently dealing here with a strong force that keeps certain themes together. It is deeply imbedded in the tradition” (2000, 98).

Parry and Lord assumed in their research that there are underlying similarities in epic poems that cross cultural and historical boundaries. Their particular research compared epic poems in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the epic poetry of Homer from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., a comparison certainly representing significant cultural and historical boundaries. They have since been validated in that assumption by the vast body of research undertaken in epic studies.<sup>29</sup>

One feature lacking in Lord's book (for the ethnomusicologist in any case) is an analysis of the music in the Yugoslav epics. Thankfully, a few recordings were included, and Lord does some melodic transcriptions that provide at least minimal descriptions. Lord's approach, however, was largely textually-oriented. This may be explained in part by his position in the Comparative Literature department of Harvard University. He did, however, give the term "epic singer" a new depth, observing that "singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act" and that the epic singer is "not a mere carrier of the tradition but a creative artist making the tradition" (2000, 13).

Parry's descriptions of oral formulas and themes in the epic tradition of the Southern Yugoslavs are remarkably helpful in clarifying our understanding of the *olonkhosut's* art, in which improvisation plays a large role. It follows the formulaic and thematic grooves of epic singers in other places and other times, but with melodic, poetic, dramatic, and narrative materials distinctive to the Sakha culture.

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<sup>29</sup> See for example, the website and journal of the leading organization for this discipline, Center for Studies in Oral Tradition (<http://oraltradition.org>), which continues to celebrate and build on the foundation established by Parry and Lord.

### Emergent character of olonkho

Another characteristic of olonkho is its emergent quality, in which the improvisatory element of olonkho is amplified by the interaction between the olonkhosut and the audience. This produces a performance which “emerges” in the moment (Bauman 1975, 302–306). In each “re-creation,” the olonkhosut responds to the surrounding context, adapting the performance to factors such as the audience’s response, the length of time they have allowed for the performance, and so on. In addition to non-verbal responses, (such as signs of attentiveness or a lack of it), there is also (traditionally) a verbal response, in which short cries of approbation and amazement punctuate the narrative at the points where the olonkhosut draws a long breath.<sup>30</sup>

Bauman’s writings on emergence explore the interactive nature of epics, giving insight into this facet of traditional olonkho performance. He remarks that “the emergent quality of performance resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations” (1975, 302). Bauman traces this theme in the analysis of epic performance back to Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* and calls this seminal work on epics “one of the first works to conceptualize oral literature in terms of emergent structures” (1975, 302). He views Lord’s descriptions of oral epic performances through the lens of emergence, stating,

The flexibility of the form allows the singer to adapt his performance to the situation and the audience, making it longer and more elaborate, or shorter and less adorned, as audience response, his own mood, and time constraints may dictate. (1975, 303)

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<sup>30</sup>Interview with Ekaterina Chekhorduna, scholar and author of olonkho materials for children, in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 6, 2011.

The emergent nature of traditional olonkho performance is an important feature in my analysis of current trends in olonkho, and the resulting prognosis for the future of its revitalization.

### Interaction between verbal and musical aspects of olonkho

The complex interactions between various verbal and musical facets of olonkho are explored in the work of Eduard Alekseyev, whom I believe to be eminently reliable in regard to his analyses of Sakha music. His creative insight and grounded musicological understanding of Sakha music has for decades influenced the writings of Sakha and Russian musicologists. In his introduction to a musicological analysis of the olonkho *The Mighty Ėr Sogotokh*, he underscores the special connections between its musical and verbal aspects:

Olonkho is primarily noteworthy as an inimitable and organic artistic conjoining of grand poetic speech and expressive, diverse song styles. It is truly unique as a musical-poetic phenomenon, possessing its own two-in-one (melodic-poetic) language, its highly-developed and complex (yet streamlined and economic) system of verbal and musical expressivity, special poetical devices and melodic improvisation, all connected tightly and flexibly interacting one with another.<sup>31</sup> (1996, 44)

This interactivity makes olonkho performance a complex art. The olonkhosut must have a high degree of fluency in both of these abilities (the melodic and the poetic), holding them in balance while flexibly interacting with an “in the moment” vision of the plot line, the audience’s response and alertness, and the time frame of the performance arena.

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<sup>31</sup> “Олонхо примечательно прежде всего как художественно неповторимое и органичное сочетание возвышенно-поэтической речи и выразительного разнохарактерного пения. Оно действительно неповторимо как музыкально-поэтическое явление, обладающее своим двуединым мелодико-стиховым языком, своей развитой и сложной и вместе с тем стройной и экономной системой средств словесной и музыкальной выразительности, особыми приёмами поэтической и мелодической импровизации, тесно связанными и гибко взаимодействующими друг с другом” (Alekseyev 1996, 44).

Both the musical and verbal portions of olonkho are “sonic forms,” according to Alekseyev, and he emphasizes the importance of timbre, a high aesthetic value in Sakha music. He asserts that the important aptitudes related to singing are the capacity to freely improvise, to expressively sing the melodic pictures, and “a special ability in regards to the timbral characteristics of vocal re-embodiment”<sup>32</sup> (1996, 45). Having explored a theoretical foundation emphasizing the interactivity of the narrative and the musical, I will now examine the narrative mode more in depth.

### The narrative mode

The narrative sections are marked by crisp articulation, deep breath control, a fast tempo (normally around 400 syllables per minute, but ranging up to 500)<sup>33</sup> and careful pitch calibrations, allowing its contours to be roughly notated.

In spite of the story-telling style of enunciation, in recitative it is fairly easy to hear a specific pitch, which allows an approximate notation of its fundamental contours. The pitches of the recitative are built on two foundational tones (steps/degrees)... the distance between the two tones is difficult to catch by ear, but ... the distinctive of the lower tone is that it is rather consistently pulled toward the upper tone, as a glissando rolling into the upper tone.<sup>34</sup> (Alekseyev 1996, 46)

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<sup>32</sup> “Профессиональное умение олонхосута подразумевает свободное владение двумя основными формами звуковой реализации эпоса: особой эпической манерой сказывания и развитой певческой техникой. Последняя включает не только свободно-импровизационное пение высокого обобщённо-героического склада, не только напевно выразительное пение с индивидуальным мелодическим рисунком, но и особые навыки темброво-характеристического голосового перевоплощения” (Alekseev 1996, 45).

<sup>33</sup> The speed and clear articulation was the special talent of a *chabyrgakhsut*, teller of Sakha tongue-twisters – (*chabyrgakhi*), a well-loved verbal arts genre related to olonkho.

<sup>34</sup> “Несмотря на сказовое произнесение, в речитативе довольно отчётливо прослушивается определённая звуковысотность, что позволяет условно нотировать его основные контуры. Звуковысотно речитативы строятся на двух ступенях-опорах... Расстояние между ступенями трудно уловимо на слух, но чаще всего колеблется в промежутке от полутора до двух тонов. Особенность нижней ступени такова, что она как бы постоянно подтягивается к верхней, глissандоподобно ‘въезжает’ в неё (в этих случаях обычно и становятся возможными изредка встречающиеся внутрислоговые распевы)” (Alekseyev 1996, 46).

These tendencies are clearly seen in the notation for the introductory narrative of *The Mighty Ėr Sogotokh* (Figure 2.1). Tonal specificity is avoided by using an “x” for a note head.<sup>35</sup> Note the presence of two tonal anchor points, with the pitch often starting at the upper one, dropping to the lower one, then climbing back up. This changes toward the end, where there is typically a downward movement of pitches, finalized by a downward glissando. These characteristics of contour are also clearly heard in the recitative of Reshetnikov (see “Reshetnikov olonkho montage” at <http://vimeo.com/mirolonkho>). The falling intonation at the end of a section is used for emphasis, and to prepare the audience for a pause while the olonkhosut replenishes his breath, and during which listeners may express encouraging exclamations (Alekseyev 1996, 47).

Other important characteristic of Sakha poetry (including narrative poetry and other verbal arts such as tongue-twisters) are the presence of both horizontal and vertical parallelisms for sounds and syllables.<sup>36</sup> This is a main pillar of Sakha poetic form. It includes points of alliteration at the beginning of the lines, as well as repetition of words between lines (parallelisms). This can be noted in the example of a Sakha-language recitative from *Ėr Sogotokh* (Figure 2.1), in which the word “сакха” (sakha) is used in the first four lines and “илигинэ” (iliginè) in four out of five lines at the beginning of the recitative. Since they are also used in parallel rhythmically, they have been transcribed in a way that emphasizes this. Also note parallelisms in the syllables at the end of lines, such as –нэ, –гэр, and –тын.

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<sup>35</sup> The transcriptions for this article were done by N. N. Nikolaeva.

<sup>36</sup> For a clear explanation of this (in Russian, with translated Sakha examples), see A. S. Larionova (2004, 71–81).

**1. Вступительный речитатив**

1. Ус са\_ха у - ө - ду - йэ и - ли - ги - нэ,

2. Туэрт са\_ха тө - рүт - тэ - нэ и - ли - ги - нэ,

3. Биэс са\_ха бил\_лэ и - ли - ги - нэ,

4. А - лта са\_ха а\_йыл\_ла

5. У - он у\_луус о\_лох\_то\_но и - ли - ги - нэ,

6. Бы\_лыр\_гы ды\_лым киэ\_нэ

7. Был\_дья\_лык\_таах бы\_дан дьэл\_лик мын\_да\_з - тын

8. Бы - дан ы\_на - раа өт\_тү - гэр,

9. У\_рук - ку ды\_лым гиэ\_нэ















10. Ох\_су\_һуу - лаах у - дан дьэл\_лик у - ор\_га - тын

11. О - той ңө\_нүө өт - тү - гэр,...

Figure 2.1: Introductory recitative from *Er Sogotokh*<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Notated example and table of symbols are from Alekseyev (1996, 58-59). Notation: N. N. Nikolayeva. See <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work20.html>. Accessed January 23, 2012. Used by permission. [See DVD]

### Symbols for notated examples

-  — Sound is an octave lower than written
-  — Note is somewhat raised (about 1/3 of a half-step)
-  — Note is somewhat lowered (about 1/3 of a half-step)
-  — Ending of raised or lowered note
-  — glissando down
-  — glissando up (“abruptly ends”)
-  — unvocalised sound with ascertainable pitch
-  — sound of unspecified pitch
-  — *kylyhakh* (short, accented fleeting sound),
-  — pulsating quarter notes, eighth notes, or sixteenth notes in irregular, changing meter
-  — breath
-  — suppression of sound
-  — a small increase in length
-  — a small decrease in length

### Music-related materials and characteristics in olonkho

The verbal and poetic content of the text is tightly connected to the sound-production aspect of olonkho, with the characters of the story each having their own motifs, formulas, intonation, timbre, and styles of singing integrated into the warp and woof of the musical fabric. Sonically, olonkho resembles other types of Turkic-rooted musics in its strong aesthetic focus on timbre; Sakha ethnomusicologists draw parallels between the sonic materials of ornamented Sakha song and the bifurcated sound produced by the throat-singing techniques of Tuvans and Mongolians (Larionova 2010).

Valentina Suzukei, a Tuvan ethnomusicologist, points out that “sonic texture” is the primary aesthetic of throat singing, jaw harp playing, and the timbre of many Central Asian string instruments (Levin 2006, 72). These sonic textures (timbres) are reflected in

traditional Sakha vocal and instrument musical expressions.<sup>38</sup> Levin and Suzukei contend that although some ethnomusicologists claim “timbre-centered sound-making... represents a protomusical form that antedates the rise of melody (or more generally, fixed pitch-height) as a musical organizing principle ... no hard evidence supports such a claim” (2006, 58).

Olonkho is a unique genre of Sakha art, in that both of the two major traditional song styles, *dègèrèn* and *dièrètii*, are used in the olonkho soundscape. In order to appreciate these song styles, one needs to understand the use of *kylyhakh* (ornamentation), a unique feature of Sakha traditional song. *Kylyhakh* is one of the markers of the traditional “exalted” style of Sakha singing.<sup>39</sup> It is notoriously difficult to describe in all of its complexity. Sakha ethnomusicologist Anna Larionova describes it as “a system of guttural overtones; a complex conglomerate of ornaments. It can be expressed in a variety of ways—vibrato, grace notes, glissandi, fleeting tones, and flageolet” (2010). Alekseyev’s description in *The Mighty Êr Sogotokh* is excellent, effectively employing visual metaphors to impart a sense of its essential characteristics:

...*kylyhakhi* are short, accented flageolets, and are worth a special mention, as they are characteristic of Yakut epic singing. *Kylyhakhi* are distinctive in their high, clear timbre, like a sharp twinkle that shimmers, as if from far away, like a spark, layered onto the sound of the fundamental melody, frequently giving the

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<sup>38</sup> The multi-media element is included in this research to exemplify the sonic textures of traditional Sakha musical expression and the olonkho performance tradition in particular (see Appendix H). For a brief overview to both the *narrative-poetry recitation* mode and the *song* mode of olonkho, see the “Reshetnikov olonkho performance montage” video on the accompanying DVD or at <http://vimeo.com/37039828>. This 48-second video clip demonstrates short alternating phrases of these two modes from a performance by master olonkhosut Pyotr Reshetnikov. This performer was especially chosen for highlighting because he is the recipient of a special governmental stipend for his role as a “carrier” of traditional improvised olonkho performance. For a more extended look at the interaction between the two modes, a longer, 50-minute fragment of an olonkho by Reshetnikov is also available on the DVD or at <http://vimeo.com/33506962>.

<sup>39</sup> The plural in Sakha is *kylyhakhtar* but when quoted in Russian text, it is normally given the Russian plural form: *kylyhakhi*.

illusion of a bifurcation of the singing voice. Decorating and embroidering the sound, it imparts to Yakut song an inimitable texture.<sup>40</sup> (1996, 56)

**11. Песня духа-хозяйки долины**

1. Э - э - э - э      2. Тыа дьаа-лы

буол-лу -      нууй!

3. Бос-хо      ха-ра тыа-бын

4. Моой-доох ба-һы-нан      кyo-тар

5. Мо-гул ку-гас      6. Мо-дун Эр Со-го-тох...

Figure 2.2: *Kylyhakh* notated: “Song of the Spirit of the Valley” (*Ėr Sogotokh*)<sup>41</sup>

In the notated example of the “Song of the Spirit of the Valley” (Figure 2.2), the *kylyhakh* is notated using small noteheads. *Kylyhakh* is found in both of the two primary traditional songs styles of the Sakha (*dègèrèn* and *dièrètii*), but is more prominent and

<sup>40</sup> “...характерные для якутского эпического пения краткие акцентные призывки — *кылыһахи*. О них стоит сказать особо. Кылысахи, выделяющиеся своим высоким и чистым тембром, подобные то острому, сверкающему удару, то мерцающим, словно в отдалении, искрам, наслаиваются на звучание основной мелодии, зачастую рождая иллюзию раздвоения поющего голоса. Украшая и расцвечивая его, они придают якутскому пению неповторимое своеобразие” (Alekseyev 1996, 56).

<sup>41</sup> Notated example from Alekseyev (1996, 58-59). Notated by N. N. Nikolayeva.  
<http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work20.html>. Accessed January 23, 2012. Used by permission.  
 [See DVD]

commonly visible in *dièrètii*, the song style most commonly associated with olonkho.<sup>42</sup>

The following section examines these two styles and their use in olonkho, defining them and giving examples of both what they sound like and how they can be notated.

### *Unmetered song style (dièrètii)*

The *dièrètii* song style is characterized as unmetered, exalted, solemn, ceremonial, ornate, drawn-out, smooth or flowing. It has structural and rhythmic freedom as well as the other, more typical Sakha modal elements such as whole-tone scales (with their characteristic tritone interval) and the unique “unfolding mode” of Sakha traditional song (Grigorian 1957; Alekseyev 1969, 117; Larionova 2004, 5).<sup>43</sup> Characteristically abundant with *kylyhakh*, songs of the *dièrètii* style are improvisatory in form. The affective content of *dièrètii* song is largely heroic, grand, majestic, and imposing, “a special technique, a manner of vocalizing poetic improvisation” (Larionova 2004, 12).<sup>44</sup>

The most characteristic genre of the *dièrètii* song style is the *toyuk*, which is employed both in olonkho performance and separately from olonkho; it is widely perceived as the most inimitable, characteristic genre of Sakha song. In olonkho it is used to sing the direct speech of the “good” characters. These protagonists, represented in the

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<sup>42</sup> For other notated examples of *kylyhakh*, see <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work20.html>. Accessed February 22, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Alekseyev (1976; quoted from [www.eduard.alekseyev.org](http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org)) explains these modal distinctive in terms of “unfolding modes” in which “the distance between the neighboring tones of the tune can vary to extremely wide margins, from a whole tone interval to ... even a tritone in its ‘unfolding.’ The latter is usually connected to an increase in emotional energy, often visible within the parameters of one song. In general, the width of the intonational step is generally related to the character of the personage being sung and the tessitura of the tune.” [“раскрывающихся ладов” – расстояние между соседними (смежными) ступенями напева может варьировать в весьма широких пределах — от целотонного промежутка (расстояние в один тон) до более чем двухтонового или далее большего (тритонового) его “раскрытия”. Последнее связано обычно с подъёмом эмоционального тонуca, нередко отмечаемым и в пределах одной песни. В целом, ширина интонационного шага так или иначе соотносится с характером поющего персонажа и с высотным положением напева.”].

<sup>44</sup> “Стиль *дьиэрэтии ырыа* представляет собой особую технику, способ озвучивания поэтической импровизации” (Larionova 2004, 12).

*dièrètii* style, can be either humans or good spirits (*aiyy*) from the Upper World (Alekseyev 1996, 48). As the direct speech of the heroic characters is sung in the style of *dièrètii*, it “helps the listener to understand his inner life, revealing his solemn and noble character” (Larionova 2010).

There are two geographically-centered “schools” of Sakha *dièrètii* song—the central region, near the Lena River, and the Vilyui River basin. These two regions have different performance practices for *dièrètii*. In the Vilyui region, there is a characteristic distinctness of rhythmic pronunciation and a general lack of long, sung-out words. The Vilyui singer quickly and distinctly sets forth the contents of the song like a pronouncement. In the Lena River region, however, *dièrètii* is characterized by profuse *kylyhakh* ornamentation and drawn-out words. The typical Lena area singer, in a considerably slower manner than the Vilyui singer, “wings it all out,” ornamenting and drawing out each syllable of the text (Alekseyev 1969, 117-118).<sup>45</sup>

#### *Melodic-rhythmic song style (dègèrèn)*

The other major singing style, *dègèrèn*, is performed in an ordinary voice in precise rhythm. In *dègèrèn*, the normal speech rhythm of the improvised text is subordinate to the rhythm of the *dègèrèn* song formulae (Larionova 2010). In *olonkho*, it expresses the songs of some of the protagonists, but is also used for the direct speech of the female demons and shamans, as well as the comic trickster-slave figures (Alekseyev 1996, 53; Larionova 2004, 54). The celestial goddess *Aiyy Umsuur* sings in the *dègèrèn* style, reflecting her measured and harmonious character (Larionova 2010).

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<sup>45</sup> See also <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/work26.html>: “Если вилюйский певец быстро и чётко излагает содержание песни (*этэн ыллыыр* — «поёт, выговаривая»), то приленский певец значительно медленнее «расходует» текст (*тардан ыллыыр* — «поёт, украшая, растягивая каждый слог»).”

Larionova, in her book on the *dègèrèn* song style, defines it this way: “*Dègèrèn* song is... established on a strictly organized metrical rhythm with a developed, clear-cut, well-defined, structurally looping, individualized melos” (2000, 37).<sup>46</sup> The texts used in the *dègèrèn* style follow the normal tendencies of Sakha poetry, with seven, eight, or nine syllables as well as abundant alliteration. The alliteration is expressed in both vowel and consonant agreement, sometimes at the beginning of the lines, but also within the lines themselves. As in all Sakha verbal arts, “good” texts (the most expressive texts) have literary devices such as epithets, metaphors, and hyperbole (Larionova 2000, 39).

Regarding pitch, “the tunes in *dègèrèn* style are differentiated by their larger intervallic content and wider tessitura, visibly transcending the comparatively modest pitch norms of the *toyuks*” (Alekseyev 1996, 54).<sup>47</sup> Among the Sakha, the majority of everyday and lyrical songs are performed in the melodic *dègèrèn* style and include many genres: *ohuokhai* (round dances), love songs, songs about nature, lullabies, play songs, work songs, *tüösüü yryata* (love songs in which a man or a woman addresses their beloved), *tangalai yryata* (palatal songs), *khambargha yryata* (throat songs), comic songs, and sung *chabyrgakhtar*<sup>48</sup> (tongue twisters). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a distinctive national choral style grew out of the *dègèrèn* style, as did streams of modern Sakha popular song.

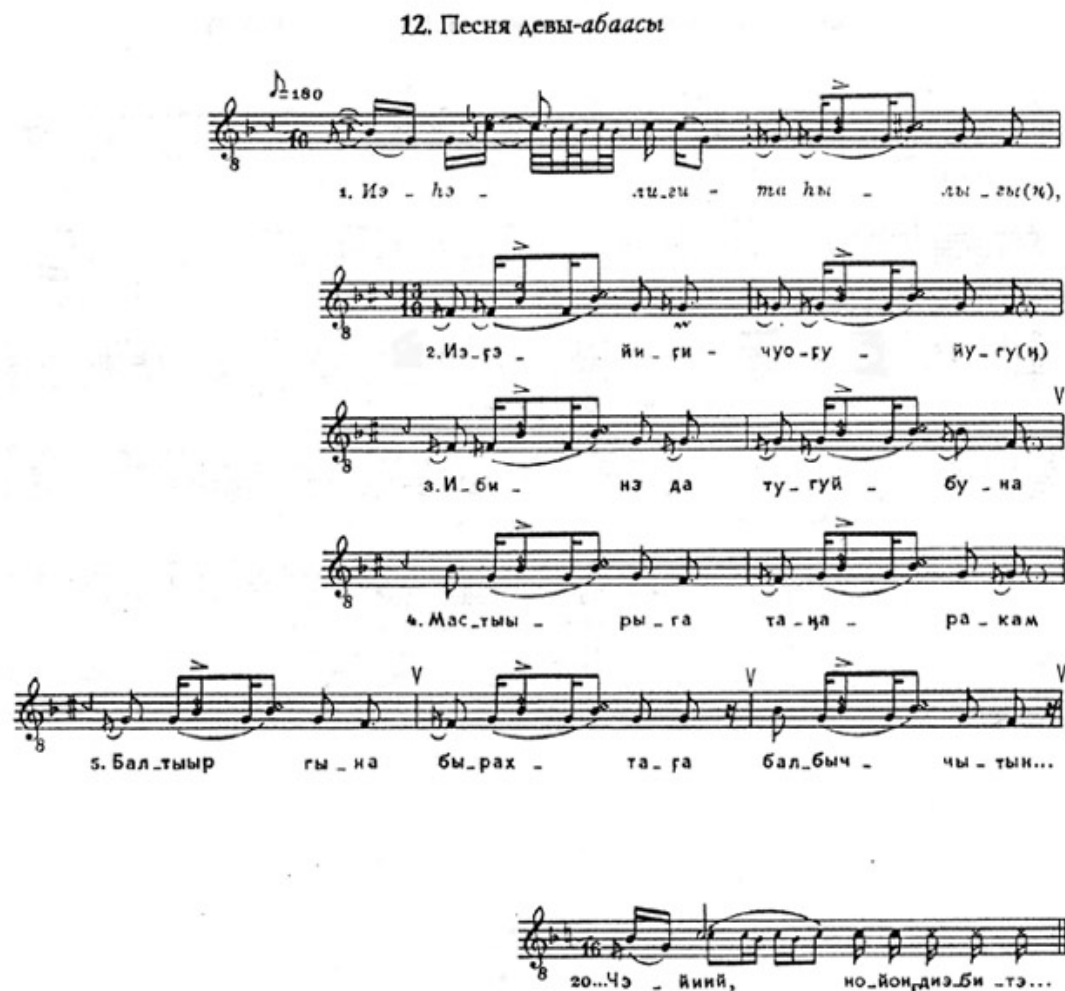
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<sup>46</sup> “Дэгэрэн ырыа...основанный на строго организованной метроритмике и развитой, рельефно очерченной, структурно замкнутой индивидуализированной мелодике” (Larionova 2000, 36).

<sup>47</sup> “Со звуковысотной точки зрения, напевы дэгэрэн выделяются бóльшим ступеневым составом и более широким диапазоном, заметно превосходящим сравнительно скромные звуковысотные нормы тойуков” (Alekseyev 1996, 54).

<sup>48</sup> –*tar* is the Sakha plural suffix.

12. Песня девы-абаасы



1. Иэ - лэ - ли-ги - та-лы - лы-зы(х),

2. Иэ-гэ - йи-ги - чуо-гу - йу-гу(х)

3. И-би - нэ да ту-гуй - бу-на

4. Мас-ты - ры-га та-ча - ра-кам

5. Бал-тыр - ги-на бы-рах - та-га бал-быч - чы-тын...

20...Чэ - йий, но-йон-диз-би-тэ...

Figure 2.3: *Dégèrèn* style: “Song of the Girl-Demons” (*Er Sogotokh*)<sup>49</sup>

Although *kylyhakh* is more commonly identified with the *dièrètii* style of song, it also appears in *dégèrèn* as well and is thus characteristic of much of Sakha music (Figure 2.3).

Pronounced and multi-pitched *kylyhakh*i appear like separate ornamented accents on particular beats in the motifs and formulas of *dégèrèn*. At other times they blend expressively with the vocal vibrato. [... *Kylyhakh* is] integral to the national singing culture of the Yakuts, and for the art of the Yakut olonkhosuts, is an idiosyncratic method of sound production.<sup>50</sup> (Alekseyev 1996, 56)

<sup>49</sup>Notated example from Alekseyev (1996, 69). Notated by N. N. Nikolayev.  
<http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work20.html>. Accessed January 23, 2012. Used by permission.

[See DVD]

<sup>50</sup> “Отчётливые и разновысотные кылысахи появляются как отдельные украшающие штрихи на определённых долях в мотивах-формулах *дэгэрэн*. Иной раз они выразительно сочетаются с

### The textures of verbal and musical materials in epics

In another analytical approach to the building blocks of the verbal and musical material of epics, Eduard Alekseyev proposes we analyze olonkho with three types of musical texture in mind: R – recitation (or syllabic-based), F – formulaic-melodic, and L – leitmotif.<sup>51</sup> The basic principles drawn from his article (1989) are summarized here:

The first principle, described as “syllabic-based” is illustrated by the Sakha genre *toyuk*, the premier genre in the *dièrètii* song style. In this improvisatory genre, each syllable in the text is elaborated upon using a “tonal-rhythmic micro-formula” with a limited number of variations. The resulting texture of the song is remarkably homogenous. These micro-formulas can be used on any kind of text (in principle, one could sing the phone book), and the result of the florid elaboration is that any text whatsoever becomes singable and even poetic. Alekseyev notes, “This produces a general impression of transcendent, elevated, and majestic epic speech... an inimitable ‘singing recitation’ style.”<sup>52</sup> This recitation style is denoted by the letter (R).<sup>53</sup>

The second kind of musical material in this model is the “formulaic” (F) type.

This formulaic segment (phrase) normally extends the length of one line of text and it has

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голосовым вибрато. Это многообразие кылысахных призывков... неотъемлемых для национальной певческой культуры якутов и для искусства якутских олонхосутов специфических приёмов звукоизвлечения” (Alekseyev 1996, 56).

<sup>51</sup> Alekseyev notes at his site that the original publication of this article, “Toward a typology construction of the musical epos” [K postroeniiu tipologii muzykalnogo èposa] appeared in the edited volume *Muzyka èposa. Statii i materialy* [Music of the Epos: Article and Materials], Ioshkar-Ola, Russia (1989, 24–27). He further notes that significant and frustrating type-setting errors prevented the article from successfully portraying his ideas. The version at his site is thus more accurate and is the version I used to prepare this summary. To access it, see: <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work21.html>.

<sup>52</sup> “Наличествуе лишь обобщённый образ остранный и возвышенной эпической речи... этот принцип порождает своеобразную распевную речитацию” (from the fourth paragraph at the site: <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work21.html>).

<sup>53</sup> In 2010, when I was visiting a meeting of Sakha Christians, I was approached by my friend Irina Anakhina (now Aksënova) who had just discovered this “syllabic step” principle, and was using it to sing the newly-translated Psalter in *toyuk* style. She said, “Pick a psalm, any psalm! I can sing it for you right here and now!” I chose Psalm 67 (Ps. 68 in the Sakha Bible) and the resulting *toyuk*, recorded by my husband William Harris, is on the DVD as well as here: <http://youtube.com/user/siberianethnoarts/>.

a distinct musical meaning characteristic of the culture and/or the particular epic tradition. Although the formulaic segment has some variation from line to line, it is “like a musical cliché that infuses and unifies the entire musical fabric of the epic narrative... able to integrate broad and varying textual content”<sup>54</sup>

One notes that the textures being described in this method increase in size from very small (syllabic) proportions, to lines of text, to the third feature of musical organization, which is what Alekseyev terms “musical theater on an epic foundation.”<sup>55</sup> This level is the “leitmotif-song,” and is indicated by the letter (L). Just as in some operas in the Western tradition, a *leitmotif* (German: leading motif) is “a coherent musical idea... whose purpose is to represent or symbolize a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or any other ingredient in a dramatic work” (Wittall 2012). Since the song material in olonkho is an expression of the direct speech of the characters in the story, this creates a relatively complex texture, with leitmotifs, formulaic segments, and syllabic-based textures all interwoven skillfully into an improvisatory song.

It is important to note the complexity of these textures in the resulting performance of olonkho. Alekseyev comments on their relationship to one another and their interconnectedness: “The R-, F- and L-principles appear both independently from one another as well as interactively, either alternating or synchronically. In regards to order of appearance and degree of complexity they are fairly equal and a strict hierarchy

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<sup>54</sup> “...представляет собой как бы единое мелодическое клише, которое пронизывает и объединяет звучание целостного эпического сказания...способный вмещать обширное и разнообразное текстовое содержание” (from the fifth paragraph at: <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work21.html>).

<sup>55</sup> “Третий принцип музыкальной организации эпоса можно было бы назвать ‘музыкальным театром на эпической основе’” (from the sixth paragraph at: <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work21.html>).

has not formed. Their relationship is contiguous and can be expressed in the following schema”<sup>56</sup> (Figure 2.4):

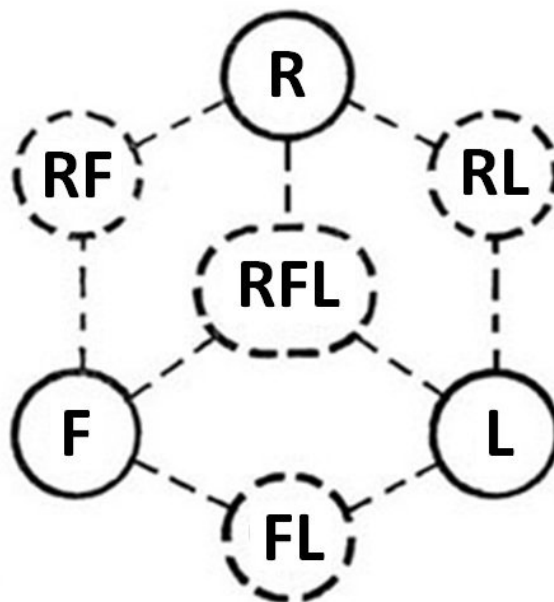


Figure 2.4: RFL Model–Recitation, Formulaic Segment, Leitmotiv

There is one more type of material in the epos—a “zero” type, or non-melodic “recitation” or “recounting” (C). In addition to this last type of material, the model elaborates on one more important characteristic; the permeable boundaries and interactions between these four elements. This analytical model for the musical materials of the epos is unparalleled, as far as I have been able to determine, in the works of other ethnomusicologists, and deserves further exploration for its application to musical forms other than epos.

<sup>56</sup> “Необходимо подчеркнуть, что Р-, Ф- и Л-принципы проявляют себя как независимо друг от друга, так и во взаимодействии, чередуясь или даже выступая в одновременности. По времени происхождения и степени сложности они достаточно равноценны и строгой иерархии не образуют. Их отношения являются скорее соположными и могут быть отражены в следующей схеме:” (from the seventh paragraph at <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/work21.html>).

In short, olonkho is unusual because it is a “multi-generic genre,” incorporating not only both styles of Sakha traditional song, but also musical elements mixed with other artistic domains such as narrative, poetry, drama, and improvisatory performance (Sivtsev 2003, 17).<sup>57</sup> Larionova writes about the interconnections of verbal and musical in olonkho, stating that “in olonkho we’ve been bequeathed with all the riches and diversity of the poetic and musical folklore of the Sakha people and, in particular, the style of *dièrètii* song, in which the verbal and musical correlate with an interactivity and interdependence in all its components (2004, 55).<sup>58</sup>

This chapter has endeavored to describe the genre of olonkho and to bring to the fore its high level of integration of the *dramatic*, the *spoken*, and the *sung*. As I listened to my respondents and recorded their interviews, I noted that some respondents used the term “sing” when referring to olonkho, while others used the term “tell.” Olonkho is, in fact, a profoundly interactive fusion of both. Alekseyev says it well:

In many languages and, what is particularly important, among bearers of traditional cultures, there are expressions which unmistakably point to the organic link existing between melody and speech: Russian *bylinas* (tales) are not sung but are recounted. Yakut epic singers have an expression, *ètèn yllyyr* (“to sing, uttering the words”).<sup>59</sup> [... Each] culture develops its own sound world, where a spoken word and a sung word are united into a timbre-rhythm-intonation complex which is extremely hard to define by words, but which is empirically well detected. (1989b – in English)

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<sup>57</sup> Further study of the complex relations between the musical and verbal aspects of olonkho has much to offer researchers of other epos traditions, primarily due to the burgeoning of academic research and writing on the topic of folklore (and olonkho in particular) in Yakutia. The growing number of Russian-language musicology, folklore, and philology-related volumes written on the topic of olonkho would provide new insights for the field of epic studies, if the geographical and linguistic boundaries could be overcome. I hope that the insights of my Sakha colleagues chosen for highlighting in this chapter will inspire other researchers of epics to become better acquainted with this material.

<sup>58</sup> “В олонхо передано все богатство и разнообразие поэтического и музыкального фольклора народа саха и в частности, стиль пения *дьиэрэтии ырыа*, в котором вербальное и музыкальное начала соотносятся во взаимодействии и взаимозависимости всех компонентов” (2004, 55).

<sup>59</sup> In personal correspondence dated January 25, 2012, Alekseyev remarks that this term in Sakha, *ètèn yllyyr* (*этэн ыллыыр*), is in Russian: поёт, выговаривая (see <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/work26.html>).

In summary, the interactivity between the various facets of olonkho performance; the verbal, musical, dramatic, narrative, poetic, improvisatory, interactive, and emergent factors, all combine to make olonkho an incredibly complex multi-generic genre. Its complexity is likely one of the biggest factors contributing to its attenuation, because the one-person theater is an art not easily achieved, especially in modern Sakha life.

With the primary musical and verbal components of olonkho outlined, I turn to the primary task of this research—understanding changes in the reception and performance of olonkho over time. The historical approach of the next two chapters assists us in understanding the *process* of change—to what degree it has happened, and in what directions the change is moving.

## CHAPTER 3

### OLONKHO BEFORE AND DURING THE SOVIET UNION

#### Why an historical approach?

Timothy Rice, in his article “Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology,” calls for a renewed look at the role of historical approaches in research, explaining that historical construction encompasses both “the process of change with the passage of time and the process of reencountering and recreating the forms and legacy of the past in each moment of the present” (1987, 474). In order to more deeply understand the current ways Sakha people are reencountering and recreating the forms and legacies of olonkho, this project provides an historical perspective of olonkho performance. This information is drawn largely from archival work and field interviews. It outlines the contexts, performers, audiences, and content of olonkho during the period preceding the arrival of Soviet power in Yakutia, as well as during and after communist rule. This historical foundation provides lenses for better comprehension of the process of change in olonkho, and leads to ways of understanding its possible future paths.

In an adaptation of a tripartite model conceptualize by Rice (2003), I have structured my research questions and data reporting around the framework of *time*, *place*, and *event*. The first element, *time*, is divided into two chapters and organized around what the data reveals as the watershed historical event for cultural revitalization in Yakutia—the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This event (and the sea-change in attitudes leading up to it) laid the groundwork for a wide-spread cultural renewal, which in turn

provided the political and cultural environment in Yakutia necessary for supporting an effort to revitalize olonkho. This effort was launched in the form of a successful bid for olonkho to be recognized by UNESCO as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” These two chapters thus address, largely in the words, opinions, and memories of my Sakha respondents, the relative political, social, cultural, religious, and musical influences of the various periods, emphasizing in particular the nodes of change which, in their perception, had the strongest impact on the decline and revitalization of olonkho performance.

In addition, these historical chapters speak to the second facet, *place*, which I interpret to encompass the changing contexts of olonkho performance practice, including categories related to “individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual” spaces (Rice 2003, 12). I show the ways in which these shifting spaces reflected and influenced the way olonkho was conceptualized, created and/or re-created, and performed. Finally, in relation to the third element, *event*, I portray the performers, audiences, content, and contexts of olonkho as they changed over time. While Rice’s model (2003) used *metaphor* as the third element, I describe the olonkho performance *event* as it changed over time and moved from one space to other spaces, providing grounded projections for diverging possible futures for olonkho.

A fundamental methodology in my research has been the extensive interviews carried out during fieldwork. These ethnographic interviews expand on the data available in Russian and Sakha-language literature on olonkho’s historical performance practice. I believe that field interviews have proven especially important, as they often reflect a more transparent view of the relationship between Sakha people and their Russian

context (in both the Soviet and post-Soviet realities) than published works from the Soviet-era which were subject to government censorship, a phenomenon noted by David Haas in an introduction to his translation of Asafyev's *Symphonic Etudes* (2008, xvii–xx).

In the following historical sections, I will first address issues of orality and literacy as well as worldview and values, as these themes are important for tracking the process of change for olonkho reception and performance from pre-Soviet times to the present. Following that, while including references to relevant historical literature, I will endeavor to present an historical narrative primarily by foregrounding the accounts and perspectives of my Sakha respondents in a roughly diachronic manner. I found their personal accounts gripping in their intensity, delightfully and transparently human, innovative in their insight, and at times divergent in their opinions, reminding us as observers that a multiplicity of perspectives can often bring a broader, more nuanced understanding of historical events.

### Orality, literacy, and the early olonkhosuts

To understand the nature of olonkho performance during the pre-Soviet years, it is crucial to note the tradition's oral roots. Jan Vansina describes an oral tradition as “testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to the next or more” (1971, 444). Many of the olonkho stories tell of a time before the Sakha moved to the north, during their early history in southern Siberia. Khazanov explains:

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, or even earlier, their ancestors migrated from the Lake Baikal area to the middle Lena River and the lower Viliui and Aldan Rivers, and then gradually spread to the Arctic Ocean shores, assimilating some indigenous ethnic groups along their way. (1993, 176)

The early roots of olonkho are deeply connected to these centuries of migration in which oral transmission was the norm. Dmitry Sivtsev (1906-2006), was known by Sakha people as a great intellect and one of their greatest writers to live into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>60</sup>

In writing about olonkho's oral foundations, he remarks,

By the will of destiny, the Sakha people were forced out by the hordes of Genghis Khan into the wild, far-off North, and left for ages without writing. But their powerful spiritual culture, forming over the period of many centuries, freely developed a form of oral folk poetry, passing along from one generation to another, and in this way the great Olonkho came into existence.<sup>61</sup> (2003, 21)

The high level of orality in Sakha culture was perfect soil for olonkho development and transmission (Okladnikov 1970, 263–264). It is important to emphasize the oral milieu surrounding Yakutia's olonkhosuts because, as Albert Lord concludes from his research:

When writing is introduced and begins to be used for the same purposes as the oral narrative song, when it is employed for telling stories and is widespread enough to find an audience capable of reading, this audience seeks its entertainment and instruction in books rather than in the living songs of men and the older art gradually disappears. (2000, 20)

The transition from orality to literacy is described by Yuri Zhegusov and Dekabrina Vinokurova, co-workers at the Institute for Humanitarian Research and the Indigenous Peoples of the North (IGI), who have been researching olonkho's history and reception since 2004. Zhegusov reported to me that because of the lack of literacy, the epic *sreda* (milieu) before the Soviet Union was more conducive to oral tradition than it is today:

Now society has changed, yes? In the past, they lived without mass media and could not read. [...] Only about 2 percent of the [Sakha] people could read before the revolution. People interacted with one another orally. Olonkhosuts went from *alaas* to *alaas* and were in great demand. They didn't have books. [DK: And even if they did, they didn't read them!] So life was rather tough; it was a difficult life.

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<sup>60</sup> See [http://www.yakutiatoday.com/people/suorun\\_omolloon.shtml](http://www.yakutiatoday.com/people/suorun_omolloon.shtml) for a short biography.

<sup>61</sup> “По воле судеб народ саха, будучи оттесненным ордами Чингисхана на далекий и дикий Север, надолго остался без письменности, но его мощная духовная культура, складывавшаяся в течение многих веков, свободно развивалась в виде устной народной поэзии, передаваемой от поколения к поколению и появилось великое Олонхо” (Sivtsev 2003, 21).

The life expectancy was very short, only about 30 years. If you were 30 years old, you were considered to be an old person. There was no such thing as “old age”! [DK: The infant mortality rate was very high.] Out of 10 children, one would survive. In these kinds of conditions, olonkho was performed. They would come and perform—there were all kinds of masters who performed—and the performances would last up to three days, singing after work, during the night...

The language of that time was more rich than it is now. It was much different then... people spoke with imagery, and to listen to an olonkho took not only strength and energy on the part of the olonkhosut, but strength and energy on the part of the listeners. The listeners were ready to do this; to delve deep into that world. People speculate things like, “Soviet power came and ruined it all,” ...but the deal is that during the Soviet years, olonkho was put into written form.<sup>62</sup>

Vinokurova noted: “You know, philosophers say that the change to written format is the ‘straight path to being forgotten!’”<sup>63</sup>

The coming Russian Revolution of 1917 was to have a complex and somewhat contradictory affect on Sakha language use in Yakutia. In the short term, it would result in both increasing Sakha language use (because of early post-Revolution literacy efforts) but decreasing its use in the long-term, particularly in important areas such as valuing orality and verbal arts. Soviet-era writers emphasized the early gains for Sakha language and downplayed the Russification that came later. For example, Soviet ethnographers Tokarev and Gurvich, in reflecting back on the transition to the Soviet period, write about some early gains in literacy after the Revolution:

When Yakutiya received its autonomy [in 1922] by a decision of the Council of Ministers of the Yakut ASSR, instruction in primary schools was changed to the Yakut language. This made it easier for Yakut schoolchildren to master their subjects. From 1933 to 1947, about 400 book titles were published in the Yakut language in overall editions of several million copies.... in 1942 Yakutiya celebrated the end of illiteracy among the adult population. (1964, 298)

This citation is an example of the ways in which the “history” written during Soviet years shows the censorship it underwent in order to be published, as only the positive is

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with scholars Dekabrina Vinokurova and Yuri Zhegulov in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 13, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>63</sup> Zhegusov and Vinokurova, 2011. [See DVD]

highlighted and the negatives are de-emphasized. For example, while the early Soviet policy on language developed the use of minority languages (including them in the public school system and other aspects of both public and private life), beginning in 1938, the pendulum swung in the direction of universalizing Russian. This was overtly touted as a means to unify all the Russian peoples in preparation for war with Germany, but the drive toward Russification continued unabated after the World War Two (Schiffman 2002; Balzer 2006, 582).

In summary, one of the key explanations for flourishing traditions like olonkho during the pre-Soviet area was the widespread use of oral (rather than literary) means of communication. The push toward literacy, beginning with Sakha language literacy and eventually Russian language literacy, all had an increasingly negative effect on the oral and verbal arts. Even Soviet-era anthropologists realized that the Soviet ideal of 100 percent literacy would have had a detrimental effect on the epic *sreda* necessary for olonkho to thrive. For example, Okladnikov, in his classic tome *Yakutia before its Incorporation into the Russian State*, points out with insight that “writing and literacy [are] factors that could have had a corrupting influence on epic creativity, acted on it, changed its content, and wholly displaced epic works by more...literary models” (1970, 263–64).

Eduard Alekseyev studied olonkho during the Soviet era, and his comments emphasize the decline in the reception of olonkho after the Revolution, noting in particular the ways in which audiences preferences moved away from strictly oral performance to mediated and written versions:

I think that the problem lies in the audience. There used to be an environment during those times when everyone believed in [olonkho], and listened to it. That

was replaced by everything that we have now—radio, television, and concerts, as well as the written form of olonkho. When everything [about olonkho] was well-known and published and people were just repeating what was already in print, it destroyed the world that existed in the olonkho.<sup>64</sup>

Several of my interviews with some of the last remaining olonkhosuts in Yakutia confirm his assertions. The most frequently mentioned reasons for the decline center around the changes in the audience. A large part of that change has included a decline in orality that has occurred since the pre-Soviet period.

The changes in audiences had an affect, in turn, on the numbers of olonkhosuts and the length of their performances. The number of skilled olonkhosuts during the pre-Revolutionary period will never be known for sure, but according to researchers in Yakutia, they were especially concentrated in a few regions, one of which was the Tatta *ulus* (region), but were also spread throughout the rest of the republic.<sup>65</sup> Zakharova and Protodiakonova report that “according to the research data, the ‘Tatta School’ of olonkhosuts was being formed by the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Each *nasleg* (county) had a handful of olonkhosuts.<sup>66</sup> According to the archival and written sources available to us today, there have been more than 700 olonkhosuts (in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), including both past and present, testifying to a true flowering of this oral tradition in the past” (2010, 22).<sup>67</sup>

One of the Tatta olonkhosuts, Pyotr Reshetnikov, was born in 1929, shortly after the long arm of Soviet power had finally established its hold on Yakutia. He told of the

<sup>64</sup> Interview with scholar Eduard Alekseyev in Malden, Massachusetts, on May 18, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>65</sup> An interactive map of the uluses in Yakutia with lists of olonkhosuts according to region can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/mapofolonkhosuts> (from the site [www.olonkho.info](http://www.olonkho.info)). Accessed January 22, 2012.

<sup>66</sup> *Handful*: “десятки” or “tens” in the original Russian.

<sup>67</sup> “По данным исследователей «таттинская школа» олонхосутов начала слагаться со второй половины XVIII в. В каждом наслеге проживало по десятке олонхосутов. Сегодня нами пописьменным и архивным источникам выявлено свыше 700 олохосутов (XVII-XXI вв.) прошлого и настоящего, что свидетельствует о подлинном расцвете этой устной традиции в прошлом” (Zakharova and Protodiakonova 2010, 22).

process of the creation and the reception of his first two olonkhos, emphasizing the flexible length of the olonkho performance and the important role of improvisation, not just in the performance of olonkhos learned from others, but in expanding and shaping the olonkhos he created:

My first olonkho [“The Great-Hearted Lord Juragastai, Hero-Warrior”]<sup>68</sup> was criticized for having a *bogaty*r (warrior-hero) who was too much of a humanitarian Yakut warrior—he allowed his evil spirit opponent to live. They told me that these kinds of olonkhos don’t exist. So then I created a second olonkho with a very angry, harsh, fierce man. This time I didn’t leave anyone alive among his enemies. All of his enemies were destroyed! That is the way the second olonkho was created. This long olonkho is about 10 hours each time I sing it, if I extend it out, of course. The length and performance of olonkho depends on the abilities of the olonkhosut himself. As he performs, he extends the olonkho, adding new subject-matter.<sup>69</sup>

The length of performance times was a repeated theme in my conversations with Reshetnikov; he made it clear that he prefers to have his performance time unlimited. He stressed that if he is given the attention due him, the audience’s reward for their good listening skills is a longer olonkho. This demonstrates how in an oral tradition such as olonkho, chronological space, as well as the physical environment of the performance, influences the emergent olonkho, making it longer and more personally fulfilling for the olonkhosut. This parallels other epic forms as well, as demonstrated by the research of Parry and Lord. Lord observes in his study of the Southern Yugoslav epics that “the essential element of the occasion of singing that influences the form of the poetry is the variability and instability of the audience... the length of the song depends upon the audience” (2000, 16–17).

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<sup>68</sup> Russian: «Великодушный Айыы Дьурагастай богатырь» (Velikodushniy Aiyy Djuragastai Bogatyr). Transliterated Sakha: “Ahynygas sanaalaakh Aiyy Djuraghastai bukhatyryr.”

<sup>69</sup> Interview with master olonkhosut Pyotr Reshetnikov in Cherkëkh, Yakutia, on June 16, 2009. [See DVD]

One of the questions often asked in regard to oral (as opposed to written) epics is the level of historical accuracy in the stories. There is a broad range of opinion among Sakha scholars on this question. Although Seroshevskii's 1896 volume mentions a progenitor of the Sakha tribes named Èr Sogotokh-Èllei (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1993, 451), a figure who is featured in a popular olonkho tale, most agree that the historicity of olonkho is not the central issue in regard to its value for Sakha people. Sivtsev states,

The historicity which exists in the “Manas” or “David of Sassoun” [Armenian epic] is not present in the Yakut olonkho. ... The historical character of olonkho is expressed in its general reflection of the culture, values, past history, geographical environment, and the spiritual and material culture of the ethnic Sakha.<sup>70</sup> (2003, 17)

I am inclined to agree that it is not historicity, as such, that made olonkho a prized genre for Sakha people during the pre-Revolutionary period. It is more likely, according to my respondents, that olonkho during this time had a strong connection to Sakha worldviews and values.

### Olonkho as embodiment of worldview and values

Olonkho's early role in embodying Sakha worldview and values provides a key to understanding the changes which were to take place in olonkho performance during the Soviet era. Vinokurova, in commenting on the pre-Revolutionary period, asserts that “olonkho developed widely as a grassroots phenomenon, gathering and displaying spiritual values, fundamental conceptions of worldview, as well as of the environment and societal experience of the people, in other words, fulfilling one of the most important

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<sup>70</sup> “Той историчности, которая есть в ‘Манасе’ или в ‘Давиде Сасунском’, в якутском олонхо нет... Из исторических лиц упоминается лишь имя одного Чингис-хана, и то только как образ рока. Исторический характер олонхо заключается в общем отражении быта, нравов, пережитой истории, географической среды, духовной и материальной культуры этноса саха” (Sivstev 2003, 17).

functions of intangible culture” (2007, 109). Because of its strong connection to a Sakha worldview that was spiritual in nature, thus clashing with Soviet ideals, it was not generally supported by the central Soviet powers, even when other Sakha expressions of the arts were encouraged. In general, “Soviet ideology tried to avoid religious discourse altogether. Yet the imposed model of cultural change placed heavy pressure on the Siberian indigenous peoples’ worldview” (Leete 2005, 233).

Reshetnikov reflected on some of those issues, commenting that worldview, including cultural values and beliefs about spiritual realities, are an important characteristic of olonkho:

Olonkho includes all the traditions, beliefs, and customs of the Yakut people, everything, their life. In the person of the *bogatyr* (warriors), they create their heroes. Olonkho is long. It recounts not only the battle between two worlds, the middle world and the lower world, but it also includes the life of the upper world, the heavenly kingdom, where our Creators live, those who help those living on the Earth, on our planet, so they could vanquish unclean powers of the lower world and the devil.

The life of the Yakut people used to depend on nature. All of it! If it was a good year for the harvest, the lives of the people got better. If there was a good hunt, or good fishing, their lives also got better and they became richer. So they worship before the High God of the heavenly kingdom, *Ürüing Aiy Toyon*, who created the earth and all of them, the human race. Olonkho starts with this—the creation of the middle earth, the human race, and how their lives developed.

In short, an olonkhosut tells about the efforts of the Yakut people toward a better life. So Yakut people are victorious over the hindrances of the lower world and invisible powers and spirits, and continue on to the most wonderful and rich life. So olonkho has a very deep purpose, not just for Yakut people, but as the dream and the strivings of all people on Earth. So that is why it has become so valued, and olonkho became acknowledged worldwide as a masterpiece of artistic literature. Oral artistic literature.<sup>71</sup>

Worldview is a powerful force, and Soviet atheistic ideology, while outwardly encouraging some aspects of cultural identity and creativity, marginalized olonkho for many periods during the 1900s. One scholar of Soviet history observes wryly,

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<sup>71</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

“Communism, as a secular religion, was much more jealous than any sacred one”  
(Khazanov1993, 185).

Many Russians, as well as Western researchers who write about olonkho, assume there is a close connection between the traditional Sakha shamanistic beliefs and olonkho, noting that olonkho integrates a spiritual-physical worldview with a belief in demons, good spirits, a creator God, and three levels of the cosmos (upper world, middle world, and lower world). But as I interacted with a wide variety of Sakha people, I learned that there does not appear to be a general consensus among Sakha people about the degree to which olonkho is connected to shamanism.

The literature on olonkho, as well as the responses I received in interviews, is diverse. In fact, one group interview with olonkho experts and scholars resulted in a brief argument on the subject, with Sakha experts on both sides convinced of their positions. I especially noted that those with Christian worldviews felt the picture of spiritual realities presented in olonkho, while not exactly representing their own, had enough overlap that they resisted a wholesale identification of olonkho with shamanism. For example, Sakha intellectual and literary giant Dmitri Sivtsev became a Christian late in life. He loved olonkho and argued it was not tied inextricably to shamanism, writing:

The myths of olonkho do not have anything in common with the religious shamanistic mythology of the Yakuts. The people themselves attest to this, as do the olonkhosuts, and even the ministers of the cult themselves, the shamans, don't accept the myths of the olonkho... which are artistic compilations and inspired, ingenious symbols. It is my conviction that all this, these broad poetic constructions of threatening powers of verse and society, battling, on one hand between themselves and on the other, battling against man, created in the image of God... [is about a hero] who is always victorious, always conquering them on behalf of the good of mankind.<sup>72</sup> (2003, 18)

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<sup>72</sup> “Но мифы олонхо ничего общего не имеют с религиозной шаманской мифологией якутов. Об этом свидетельствует сам народ, сами олонхосуты, а с другой стороны – служители культа – шаманы не признавали мифов олонхо...по сути художественные обобщения и гениальные символы.

Sivstev's opinions are supported by historical records from more than a century ago. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Seroshevskii wrote that the *abasy* (evil spirits) in olonkho should not be confused with the shamanic *abasy*, citing a personal conversation with a shaman from Namskii ulus in 1890 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1993, 590–591). Furthermore, Seroshevskii felt that the most powerful idea in olonkho was not so much centered on the gods (or even fate), but on the power of the living, active, human will (592).

In short, it is difficult to know for sure the answer to the question of the connection between shamanism and olonkho. Certainly, there were some olonkhosuts who were also shamans, but this does not mean the worldviews were alike. There is, however, universal agreement that olonkho reflects, in a broad and prototypical way, the best ideals and worldview of the Sakha people in centuries past. On this, Sivtsev writes:

The idea of olonkho, this classic heritage of the North, is rich and deep. In its images and symbols, centuries-old issues which have challenged humankind throughout history are presented and explored. These are the issues of life and death, the issue of the victory of man over the enemies of society and nature, the issue of destruction... the issues of the celebration of love and the happiness of people, the children of the Sun, all the tribes of creation.<sup>73</sup> (2003, 20)

These are the issues that touch worldview. And most important, the question of “who is man?” is addressed in olonkho. In the Sakha olonkho, we see a view of mankind in which “man is not a slave of nature, but is a tsar, a sovereign, a conqueror of nature through his

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По моему убеждению, все это – широкие поэтические обобщения грозных сил стихии и общества, борющихся, с одной стороны, между собой, а с другой стороны – борьбы с ними богоподобного человека, противораставляющего себя им, побеждающего, покоряющего их ради блага всего человеческого рода” (Sivstev 2003, 18).

<sup>73</sup> “Идея олонхо, этого классического наследия Севера, богата и глубока. В его образах и символах ставятся и разрешаются вековые проблемы, волноввшие человечество на всем протяжении его истории. Эта проблема жизни и смерти, проблема победы человека над враждебными силами общества и природы, проблема уничтожения... проблем торжества любви и счастья людей, детей Солнца, всех племен созидания” (Sivtsev 2003, 20).

indestructible power and wisdom. Man is immortal, even victorious over death”<sup>74</sup>  
(Sivtsev 2003, 20).

Regarding the importance of olonkho’s values and worldview for Sakha people, Mikhailov mused, “[In olonkho we find]... great values which were preserved, key marks of that which we study and read about until this very day and can’t find, these things are hidden to this day in our heroic epos. Probably our generation and even our children, the future generation, will find something there.”<sup>75</sup> I conclude from these interviews that there is much in olonkho that resonates with a spectrum of values and spiritual beliefs, just as all archetypal tales do.

#### Olonkho in pre-Soviet times

The performance practice of olonkho was not widely documented in pre-Soviet times, largely because the vast distances from Western Russia to Yakutia in the Siberian North. Boris Mikhailov, a folklore scholar active in revitalizing olonkho and director of *Archy Diètè* (House of Purification), a center for Sakha traditional religion and culture in the city of Yakutsk, bemoaned the paucity of knowledge about olonkho and its performers in the pre-Soviet period:

We don’t know things like... for example, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a true performer, over the period of one year; how much could he recount? Where did he recount, and what were his audiences like? On average, how many times a year would he recount olonkho? This has not been studied yet. Also, the geography of where they were located, what was the size of their territory? Because Yakutia is very large.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> “По якутскому олонхо, человек – не раб природы, а царь, владыка, причиняющий ее себе своей несокрушимой мощью и разумом. Человек бессмертен, он побеждает даже смерть” (2003, 20).

<sup>75</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>76</sup> Interview with scholar and olonkho promoter, Boris Mikhailov, in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 13, 2011. [See DVD]

Yakutia is indeed large, roughly the size of India. It is the largest sub-national entity in the world (1.1 million square miles) and one-fifth of Russia's territory (Vasenev 2007).

Figure 3.1 shows the location of Yakutia in relation to the rest of the Russian Federation.

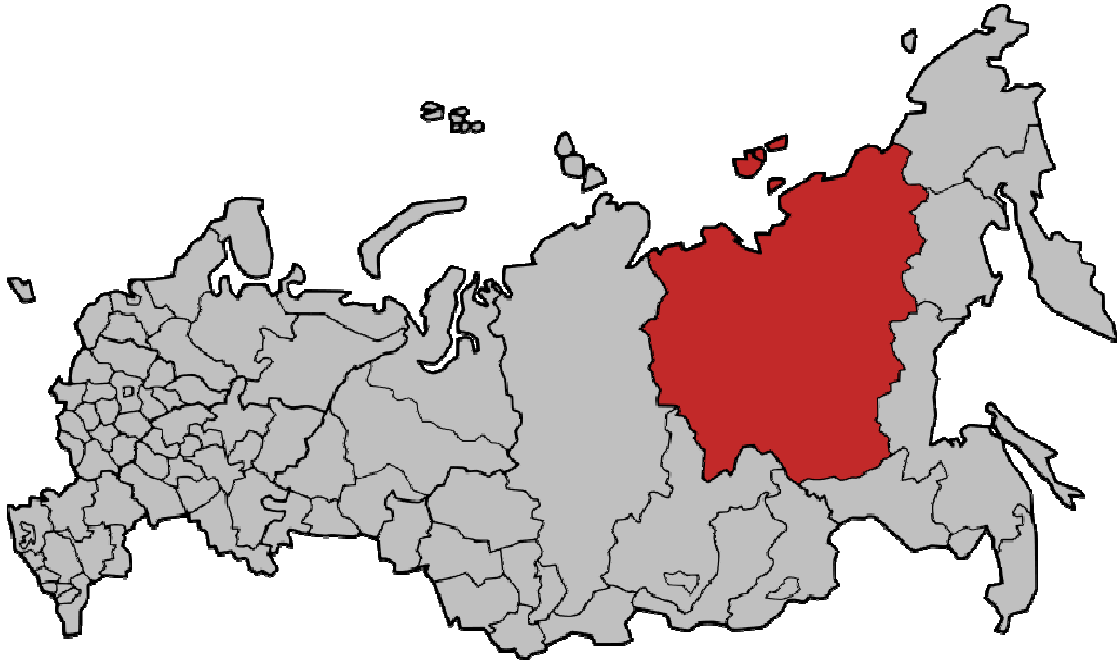


Figure 3.1: Map of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in the Russian Federation<sup>77</sup>

Russia's trans-Siberian rail line, until the last decade, touched only the southern parts of Yakutia. Roads are few—some only open in the winter when the roads freeze, allowing the snow and ice to be bladed into a relatively passable condition for cars. But in the pre-Soviet years, before cars or trains or airplanes, the mode of travel was usually either on the backs of horses or cattle, or animals pulling sledges (Tokarev and Gurvich 1964, 259). Olonkhosuts were described during the pre-Soviet years as traveling bards whose performing space was intimate; the extended family and close friends gathered for

<sup>77</sup> From <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RussiaSakha-Yakutia2007-07.svg>.

the performance around the fireplace in the *balaghan* (see Figure 3.2), a traditional Sakha family dwelling. These spaces, while one could term them “local,” reflected the fact that most Sakha people lived, not in towns but in groups of one to three *balaghans* (usually less than 20 people) in winter, and in groups of five to ten dwellings in their summer camps (Tokarev and Gurvich 1964, 261–262). These dwellings were located on the edge of an *alaas* (small grassy meadow), surrounded by forest and a significant distance from the next small community.



Figure 3.2: *Balaghan* in an outdoor museum near Cherkëkh, Yakutia (June 16, 2009).

Pyotr Reshetnikov was awarded the status of *master olonkhosut* in 2006, shortly after the time of the UNESCO proclamation. He hosted me at his home in Cherkëkh, Tatta *ulus* (region), in 2009. My videotaped interviews with him provided insight into the

life and performance practice of an olonkhosut.<sup>78</sup> When asked about the early history of olonkho, how it was performed up to the early years of the 20th century, he replied:

You have correctly noted that our very best olonkhosuts, great olonkhosuts appeared (were born and lived here and created their olonkhos) in fact at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were hundreds of them in various uluses – they could be found in all of the uluses. The peak of olonkho development was in fact in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the appearance of Soviet power.

One can say that olonkho is a great oral work the creation of individuals – the olonkhosuts. They create a long story, with songs and heroes. The length of an olonkho, they say now, went for three whole days, among the very best olonkhosuts. We have a tradition (among the Yakuts) for listening to olonkho. We don't listen day and night without stopping, but usually after work has finished you sit down and listen to olonkho, after the mid-day meal, for example, and listen into the deep night and it continues sometimes even until the morning. And so if it's three evenings and three nights, you could say that's three whole days.<sup>79</sup>

The intimate space for olonkho performance during this time influenced the way it was conceptualized and performed, because it was an extended event, not to be consumed in one sitting, not even in one long night. Olonkho was a performance for a small circle of friends and family, an adventure (almost like a family vacation) as they entered into the world of olonkho. When I asked Reshetnikov about the attitudes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries toward the olonkhosuts themselves, he responded:

During those days, of course there were no television, radio, things like that, publications (books, journals), so the Yakut people were entertained only by these olonkhos, see? Because an olonkhosut was highly prized, as a creator of beliefs and traditions of his people. At that time there was truly a community of listeners for olonkho. If the olonkhosut traveled from one family (or *balaghan*, as the Yakuts say) to another, all the people who lived in that *balaghan* – relatives – would gather to listen to the olonkhosut, like we were discussing, for the whole night. It was like a celebration – the appearance of an olonkhosut. Really great olonkhosuts were rare during that time as well. Lesser olonkhosuts of course lived during that time – now they are all being counted – so during that time you could say there were hundreds of olonkhosuts. They lived, created, and recounted their

<sup>78</sup> See <http://vimeo.com/33177383> or the DVD for the full interview with Pyotr Reshetnikov, in Cherkëkh, Yakutia, on June 16, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with master olonkhosut Pyotr Reshetnikov in Cherkëkh, Yakutia, on June 16, 2009. [See DVD]

olonkhos. So for this reason, from that time to our generation, olonkhosuts and their creations are/were very valued.”<sup>80</sup>

Boris Mikhailov, who is very involved in reviving olonkho, recounted the story of one more context for performance, a gold rush in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century at Bodaybo, to the west of current-day Yakutia. At Bodaybo, olonkhosuts joined the migrants in the gold fields and interacted there, influencing one another’s singing styles and storylines:

There was a time when there was a gold rush in Bodaybo (which is now in Irkutsk oblast, but used to be part of Yakutia). People rubbed shoulders with olonkhosuts then, because it was a time when everyone was working toward getting money by mining for gold. At that time, people came in from all the regions (from the Viluisk group of uluses) came together, and from the Central group of uluses, and we all know now that at this place, in particular, people knew one another well and could hear the olonkhosuts from these regions... At this time there were these connections between these groups of uluses [...]. Many olonkhosuts could exchange plots...after all, the olonkhosut could catch it on the first hearing, and upon returning to his own region, he would recount a plot taken from the Viluisk region. [...] This mining for gold even happened before the Revolution. We have a lot of material that describes these memories about Bodaybo where the various olonkhosuts were able to gather together.<sup>81</sup>

These olonkhosuts, probably for the first time in their lives, performed for broader audiences than a small family context. Not only did this new space for olonkho performance allow olonkhosuts to exchange their musical and verbal materials with one other, it provided them with discriminating audiences to encourage the honing of their art. Although the conditions at the mines were abhorrent, eventually prompting a strike subsequently quashed by tsarist soldiers in the Lena Massacre, the Bodaybo gold fields (until they were abandoned by workers in spring of 1912) provided a venue for exchanging musical and verbal materials related to olonkho.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>81</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>82</sup> Life in Bodaybo was not a series of long evenings by the fire, singing olonkho, although if Mikhailov is correct, they must have somehow found time to perform for one another. The gold fields at Bodaybo opened in the 1860s, and by 1912, the working conditions imposed by the British and Russian shareholders

Mikhailov has been captivated in particular by one olonkhosut's astonishing life, Innokenti Ivanovich Burnashëv (Tong Suorun<sup>83</sup>), who began to perform as an olonkhosut during the pre-Revolutionary period. He was so highly valued and loved as an olonkhosut that during the civil war immediately following the Communist Revolution, his life was spared because of his profession. Mikhailov describes his fascination with this colorful individual, about whom he wrote a book:

In the book it explains about how he became a professional [olonkhosut]. He traveled around a lot to different families that invited him. Of course, most of them were rich families. And of course, they could reward him. Because of this he was able to be involved exclusively in the performance of olonkho, and feed himself that way, and his family too. They gave him a lot. He died in 1946, and was about 70 years old at the time. So his best years of storytelling were at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

During the time of the civil war, he was sentenced twice to being shot, each time put up against the wall, waiting for the shot that would end his life. He was saved by olonkho, because the people, regardless of whether he was a bandit or Red Guard, they understood that an olonkhosut was a unique kind of person. Because he carried within himself folk wisdom, the “folk word” they call it, they knew it was shameful to kill someone like that, someone that held so much folk wisdom in him. So his storytelling art saved him from the threat of death.<sup>84</sup>

These personal and moving stories, passed down through the last century, describe what may be the apogee of olonkho performance, a time when olonkhosuts were greatly valued and their audiences were eager for their performances. There was also an increased ability to travel and to interact with other epic performers, expanding their repertoires and abilities. Interviews with respondents and reports from archival sources

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(including Russian royalty) were so brutal that the workers finally rebelled with a general strike on March 13. Over the next month, they communicated their demands and assembled for demonstrations. On April 17, 1912, troops sent by Tsarist government began shooting into the gathered crowd of workers, killing hundreds of people. This event, called the “Lena massacre” resulted in strikes breaking out all over Russia, continuing until the onset of World War I. The Lena Massacre was used as propaganda against the tsarist government by the communists who eventually succeeded in overthrowing tsarist rule (Melancon, 2004).

<sup>83</sup> Many Sakha artists and writers take a Sakha pseudonym and use it in tandem with (or sometimes in place of) their “Russian” names, sometimes called “Christian names” as they were originally given by the Russian Orthodox Church upon baptism.

<sup>84</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

paint a vibrant picture of olonkhosuts exchanging stories and musical ideas with one another during that time.

Valeri Kononov, a retired Sakha man who was part of our field research team, drove us many miles over rough Yakutian roads. He gave an overview of olonkho performance practice during the years before it experienced decline:

I would say that olonkho is really our “folk achievement.” Why? Because for all the centuries that the Yakut people have lived, olonkho has not been lost, never been forgotten, and in fact, just the opposite—it’s being developed and has found its second and even third “wind.” I think this is really great. This is very good and olonkho is developing. It used to be performed even when we didn’t have concerts, or dramatic theater, cultural enlightenment work – we didn’t have those things in the old times, so the people only listened to olonkho. When the olonkhosut would come to the village—actually, people used to live on an *alaas* (grassy meadow)—with either two, three or four families—the largest were five families.

When the olonkhosut came to visit, it was for sure the happiest moment of people’s lives. And they would send messages around to people, “Come on over tonight! The olonkhosut will begin to sing!” And the people of the *alaas* would gather in the *balaghan* and listen to olonkho from evening until morning. They would forget during those hours how difficult it was to live, and so on.

It used to be that it was truly difficult to live in Yakutia. To live with that kind of cold—to fight that kind of freezing weather, and on top of that to take care of their herds—it was really difficult. So the people, when the olonkhosut would come, when he would sing... perform. The people would forget themselves.

The people would accept, spiritually, whatever was sung in that olonkho. The contents of the olonkho were primarily... they were about our heroes. The people would listen from evening until morning, and they would forget all about sleep. They would even forget about their difficult life. In the morning they would all leave for their homes – to do their work. They would agree on a time to get back together once again. When an olonkhosut came, the shortest time he would sing was three days. That was the shortest. He’d sing up until one week – seven days. It depended on the olonkhosut himself, how much he knew, what his level of ability was. The higher his ability, the more olonkhos he would know.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Valeri Kononov and his wife Maria were vitally interested in my research on olonkho and spent many weeks working on the logistics of my travel around Yakutia during the summers of 2009 and 2010. They clearly fit into the category of “enthusiasts” for olonkho revitalization. This interview was in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 19, 2009. [See DVD]

Kononov's description of olonkho in the pre-Soviet period expresses common understandings among Sakha people of how olonkho was performed during that time, and likely represents a close approximation of historical reality for those years.

### Olonkho in the Soviet period

In October of 1917, with the Tsar's family under house arrest, Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power from the Provisional government (Service 2009, 59–62) and the Soviet governmental apparatus began to form in Russia. The effects of the 1917 October Revolution, however, were slow to reach Yakutia. The bitter civil wars which followed the Revolution were drawn out in this far-flung province, so the period of consolidated Soviet power actually reached Yakutia later than in many other parts of Russia. The Yakut ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) was eventually proclaimed on April 27, 1922, and just seven months later, on December 31<sup>st</sup> of that year, the constitution of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) was ratified (Service 2009, 132–33).

### *Olonkho from the Revolution to World War Two*

The earliest years of the Soviet period under Lenin saw ideological support for the indigenous and national entities within Soviet borders (Service 2009, 113–114). Susan Crate engages with writers such as Graham Smith (1996, 7) in her article on the Sakha round dance (*ohuokhai*), asserting that from 1923 to 1928 the government supported a policy of “*korenizatsiia* (nativization), which was designed to support ethnic diversity and diminish Russian elements, as well as other policies that promoted local language,

education, and culture.... Every republic passed *korenizatsiia* decrees, some specific to the ethnicity involved. In Sakha (Iakutia) the decree took the form of *Iakutizatsiia*” (2006, 168). The early Soviet policies supporting diversity and amelioration of the homogeneity of Russian culture changed drastically, however. By 1928,

Stalin began the country’s “Great Transformation,” aimed at wiping out all backwardness and reminders of the past in an effort to “leap over centuries and catch up with Russia’s perennial nemesis, the West.” Key to this effort was the amalgamation of the diversity of cultures in the expansive USSR into one Soviet people. (Crate 2006, 168)

Because olonkho is a powerful worldview carrier, especially in regard to the existence of the spiritual as well as the physical world, I asked several of my respondents how olonkho was affected by Soviet power’s atheistic policies. Reshetnikov described it this way:

After Soviet power was put in place, olonkho was not congruent with the politics of the Party and the Soviet government. If you study the history of politics, you yourself know that they opposed any kind of faith of the people: Russian Orthodox, Christian, or Yakut beliefs—these were all marginalized. Evil spirits, good spirits, devils, and shamans were opposed or denied. For this reason the politics of Soviet power did not recognize all of this, but rather considered it to be charlatanism or something of the sort, not part of the creativity of the people. And so olonkho was marginalized and eventually almost completely forgotten.

They even criticized olonkhosuts when they performed for the people. They even criticized our great Oiyuskiy! He was himself an olonkhosut, and he was the first to write out a really long Yakut olonkho—*Nyurgun Botur the Swift* which was considered a work of unique quality among olonkhosuts, and even among other kinds of writers. Even *this* person was criticized! But he endured all that and put olonkho onto a high plane.

He led the Humanitarian Institute of Languages and Literature and was able to preserve olonkho, so we are grateful to Oiyunskiy (Platon Alekseyevich Sleptsov). That’s the way it was at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—people started to forget olonkho, and after that, olonkhosuts completely disappeared.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

There are other accounts of the marginalization of olonkhosuts. Pyotr Tikhonov [PT], a well-loved olonkho performer in Yakutia (Figure 3.3) told me [RH] the story of his great grandfather:

PT: My great great grandfather was an olonkhosut (on my mother's side). He used to gather olonkhosuts together. He was already an old person, and during the years of Soviet power he experienced repression for this [connection to olonkho]. They called him "*Molodo*" (The Young), that's what they called him in Russian translation. He is remembered, but not as a person who was repressed, but because he was noticed by Tong Suorun (Burnashev)—you've probably heard of him; the most famous olonkhosut in the Megino-Khangalaskii Ulus—who got an interview with him... and he said that there were two olonkhos he learned... from my great great grandfather. They were fair then. He didn't create them himself. But then he later created some of his own works, but his foundation was my great great grandfather.

RH: Did you ever hear him sing?

PT: No, no, he lived in ancient times [literally: *was an ancient person*]. My great-great grandfather. Probably in the 30s they took him away...

RH: Took him away?

PT: Uh-huh – he was repressed.

RH: They exiled him?

PT: Yes, and he died there.<sup>87</sup>



Figure 3.3: Pyotr Tikhonov, olonkho performer, in performance (June 20, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Interview with olonkho performer Pyotr Tikhonov in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 20, 2009. [See DVD]

Accounts of marginalization and repression, while absent from the Soviet-era historical literature, were reported as common occurrences by my respondents.

Larionova points out that in the 1920s, the Sakha political club, “Sakha Kèskil” played a large role in efforts to publish olonkhos. Before that, olonkho fragments were published as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but virtually all lacked notation, describing only the verbal aspects: texts and plots (2004, 43). Since there was a perception among Soviet leaders that olonkho supporters were politically motivated toward nationalism and “backward” in their orientation, olonkho enthusiasts began to experience pressure from Soviet power structures. The result was a distinct attenuation of olonkho performance.

Beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1940s, Yakutia was devastated by Stalin’s purges, in which “millions of people, including Sakha writers and scholars, were imprisoned or killed” (Cruikshank and Argunova 2000, 102). Boris Mikhailov, drawing from his scholarly work on olonkho’s history, described how the purges affected olonkhosuts. In particular, he focused on Oiyunskiy, author of the olonkho *Nyurgun Botur* and one of the most well-known Sakha intellectuals of the 1900s:

In the 20th century olonkho began to slowly but surely disappear, during the Soviet period. During this period people appeared who openly battled shamanism and the performing art of olonkho, believing that it was all part of “the past” and that it didn’t provide any benefit for modern humanity of that time. So they [olonkhosuts and shamans] were persecuted and sent to the camps. We have a lot of material demonstrating that olonkhosuts felt persecution.[...]

Platon Alekseyevich Oiyunskiy became a victim of this during the Soviet period... [RH – yes, he died during 1938 or 39, didn’t he?]. Yes, he died. He himself built a kind of Soviet life; he “rebirthed” Yakutia and helped it to achieve autonomy. He himself suffered for that in the camps. They arrested him and he died in the camps. We don’t know if he was killed by them, or if he just died—we don’t even know where he was buried.

He was an opponent of those who opposed the folk epos. He was listened to by a lot of people. Our people supported his opinions, believing that the things which were the creation of the people should not disappear into the past.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

Cruikshank and Argunova, researching the “reinscribing of memory” in the Tatta *ulus*, write about the close connections between that period’s great Sakha writers and the olonkhosuts who influenced their lives. They report that Sakha authors who were repressed and persecuted for crimes of “nationalism” were later remembered as literary giants in Yakutia, and that “their histories were merged with those of olonkho performers with whom their stories have become entwined. [They] began writing in relative obscurity. During the 1920s and 1930s, each became swept up in events, enmeshing themselves, and ultimately others in the Tatta *ulus*, in charges of bourgeois nationalism” (2000, 109).

One of those writers, Aleksei Kulakovskii, wrote a fascinating letter demonstrating how profoundly he was affected by listening to olonkho during his childhood, before he was proficient in Sakha language:

When I was a little boy, I used to sit “under the mouth” (a Sakha expression) of the teller throughout the night listening to his tales... this passion of mine very soon pushed me to learn my native language. Gradually, I started to understand the past, everyday life, and mainly the language.<sup>89</sup> (Cruikshank and Argunova 2000, 109)

It is interesting to note that for Kulakovskii, the result of his passion for “sitting under the mouth” (listening to olonkho) was a desire to learn Sakha better, although he must have had some understanding, as he calls it his “native language.”

The beginnings of multi-person performances of olonkho also began during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although olonkho had not yet been staged as a theatrical piece, “collective” performances began to appear and are experiencing a renewal in Yakutia at the time of this writing. Agafia Zakharova, the IGI Olonkho department head, told me what their research on collective performance had uncovered:

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<sup>89</sup> The letter is documented in Emelianov (1964, 80), translation by Tatyana Argunova.

Collective performance began in 1906, I think. Talented olonkhosuts gathered here in Yakutsk and did the first collective performance in the Club of the Prikashikov. There was a talented olonkhosut (Pyotr Ammosovich Okhlopkov – Naara Suokh) who came in from Ust-Aldan ulus – it was easier for him that way, and they did a dramatized section (act) from his olonkho. In that show, a lot of olonkhosuts participated. They divided the olonkho up by personages. It was quite interesting for people because they had great voices. It was the first dramatic (collective) setting of its kind, but it is continuing to this day in folk theater, in kindergartens, these shows continue.<sup>90</sup>

The collective performance phenomenon is confirmed in Soviet-era anthropological literature as well. Tokarev and Gurvich write,

Sometimes the poems would be declaimed by several story-tellers together, who to some extent or other dramatized the story, dividing the main roles among themselves; one sang the role of the hero, another, the role of his adversary, while the third undertook the narrative part of the poem. The knowledge and narration of these poems was fast declining by the beginning of the 20th century, and there were fewer and fewer good storytellers of this kind; the collective singing of poems almost died out completely. (1964, 282)

This is one of the first instances of Soviet ethnographers documenting the decline of olonkho in their writings. It is clear from this passage that the appearance of collective performance was a response to the difficult demands of traditional olonkho. Zakharova concurs, noting that it was easier for performers to be either strong as singers or as narrators. It took a rather remarkable performer to be good at both. She remarked,

Of course the most widely practiced performance was solo performance—song and recitative. But there came a time when there weren't any of the really great performers left—those who had both of those gifts in one person. Then “pair-singing” appeared, when one olonkhosut is a good storyteller, for example, but he's weak in singing [...so ] you begin to see “separate” performers—good at singing, or good at recounting. In these cases, they perform in pairs. This began to happen in the first half of the 20th century.<sup>91</sup>

During my fieldwork in Yakutia I observed instances of collective performance and noted that they are not theatrical in the formal sense; they do not have props, staged

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with scholar and head of the Olonkho department at IGI, Agafia Zakharova in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 4, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>91</sup> Zakharova, 2011. [See DVD]

movements, or non-olonkhosut actors. But their appearance early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century eventually led to the proliferation and development of an olonkho derivative, the theatrical setting. These two derivative forms (collective performance and theatrical settings) still exist side by side with olonkho's traditional solo-performed genre.

### *Olonkho during the 1940s and 50s*

The decline in olonkhosut numbers was already being documented by IGI in the 1940s, according to Zakharova. Although the statistics for olonkhosuts had been described before the 20<sup>th</sup> century as being “handfuls”<sup>92</sup> in each *nasleg* (indicating possibly several thousand), by the 1940s their numbers were sharply attenuated.<sup>93</sup> She reported, “In 1941, during the Great Patriotic War, there was a large expedition in which they counted around 80 olonkhosuts all over Yakutia. They documented over 300 olonkho plots which were known by olonkhosuts.”<sup>94</sup>

Mikhailov mused on the swing of the pendulum back in the other direction and the motivations for a change for the better in Soviet attitudes toward olonkho during World War Two (called the “Great Patriotic War” in Russia):

Then all of the sudden the Great Patriotic War came in 1941, and at that time there was a revitalization of olonkho. The olonkhosuts were held up like a banner, because the plots of olonkho are basically about good and evil, and this idea was used in the battle against fascism to facilitate a rebirth among the people through olonkho.

They even built a tank (Number 34) and named it “*Nyurgun Botur*”! They gathered money from people living in Yakutia, and gave it for the building of a tank. They built this tank somewhere in a war factory, named it “*Nyurgun Botur the Swift*,” and sent to serve in the war. That was the kind of rebirth it went through then.

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<sup>92</sup> *Handful*: “десятки” or “tens” in the original Russian.

<sup>93</sup> A *nasleg* is roughly equivalent to a “county” or administrative division with a few towns/villages, much smaller than an *ulus*.

<sup>94</sup> Zakharova, 2011. [See DVD]

After this they began to consider olonkhosuts to be writers. They accepted a list of olonkhosuts into the Union of Authors of the USSR, and all in one day, these olonkhosut became “writers.” This was a Soviet idea—to give them recognition and consider them as being on the same level as writers so that they could create and write. So there was revitalization at that time.

But then “those days” returned, and there were articles written against many famous writers, including our local ones, which said, “We raise our fists and our swords against olonkho.” There were these kinds of articles! [RH: Who wrote like that?] There was a famous writer named Èllei Kulashikov, who to this day... well, he eventually acknowledged that he made a mistake. Because, after all, it’s a folk tradition, folk wisdom. It is actually a folk treasure!<sup>95</sup>

The pendulum of government approbation again changed direction and the period after the war became difficult for olonkho. Anna Kulikova, writing on the modern ethnocultural and ethnoreligious processes in Yakutia, summarizes the ideology of assimilation that was prevalent during that time:

The Soviet leadership affirmed an ideology of integration of all peoples of the USSR into a socialistic culture as well as integration into a “new historical community” of Soviet peoples.<sup>96</sup> This was achieved by means of a liquidation of national regions, reorganization and transformation of national minorities into the language of Soviet republics, and also the closure of national schools.<sup>97</sup> (Kulikova 2009, 98)

The stories of two women born around the time of World War II illustrate the picture of a genre on the brink of disappearance. Maria Kononova and Ekaterina Chekhorduna both had relatives who were olonkhosuts. While Chekhorduna has vivid early childhood memories of performances and Kononova does not, their stories demonstrate the experience of those closest to olonkho at that time. Kononova’s

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<sup>95</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>96</sup> Kulikova cites here: Vdovin A. I. 2002. Evolution of the National Politics of the USSR (1917 – 1941). The Moscow University Herald: Series 8, 3:47.

<sup>97</sup> “Со стороны советского руководства утверждалась... идеология приобщения всех народов СССР к социалистической культуре и сплочению их в «новую историческую общность» советских людей. Это достигалось посредством ликвидации национальных районов, реорганизацию и перевод национальных меньшинств на язык советской республики, а также закрытие национальных школ” (Kulikova 2009, 98).

recounting of her childhood connection to olonkho performance parallels the experience of many, as she grew up without the opportunity to hear live performances:

When I was born, olonkho had long disappeared. I never saw living olonkhosuts, and I only heard about them from my parents. They told me that on my mother's side, my grandfather had been—I guess you could say—a great olonkhosut. They called him “Yrya Semën.” *Yrya* means “song”—“Semën Song,” so you can see they saw olonkho as song.

This old man, my grandfather, would sing for three days and three nights in a row; he would gather people together for a performance. All the time my relative Proskovia would remember and describe to me what a great olonkhosut he was, and how well he sang.

Proskovia was my relative. She lived for a very long time, so she was the one who told me about it. My mama died very early. So I never heard from her that my grandfather had been an olonkhosut.

But in my family, none of us sing [olonkho] because everything was forbidden, everything was forgotten about olonkho, and so I cannot tell you what kind of olonkhosuts there were, or how it was, we simply forgot. Only in recent times...<sup>98</sup>

Chekhorduna was more fortunate than Kononova in this, as it was not her grandfather, a generation removed, but her own father who was an olonkhosut. She vividly remembers his performances for the family circle. Her story is particularly poignant, as it draws us into the world of the sights and sounds of an olonkho performance as perceived by a small child during the 1950s and recalled with great clarity 60 years later. She recounted:

During that time, my father's health was not so good, but he sang olonkho. As a result, my mama told me, he was asked to perform olonkho during the holiday times. During the regular work days, there wasn't any opportunity to do that, but during the holidays, he was asked to perform during the evenings.

During those days, we didn't have any telephones, no radio, no electricity during my childhood. All that appeared later, when I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> grades. ...This was during the 1950s. All there was for entertainment was the olonkhosut. So people would hear the rumor: “Pyotr Afanasevich is going to sing this evening!” And the guests would begin to arrive.

My father sits before the fireplace, usually facing the west, and all of us sat around him; some seeing him from the front, some from the side, some even from the back. He crosses his legs, tips his head back just a little, closes his eyes, and begins his recitation. At first, as if from a long ways away... [*she begins to*

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Sakha poetess and project collaborator, Maria Kononova, in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 19, 2009. [See DVD]

*recount an olonkho in a “recitation” tone of voice, imitating what she remembers*].... this is how the olonkho starts.

At first he starts slow, a little at a time, then the tempo picks up. Because of this, every kind of vision begins to appear before my eyes (I was, after all, very little at the time—five, or maybe 4 even). My mother has her arms around me, and I sit and I listen. I didn’t understand it, but his voice... the timbre, the tempo, how he goes slower, then more quickly, then into his upper register, then, “Ha ha ha ha ha!” —like that—the singing of the demons, then the [*oh-ho, oh-ho*] singing of the warrior-heroes, solid-like... then the song of the *udaghana* (female shaman) [*dje-bo-o-o*]... then the crying song of the girl... and more singing of the demons... This is the “theater of one actor.”

It seems to me, in my memories, that he didn’t gesticulate a lot... he just sits still, not moving, and only with his voice, his voice... that is what stays in my memory. Now you see olonkhosuts who perform with all these techniques... I don’t enjoy that so much. Because my father would just sit, and although he’d do this [*turns her head*], but he didn’t do any other kinds of movements... it was all done with his voice.

I would always cry in the same exact place in the story! It was when the evil demon warrior would appear on the scene... I was so afraid of him! I guess my father would, at the beginning of the olonkho, describe the beauties of nature for a long time, then describe the representatives of the upper world, the middle world, then the lower world... it probably took him about half the night to describe this, and by that time I was already falling asleep. Then mama would take me over to the bed, and I would always wake up, and just at that time, I’d hear [the demon-warrior], “Ha ha ha ha...” and the tempo would pick up and the battle is getting closer and the hero-warrior would return from somewhere, and already I am beginning to cry a little bit.

Then mama lays me down and covers me up with a quilt, holds my hand, and sits nearby. By that time, the demons have all arrived and are singing, and they are fighting with one another. By then, I’m completely hiding under the quilt. Mama is trying to quiet me, and I’m starting to calm down. And I can’t hear anything, because the quilt is so thick that I can’t hear at all... it’s made out of rabbit down, and it doesn’t let the sound through. It’s very quiet under there, under the quilt.

In general, my father would sing very loudly (everyone said that he sang loudly), but under the quilt, I couldn’t hear anything. So I would think, “Well, that’s it – it’s all over,” and I would poke my head out again. Mama was gone... she had already gone back to her place, and I was alone in the bed. My father is sitting with his back to me, and I can’t see his face.

There is no light, as I said, just the fire in the fireplace, so it is dark. Scary! There’s this kind of window... over my bed (actually to call it a bed is not quite right, it’s called an *oron*, which is like a wooden bed that people usually have in their *balaghan*).

So above the *oron* is a window. And it’s always like an evil black hole. As you can imagine, it’s a black, black night, and there are *abaasy* (demons) out there, fighting the warrior hero. We have another window; my childhood

memories are that we had two windows. The eastern window, which is lit up with the flame-colored reflection of the fireplace, and the western, which is *dark* – there is *nothing* there. And under *that* window, I lay there! All alone! And when he sings the songs of the demons, I am covered in sweat. And when I look at that window, I begin to cry again and dive under the quilt. Whew! I begin to calm down. I usually didn't have the courage to come out again. But in my thoughts, I'm fighting those monsters. So this is why I believe that olonkho [...] should be sung. Fairy tales are one thing, but olonkho is something completely different.<sup>99</sup>

Reshetnikov reflected on some of the fleeting Soviet recognition of olonkho that happened in the 1950s, as he was a young man at the time. He said:

One cannot say that olonkho was completely forgotten, because olonkho is the foundation of the literature of the Yakut people. Olonkho tells, in very artistic form and with deep meaning, the life and the struggle of the Yakut people, and not only of the Yakut people, but the people of the whole world. So for that reason, some parts of olonkho were recognized by the Soviet powers. For that reason, olonkho was set as a dramatic production in the theater. First, *Nyurgun Botur* was set as a theatrical piece in 1957, in Moscow, of all places. In fact, last year I was part of a delegation from the city of Yakutsk to Moscow. This was in connection with the celebration of 375 years of unification between the Republic of Yakutia and Russia, and in Moscow they celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the production of olonkho at the Bolshoi Theater in the city of Moscow. Maybe people don't remember that. But in general, as a great work of art, olonkho was marginalized.<sup>100</sup>

Although there were still olonkhosuts singing their songs throughout the long winter nights, they had become few and far between. This time in Soviet history was difficult for the indigenous cultures of Siberia's peoples.

Symbolic tokens of Soviet support for indigenous arts (at least in their concertized versions) such as the theatrical staging in Moscow were more than overwhelmed by the systemic marginalization of traditional forms of ethnic artistic expression, especially when those forms were a strong worldview and identity carriers. Soviet ideology saw this

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Ekaterina Chekhorduna, scholar and author of olonkho materials for children, in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 6, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>100</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

as a threat to integrating the various peoples of their territories into one “happy” Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

In an interview with Eduard Alekseyev [EA] and Anna Larionova [AL] in 2010, they remarked about the changes that took place in olonkho’s reception when it moved from a performance in an intimate space with a small group of friends and family to public spaces—the concert stages in large towns and cities. They felt that it radically changed the perception of olonkho’s genuine, improvisatory art. In fact, people forgot about the “real thing,” and could no longer tell the difference between memorized performance and the improvisatory art of the master olonkhosut:

EA: Now at least there is a contrast. It used to be, when there was just self-styled performance, the concert versions of olonkho, they thought that these were “true performances”—short sections of olonkho, memorized and not created. They thought that was the real thing.

AL: When I was really little, I was able to hear the “tail end” of these real performances, when they performed live.

RH: What years were these?

AL: The end of the 50s. After that, all you heard were the concert versions. So until the 60s the tradition was still alive. I remember.... In fact, maybe that’s why I ended up studying olonkhosuts and all that... when I was really little and lived in the village, I remember my father took me to hear performers. I was really really little at that time—probably not even five years old. When we moved to the city, I only heard it on the radio and on TV or on stage. And the stage performances were very short—just one song. By the 70s and 80s, people thought that this was the real olonkho.<sup>101</sup>

RH: They actually forgot [the real thing]?

AL: Yes, they began to forget...

EA: The true model got erased... and they confused self-styled, amateur performance with its fancy costumes—what they were seeing on the stage—with the “real olonkhosut.” And by the way, this was not just because of the presence or absence of Soviet power; it was a general, pervasive process that happens

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<sup>101</sup> Alekseyev added in a personal correspondence (April 26, 2010) after this interview, “I think that during this time, in the understanding of the masses, that there was a huge confusion of perceptions regarding what a true olonkhosut was. This was the “flowering” of the officially approved and supported by officialdom “artistic amateur activity.” (My translation, from the original): “Я думаю, что в это время в массовом сознании была как раз самая большая путаница в понимании, что есть настоящий олонхосут. Это было время «расцвета» официально насаждаемой, поддерживаемой сверху «художественной самодеятельности».

around the world. In fact, when olonkho began to be surrounded by *agiotage* (craze, frenzy, commotion)... it worked against the true tradition.<sup>102</sup>

Cruikshank and Argunova, commenting on the suppression of cultural practices during the Soviet era, write: “During the 1950s and 1960s... activities based on Sakha nationality were discouraged as manifestations of ‘bourgeois nationalism’” (2000, 102). But an olonkho could be created on a variety of subject matter, including those communist themes acceptable to the censors. A humorous story of how Sakha olonkhosuts dealt with this reality is recounted by Eduard Alekseyev:

EA: In my book “Folklore in the Context of Modern Culture” there is a piece of a chapter called “The Paradox...” something or other and it talks about the first wave of anything, how it is often not the real thing. For example, at the end of the war, and even before then (the 30s) – there was a renewed interest (*agiotage*) in olonkho. It was connected to the “personality cult” – the need for heroes, the bombastic, etc.

So they decided to send an olonkhosut to Moscow during that time, and there were two candidates. Which do you think went? The good one or the worse one? It wasn’t the best olonkhosut who went. He was too smart for that. He understood that it was dangerous. So he deliberately sang an olonkho in which there were ideologically dangerous words, words that would not pass the censors. [RH: Is that right?] It’s absolutely true. So of course, they set him aside... Of course, he was the “real thing”—a true olonkhosut.

So the guy that went sang things like “Glory to Great Lenin” and “The Day of Great Victory,” things like that. He [Nokhsorov – the true olonkhosut] ended up going as a singer of praise songs, but not as an olonkhosut, because he didn’t have the “right plots” to his olonkho. But the ones that recount the plots that resonated with that epoch, that one got to go. This is a rule that always seem to happen. Who gets recorded on recordings? The people who are the best? Or the ones that are right at hand? And who are easy to catch.

I often reflected on these words during my ensuing fieldwork. They inspired me to take the extra effort to find olonkho performers and respondents to interview who were not just right at hand, not just the “typical man on the street in the big city of Yakutsk,” but to go to the villages and talk with Sakha people in their own surroundings.

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Eduard Alekseyev and Anna Larionova in Malden, Massachusetts, on April 20, 2010. [See DVD]

Judging from my respondents' accounts, the 1940s and 50s were decades in which, after a brief spurt of State support during World War II, olonkho resumed a steep decent into a dormant state that lasted for another half century.

*Olonkho from the 1960s through the 80s*

A decline in language and culture for the Sakha continued during the 1960s and 70s. Argunova reports that in the 1960s, Yakut schools were ordered to teach only in Russian beginning in the seventh grade. Simultaneously, the number of Yakut language schools and preschool educational institutions was drastically curtailed (1992, 75).

Soviet ethnographers Tokarev and Gurvich, reflecting the official State position of support for cultural artistic expressions, wrote this sanguine account about the state of olonkho performance:

Following the Socialist Revolution, profound changes occurred in the oral folklore of the Yakut people. Many genres of the traditional folklore, such as shaman spells and chants, fell into disuse, while others continued on in a completely different form (singing at the *ysyakh-kumys* festival.) The heroic tales—olonkho—have remained the favorite form of oral folklore; they are frequently sung on the radio and at club concerts, and are included in other performances. The talented narrators of these epics, or olonkhosuts, are very popular among Soviet audiences. Many of them are members of the Union of Soviet Writers. There are now more than 400 such storytellers on the registers. (1964, 302)

Although certainly some of this portrayal is factual, nonetheless, the overall impression is likely more rosy than warranted. Certainly descriptors such as “favorite form of oral folklore,” “frequently sung” and “very popular,” when compared with the personal testimonies of my respondents, appear hyperbolic.

All the same, there were a few olonkhosuts still alive during those days. One of them whose work stands out during this period is Roman Petrovich Alekseyev (1900-

1977), the grandson of a Swedish political exile.<sup>103</sup> Roman Alekseyev's work has been extensively published, thanks to his family's labors. In what they described as an "heroic" task, his daughter, Akulina Romanovna Alekseyeva, coordinated the documentation of his olonkho texts. While simultaneously raising her own six children, working as a dorm mother in a boarding school of 100 children, and regularly hosting dozens of visitors, she also managed to engage and organize the whole family (and even visiting guests) in transcribing the texts of her father's olonkhos and other songs (See Figure 3.4).<sup>104</sup>

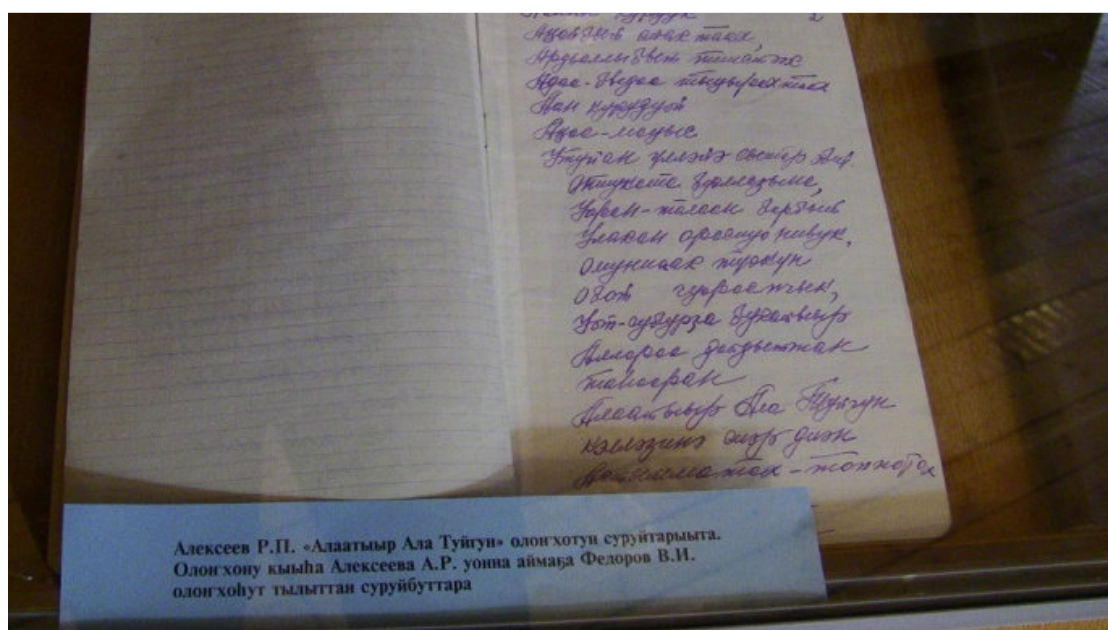


Figure 3.4: A manuscript of an olonkho by Roman Alekseyev (June 20, 2009)

While in his hometown of Borogontsi in 2009, I met with three of Alekseyev's descendants and asked them many questions about his life. The resulting 22 minute

<sup>103</sup> Estradii Pavlovich Nikolaev was exiled to Siberia with 200 others in retribution for the murder of Tsar Alexander II. He served the required 14 years, married a local Sakha woman, and had five children, two of whom stayed behind when his term was up and he returned home.

<sup>104</sup> An article about R. P. Alekseyev (in Russian) is at [www.Olonkho.info: http://tinyurl.com/RPAlekseyev](http://tinyurl.com/RPAlekseyev).

interview underscored the importance of documenting olonkhos by masters like Roman Alekseyev (Figure 3.5).<sup>105</sup> It also provided insight into what the post-war years were like for olonkhosuts. Alekseyev's granddaughter, Liubov Shelkovnikova, commented on attitudes toward olonkho during this time:

To say that no one did olonkho during the Soviet period would not be correct. Because we know that people came to visit our grandfather during that time; a few people every year, and they were interested in him. This means that those who were specially working in the area of folklore, they always were interested, and they always did all they could to make sure that the olonkho of the Yakut people, that in general the epos and the folklore of the Yakut people, would be preserved and would continue.

The mass performances, like for Ysyakh and for large gatherings of people—of course there was nothing like that during that time. But all the same, those who valued olonkho, they always were involved in these things, always. So that is why it was preserved. And now, of course, it has become more for the masses, for all the people. That's the main difference.<sup>106</sup>

Her aunt, Anna Andreyeva, added: “When we gained sovereignty, [we heard] all kinds of folk songs and the like, even the use of khomus which wasn't [seen] during that time... We didn't know anything during that time – how to sing, how to dance *ohuokhai* (round dance), we didn't even know how to say *chabyrgakh* (tongue twisters)! Because they didn't teach us.”<sup>107</sup>

Alekseyev's grandson, Gavril Gavrilevich Shelkovnikov, in reflecting on his grandfather's life, remarked on how he got an unusually early start as a performer: “Do you know why my grandfather was such a strong olonkhosut? Because his own father taught him from the time he was very small. From the time he was small—three years old. And by the time he was nine years old, he already was beginning to perform

<sup>105</sup> See this interview in Russian at <http://vimeo.com/34207733> or on the DVD.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Roman Alekseyev's relatives, Liubov Shelkovnikova, Gavril Shelkovnik, and Anna Andreeva in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 20, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. [See DVD]

publically... His genes were really strong.”<sup>108</sup> A common thread in the accounts of the lives of master olonkhosuts is the important factor of childhood exposure to olonkho.



Figure 3.5: Portrait of Roman Alekseyev in Borogontsi, Yakutia (June 20, 2009).<sup>109</sup>

In addition to the few master olonkhosuts who were still performing in the 1960s, there was one outstanding recording played on the radio. During my field interviews with people from all walks of life and levels of understanding of olonkho, one performer was consistently mentioned whenever I asked where they had heard olonkho—the name of Gavril Kolesov.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Roman Alekseyev’s relatives, Liubov Shelkovnikova, Gavril Shelkovnik, and Anna Andreeva in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 20, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>109</sup> Photo of a portrait of Roman Alekseyev by an anonymous artist, hanging on the wall at the Ysyakh Olonkho at Borogontsi in 2009.

## Gavril Kolesov

Gavril Kolesov was the featured performer on the recording of the most well-known and well-loved olonkho of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Nyurgun Botur the Swift*.<sup>110</sup> An oral story with many versions, it was the first olonkho to be put into literary form.<sup>111</sup> Oiyunskiy penned it before his death in the camps in 1939 and it was translated into Russian in 1975. The recording, made in 1962 by Leningrad Studio of Phonograms and re-mastered to CDs in 1997, was 28 hours and 27 minutes long, including close to 19 hours of singing, the rest was recitative (Larionova 2004, 54). In the late-1990s, when I first began studying Sakha music, I was given a set of the LPs by a pensioner in our church and told, “If you want to understand Sakha music, you need to listen to these.”<sup>112</sup> People’s recollections of hearing Kolesov’s performance reach back to the 1960s, testifying to the power of one recording to influence a whole generation of listeners (see Figure 3.6). Dekabrina Vinokurova [DV] reminisced of her own youth:

DV: Olonkho was really played a lot on the radio. They played Kolesov constantly. I still listen to radio today, it is my habit to do this; I can’t live without the radio. I remember as a child that olonkho was heard a lot on the radio. My grandmother listened to it. And when we traveled to the Gorniy Ulus, the older generation said that they heard it a lot on radio, through those records that were played. So, don’t ever say that it wasn’t heard during the Soviet years, because it really was. It’s a different issue, of course, when you talk about the higher level of government, but through mass media [at the republic level] it was played.

RH: What years was this?

DV: It was during the 70s and the 60s. Especially during the 70s it was really spreading, because the vinyl records were just beginning to really be used during those years. I heard people talk about Kolesov, after he died of course, that he was self-taught, simply an “artist,” and that there was a time when it *otkrilis* (opened up) for him, and after that he *pereshël* (passed over). Do you see? When olonkho

<sup>110</sup> P.A. Oiyunskiy, *Nyurgun Botur Stremitelnyi: Yakutskii geroicheskiy epos – olonkho* [Nyurgun Botur the Impetuous: The Yakut Heroic Epos of Olonkho]. Performed by Gavriil Kolesov. Recorded in 1962 by the Leningrad Studio of Recording. Remastered in 1997 by Studiia Poligram [KYDYK].

<sup>111</sup> Olonkho performer Pyotr Tikhonov said that Oiyunskiy wrote it out using material from 30 variants.

<sup>112</sup> A short collection of fragments from this set of recordings can be found at the <http://olonkho.info> with a direct link here: <http://tinyurl.com/ggkolesov-nyurgunbotur>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

was not popular, when people all around him were criticizing him, those so-called “actors,” he didn’t listen to them. He performed women’s parts, men’s parts, and I heard this with my own ears when I was a child. And although I didn’t understand it much at the time because I was a child, I listened to it. [...] He was one of the first people to really spread olonkho.<sup>113</sup>



Figure 3.6: Record set of *Nyurgun Botur* and Gavril Kolesov (June 20, 2010)

Vinokurova’s recounted memories underscore Kolesov’s crucial role in maintaining appreciative audiences through the mediated means of a set of recordings.

Elena Kugdanova-Egorova, a professional musician and music teacher, who confessed to not being a fan of olonkho, nonetheless had similar positive memories about Kolesov during these years: “I like the olonkho performances of Gavril Kolesov. He

<sup>113</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

himself is a *samarodok* (i.e. self-taught and talented).<sup>114</sup> He laid the foundation. I like his kind of performance.”<sup>115</sup> When I asked why she liked his performance in particular, she responded, “Because it is classical olonkho... First, it is accessible, right? And second, in the way it is done correctly. You can learn a lot from him about how to do it right. I am hooked on his manner. Also, I knew him personally. He was simply a good teacher.”<sup>116</sup>

I discovered another fan of Gavril Kolesov in Maria Stepanova [MS], an elderly Sakha woman who served as one of my hosts and tour guides at the 2010 summer Ysyakh festival in Berdigestyakh. I asked her if she had heard olonkho when she was young, but she could not recall ever hearing a live performance in her childhood. She was, however, very happy to tell me about how Gavril Kolesov had played a part in her becoming an enthusiast for olonkho performance:

MS: When I studied at the teachers college in Yakutsk, for some reason I purchased a recording of *Nyurgun Botur* (the olonkho), a set of 9 records, sung by Gavril Kolesov—the whole set. Because of that [recording], my interest in olonkho was born, I think.

RH: What year was this?

MS: Somewhere around 1973. I used to love those singers, not just olonkhosuts, but amateurs—I really liked amateur singers. Maybe for that reason it showed itself [my interest in olonkho]. But also, my brother, whom you met yesterday, Dmitri Ivanovich... later on, I was at his birthday celebration, and there I met Gavril Kolesov.

RH: You knew him?

MS: I did. I knew him. First I knew him through his records. Then I met him in person at my brother’s birthday celebration. It was such a great joy! I got to talk to him, to meet him.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> This Russian word has multiple layers of meaning. It refers to a “gold nugget” but the literal roots of the word mean “born out of oneself,” alluding to the “self-taught” characteristic to which Kugdanova-Egorova referred.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with professional musician Elena Kugdanova-Egorova in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on June 18, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>116</sup> Kugdanova-Egorova, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>117</sup> Interview with my host for fieldwork, Maria Stepanova, in Berdigestyakh, Yakutia, on June 20, 2010. [See DVD]

For Stepanova, just as for many others, the Kolesov recordings led to a lifetime of olonkho appreciation and helped to slow the decline of the epic *sreda* in Yakutia.

Irina Aksënova [IA] is a Sakha musician in her 30s who often sings traditional genres such as *toyuk* (praise songs) and *ohuokhai* (round dance). When I asked her if she had heard olonkho in her childhood, she responded with these memories of Kolesov's well-known recordings:

IA: We heard it on a record. In my time, there were already no olonkhosuts in our village. So I heard it on a record, Gavril Kolesov's performance. It is the most famous performance. He was that kind of an artist, and he performed. Everyone bought those records. My people didn't have any relationship with the arts whatsoever, other than Grandpa, who was an amateur. But we always bought records. We had a lot of records, and a player. And they listened! When he performed, (now I think about this) a shaman—the voice of the shaman, the voice of Satan, I would crawl under the bed, taking a pillow with me, and cover my ears and lay there. Lay there until the record was done. And the recording was long, after all! I don't know how many minutes I'd lay there. Then my sister would come to me and say, "Done! It's all over!" So she had to tell me. And then I'd get up. There you have it.

RH: From fear?

IA: From fear.

RH: Of what?

IA: I was afraid! When he'd perform, the voice of Satan, I'd experience such fear! Awful fear. There were three of us. My brother was two years younger, my sister two years older, and for some reason, they were indifferent to it. But I always reacted... I always hid myself. Besides records, they played it on the radio. The radio was here, and here's the table. We'd sit and listen. They're broadcasting, and everyone is looking at me. So I hide again. I leave the table and hide, regardless of what was on the table—soup, or *piroshki*—I always left the table. I don't know; that's just the way it was with me.<sup>118</sup>

The memories of Kolesov and his recordings should be understood in the context of a severe attenuation, in many other venues, for hearing traditional music of any kind, much less olonkho. Dora Gerasimova [DG] and Maria Kononova [MK], two of my traveling companions during my field research in 2010, reminisced about the level of

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<sup>118</sup> Interview with amateur musician Irina Aksënova in Yakutsk, on June 8, 2009. [See DVD]

Russian domination in the areas of language and music, in particular during the 1960s and 70s.

- RH: How many minutes of Yakut language did they broadcast on the news in those days?  
 DG: 15 minutes is all!  
 RH: Wow, that's very little.  
 DG: And I've heard that... all the minutes for meetings were written in Russian in the 60s. So because of that there was resentment.  
 RH: And in the 70s?  
 MK: Meetings were all held in Russian. If there was one Russian teacher and ten Yakut teachers, the meeting was held in Russian. The whole meeting in Russian!  
 RH: Did they teach Yakut language as a subject in the schools in the 60s?  
 DG: Yes  
 RH: And all the rest was...  
 DG: in Russian.  
 RH: Wow...  
 DG: For example, in the 60s in the concerts in the schools—there weren't any *toyuks*, or *ohuokhais*, or of course, olonkho themes, just all kinds of Pioneer songs, and some dances.<sup>119</sup>

The Kolesov recordings contributed not only to an appreciation for olonkho during those years, they even played an essential role in beginning the career of one of the most popular olonkho performers in Yakutia today, Pyotr Tikhonov. When I asked him how he first heard of olonkho, and why he began to perform, Tikhonov [PT] said:

- PT: My favorite guru was Gavril Gavrilovich Kolesov. It was through his work that I heard about this song called the epos of olonkho. Despite the prohibitions, despite the lack of attention, we always had these kinds of people. I was 19 years old when I first heard his song...  
 RH: Did you hear it from records then?  
 PT: Yes, and it completely changed my worldview.  
 RH: Is that right? From hearing one olonkho?  
 PT: From one hearing. So at 19 years old I learned my first epos... a children's epos. I listened to it and then learned the words by heart. At that time, there was no special program for this. There was no attention for this kind of thing.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Dora Gerasimova and Maria Kononova in Yakutia, June 19, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>120</sup> Tikhonov, 2009. [See DVD]

Thus, Kolesov's recordings catalyzed the performing career of this engaging performer, Pyotr Tikhonov. Although he performs from memory, not creating his own olonkhos, he is in demand as a traveling olonkhosut, visiting towns and villages around Yakutia to teach children olonkho, and to perform at competitions and various other events.

In summary, my respondents' accounts indicate that olonkho's continued decline in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s was ameliorated by Kolesov's recording of *Nyurgur Botur*. Other than scattered accounts of family performances from those fortunate enough to be related to the few remaining olonkhosuts, the primary source for hearing olonkho was through mediated means such as radio and the Kolesov recording. It was enough though, to keep the memory of olonkho alive, if only barely.

#### Olonkhosuts at the end of the Soviet Period

By the end of the Soviet period, the olonkho tradition had almost completely died out and olonkhosuts were extremely rare. The research of scholar Dekabrina Vinokurova provides key information on the level of knowledge about olonkho in the last decades before the fall of the Soviet Union. She summarized this research in an interview with me, painting a picture of a tradition that had declined to the point of rare performances relegated to a few areas of Yakutia:

When I was preparing the documents for UNESCO, I was using a questionnaire in Gorniy Ulus, and talking with some young people. They were very interested that we were "all of the sudden" talking about olonkho... I asked them if they remembered any olonkhosut who would travel around the villages and perform (I have this in my questionnaire). And I was talking to the policemen at the police station, and they said, "Oi, we had someone like that here! When we went fishing, and hunting, he always went with us." It was kind of like he was "always underfoot." I asked them if they could even remember his last name, and they said, "Ah, *nyet*! He was an old man." They said he would sing and sing, and then they would share [the catch] with him, and in that way, he would provide for

himself. This was during the 70s and 80s. So, this kind of thing was happening until the 80s. He would travel from one group of people to another. He disappeared; poor guy, he's probably long dead.

This was the kind of attitude there was. There were these lone performers who continued to spread olonkho during those days. It wasn't completely as if it died out all at once; there were these occasional appearances like this. It wasn't really as if after the Proclamation, all of the sudden out of nowhere... but the *sreda*, the community of listeners, really did disappear completely. If some young people remember that there were performers that their parents listened to, and that traveled around, all the same, I think that basically the *sreda* disappeared, although there may have been some last lone examples of performances. You could hear lone examples. In Ust-Aldan I asked this question, and unfortunately, they could not remember any example at all of this kind of thing.<sup>121</sup>

It is clear from the recounting of these memories that there were still a few olonkhosuts who could be heard into the 1980s, even though the epic *sreda* was virtually gone and formal performance opportunities were scarce. This dire situation was also reflected in the Sakha language education available to children. Tatiana Argunova reports that in 1986, in the capital of Yakutsk, only 16 percent of Sakha school children were fluent in their native language (1992, 75).

First-hand accounts by family members who lived with their elderly olonkhosut relatives are among some of the most insightful conversations I experienced during my fieldwork. For example, Nikolai Alekseyev (seen in Figure 3.7) and his wife Anna hosted our research team during the 2010 olonkho festival in the town of Berdigestyakh in Gorniy *ulus*. He is the grandson of the master olonkhosut Semën Gregorevich Alekseyev (referred to hereafter by his Sakha pseudonym, Ustarabys).<sup>122</sup>

Nikolai Alekseyev [NA] was adopted and raised by Ustarabys and learned the art of olonkho performance from him. I was eager to find out what that transmission process

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<sup>121</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>122</sup> A short biography of *Ustarabys* is available in Russian at the <http://Olonkho.info> portal. See: <http://tinyurl.com/Ustarabys>

was like between grandfather and grandson, so I asked him about what it was like being raised by a famous olonkhosut. He was happy to respond with his recollections:



Figure 3.7: Nikolai Alekseyev, olonkhosut, in Mytakh, Yakutia (June 20, 2010)

NA: Well, my grandfather worked as a carpenter, and built homes, worked. He hunted, fished (using nets under the ice in winter). When people would gather there, he would start to sing the songs of olonkho... and when I was little, I asked him, “How do you know this long story by heart?” He told me, “You just have to know the names of the *bogatyrs*. The rest goes by itself” he said (his words). And in the end of the 90s some educated people came and began to teach about olonkho, what it is, and how many there are.

I asked my grandfather how he learned the olonkhos. He listened to it from his childhood. And he parodied it, as a joke, or whatever, and then when he was in his older years, he began himself...

RH: What do you mean by “older years”?

NA: 60 years old or something like that. I don’t know exactly... When I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, somewhere near 1980, he already sang olonkho. He had a big *munka* for under-ice fishing, (they were in big tents) for big *karasei* (fish). And he also sang then, people say. I never went with him “under the ice.” Others went, my brothers went with him, but I was the youngest, so they left me behind. They’d say, “You’ll freeze!”

RH: Well, this means that you heard a lot of olonkho when you were growing up. You heard how he sang. And then you also began to sing olonkho. How did that start?

NA: As a joke, I parodied him. When I was growing up – at school, you know – at after school concerts, I participated, and I sang olonkho. But only new ones.

RH: New plots?

NA: Yes, new ones. I would take songs, then other things, as a joke. It's okay to try! Or maybe not?

RH: Of course!

NA: Jokingly... It was simply a joke! [He begins an olonkho, parodying the story of *Nyurgun Botur*, using anachronisms like pistols and motorcycles.]

RH: This is very interesting! It's especially interesting that parody is important, that it plays an important role in this.

NA: Yes...

RH: A person parodies, then becomes more experienced.

NA: My grandfather also parodied. He parodied all kinds of people. He would even parody how they spoke. So probably from my earliest years, I learned this from him. So I saw it, and parodied it. When my parents got drunk and spoke badly, I parodied it; my father, my grandfather, my mother, my brothers. Then even others—from concerts and on TV, I would parody famous people in our village, I'd even parody my friends. How do they say it? I made fun of them. That's what it was like.<sup>123</sup>

Alekseyev went on to say that after he became a Christian, he had a change of heart and no longer feels right about parodying people, but his olonkho performance style is still rooted in a playful, improvisatory approach. This performance style is not often talked about among researchers, but Chekhorduna noted in an interview that there were those who habitually performed in this style.<sup>124</sup>

It was during the late 1980s that the most well-known living master olonkhosut in Yakutia today, Pyotr Reshetnikov, first began to improvise in the olonkho style. Although he heard many olonkho performances as a child, he had never tried his hand at singing olonkho himself until he was retired. Reshetnikov recounted, in a very amusing way, the attitudes toward olonkho at the time, and how despite the genre's marginalization, its status as a Sakha art gave him the opportunity to learn that he had “the gift.”

It was kind of by happenstance. In my early years I only sang *toyuk*; I didn't do olonkho at all. Around here they usually have festivals of amateur music-making between the counties (*naslegs*). And one time, when I was already retired and

<sup>123</sup> Interview with olonkhosust Nikolai Alekseyev at his home in Mytakh on June 21, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>124</sup> Chekhorduna, 2011.

elderly, I was invited by the “cultural workers” to come to the House of Culture. They said, “Pyotr Egorovich, you sing toyuk really well. Maybe you can recount an olonkho. We are including a passage from an olonkho in the concert program. But I told them, “Olonkho is long; it is impossible to use it in a concert.” They said, “Without some olonkho, we’ll get points deducted.” [laughs] So that is how they let me on stage for the first time! So I thought and thought, and then began to recount my first olonkho.

But within five or six, or ten minutes they came up to me and said, “Pyotr Egorovich, we wanted it fast! Old man, you are wasting a bunch of our concert time!” And they chased me from the stage! It was then that I had the thought, “It appears that I have the ability to recount an olonkho ‘from myself’ (impromptu).”<sup>125</sup>

Reshetnikov’s complaint about the short attention span of audiences is only briefly touched on in this story, but he later talked about the poor state of engagement in olonkho performances and how the olonkhosuts are not given enough time to really expand and fully flesh out their epic ideas. For those who memorize their texts (the vast majority of today’s olonkhosuts), they cope with the limits by performing only small sections of text. They believe the amount of time given for these “epic” performances borders on the ridiculous. When asked how long people gave him for olonkho performances, Pyotr Tikhonov reported: “People don’t listen very long, maybe four or five minutes, ten at the most. If I sang any longer, they’d leave, or chew me out!”<sup>126</sup>

A key milestone for olonkho in the 1980s was the beginning of a gargantuan collaborative work, a multi-volume series titled *Monuments of the folklore of the peoples of Siberia and the Far East* (hereafter “*Monuments*”). Although not all of the titles were about olonkho, there were eventually two volumes on olonkho published in the 1990s, with accompanying recordings of song examples and full textual translations into

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<sup>125</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>126</sup> Tikhonov, 2009. [See DVD]

Russian.<sup>127</sup> These volumes also featured notational, historical, and musicological notes and commentary, providing a rich resource and a significant “monument” for folklore studies for future generations of students, teachers, performers, and olonkho lovers.<sup>128</sup>

Anna Larionova attributes olonkho’s revitalization to UNESCO, but points out that publishing *Monuments* built interest among scholars in olonkho:

Olonkho also began to be forgotten. If it had not been for UNESCO, who knows [what would have happened to olonkho]. Of course, in my opinion, there was a wave of interest in folklore, you know, when they began to work on the *Monuments* series. Folklorists began to travel to the regions and began to show interest in the carriers of these traditions, and that in turn created an answering wave of reaction in people, and it began to live again. This was in the 80s—from 1984 to 1986, like that. So slowly but surely, interest began to rise, and then there was the UNESCO announcement...<sup>129</sup>

The research done by scholars at educational and research institutions in preparation for the publication of the *Monuments* series likely prepared the ground for the successful and timely submission of the UNESCO application that followed.

As the period of Soviet power experienced its own decline and eventually drew to a close, Sakha cultural revitalization began in earnest. A well-known poem from 1910 by Aleksei Kulakovskii, Sakha intellectual and writer, expressed the feelings of many Sakha for decades:<sup>130</sup>

When side by side for a long time  
An old and strong people lives with a small one,  
The younger people is treated unfairly  
In secret and patently, but always in everything.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Vol. 4 - The Yakut Heroic Epic “Kyys Debiliye” (1993) and Vol. 10 – The Yakut Heroic Epic “Moguchi Ėr Sogotokh” (1996).

<sup>128</sup> This research project is greatly indebted to those who collaborated on the publication of those two volumes, as they are clearly the product of many good minds and many talents working together.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with scholar Eduard Alekseyev and Anna Larionova in Malden, Massachusetts, on April 20, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>130</sup> Khazanov says this poem was “known virtually by all educated Yakuts; it was practically forbidden for many decades, but that only increased its popularity” (1993, 175).

<sup>131</sup> This work was republished in 1990 as *Snovidenie shamana: Stikhotvoreniia, poëmy* (*The Dream of the Shaman: Verses and Poems*). Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, hopes for a change in the relationship between the Sakha Republic and the “center” (i.e. Moscow) were strong. But the numbers of Sakha, even in Yakutia, had dropped to a minority, and the economic infrastructure was in shambles. Reflecting on the last decades of the Soviet Union, Khazanov wrote:

During the last 25 years the development of mining has resulted in an influx of new migrants from European Russia and other eastern Slavic republics. As a result, the proportion of Yakuts in the overall population of the republic has dropped from 90 percent in 1920, to 43 percent in 1970, to 36.6 percent in 1979, and to 33.4 percent in 1989. (1993, 267)

This was the lowest point for the Sakha epos. By now there had been more than five decades of marginalization for olonkho, its singers, its worldview, and its values. The coming collapse, however, of the Soviet Union in 1990 and 1991 was going to have far-reaching consequences, not just for Sakha people, but for olonkho, which had by this time, almost completely disappeared from the public eye.

## CHAPTER 4

## OLONKHO AFTER THE SOVIET UNION

The politics of cultural revitalization

When the Soviet Union dissolved, Yakutia's demographics began to change, and along with it, the political climate for supporting olonkho revitalization. Yakutia's ethnic Russians began to flee the "coldest inhabited place on earth"<sup>132</sup> for warmer climes in western Russia, and the percentage of Sakha people began to grow. As reflected in census results, the Russian population in Yakutia dropped from 50 percent in 1989 to less than 38 percent in 2010.<sup>133</sup> During the same period, the Sakha population rose from 33 percent in 1989 to almost 50 percent in 2010. It is clear from these statistics that the numbers of Sakha and Russian people in Yakutia have taken only two decades to exchange places. The next largest group, Ukrainians, also mirrored this outward migration trend, dropping from 7 percent to just over 2 percent during the same number of years.

I have personally observed Yakutia's demographic transformation since my first visit to the area in 1993. These changes are sharply felt by the Russians who have remained in Yakutia. In December of 2011, a Russian friend complained bitterly to me about the demands she faces at work from the Sakha majority. She felt pressure to

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<sup>132</sup> The town of Oimyakon, in Yakutia, holds the official record for this in the Guinness Book of World Records (<http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records/lowest-temperature---inhabited>). See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-11875131> for the report (and a video) of a BBC reporter who visited.

<sup>133</sup> Figures rounded to the nearest percent. See the census figures at [http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Sakha\\_Republic](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Sakha_Republic) and (Federal State Statistics Service) (2011). "[Информационные материалы об окончательных итогах Всероссийской переписи населения 2010 года](#) (*Information on the final results of the 2010 All-Russian Population Census*)" (in Russian). *Всероссийская перепись населения 2010 года* (2010 All-Russia Population Census). Federal State Statistics Service (Retrieved 2011-12-28). See also the official sites for documenting the Russian Census: <http://www.perepis-2010.ru/> and [www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat/rosstatsite/main/](http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat/rosstatsite/main/).

celebrate Sakha ethnic holidays on weekends with co-workers and to wear Sakha jewelry “for solidarity’s sake”—a demand she intends to resist.<sup>134</sup>

Sakha language and cultural expressions rebounded during perestroika and the post-Soviet years of the 90s. Maria Kononova [MK] was a key Sakha collaborator during my fieldwork in the summers of 2009 and 2010, coordinating the logistics for our travels around Yakutia. She told me about how Sakha culture began the process of revitalization during perestroika. She noticed changes in attitude at that time toward cultural expressions ranging from the names of administrative divisions to artistic expressions like *olonkho*:

RH: What is happening now, in this transitional time?

MK: After 1985, perestroika started in Russia. And little by little, things that had been forgotten were restored. Even, for example, during that time they called our *uluses* [by the Russian term] *rayons* (regions) but now they have returned the word *ulus* – because it was our old word for an administrative division.

RH: So now, in what kinds of contexts is *olonkho* being performed?

MK: Here, in general, it is being developed very energetically and they are really beginning to do it well. In the beginning of the rebirth period, in cultural events, they began with little (short) *olonkhos*. But now *olonkho* has its own strength and its own propagation. You could say that people even come from far away countries to study our *olonkho*! [She looks pointedly at me and laughs.] To study it and look at it and put it in the realm of science. This is a very praiseworthy thing.<sup>135</sup>

Boris Mikhailov [BM] also remembers the joy he felt in the new-found freedom for cultural renewal in Yakutia during Yeltsin’s rule, and his disappointment that politics are once again swinging away from self-determination:

BM: Thanks to Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin, who gave us freedom, this kind of revitalization happened. What did he say? “Take as much water as your bridge can handle.” It was that kind of time; there really was revitalization then! They were such happy days because we knew we were revitalizing our language and culture, but from 2000 on, they have been slowly but surely taking things back. ... They have been decreasing the hours that get taught in schools on national

<sup>134</sup> Interview with (anonymous) Russian music teacher in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 8, 2011.

<sup>135</sup> Kononova, 2009. [See DVD]

cultural topics, etc. We've been fighting that, and they so far have let us continue.

RH: So it turns out that you have to constantly fight for such things?

BM: Of course, the policies come from above, from the "center" of Russia.<sup>136</sup>

The resistance to control from the center is strong in Yakutia. One of the most effective recourses available to Sakha people is the legislative process. Although their laws can be overturned by Moscow if they are perceived as contraindicating the interests or laws of the State, the Yakutian legislature is busy passing laws aimed at protecting Sakha culture.

Anna Kulikova, a doctoral student at the Amur State University, writes in a recent dissertation on modern ethno-cultural and ethno-religious processes in Yakutia:

At the present time, the rebirth of the cultural values of the peoples of Yakutia is one of the most important emphases of the national politics of the Republic of Sakha. This is reflected in regional legislation, which takes into consideration aspects of the cultural distinctiveness of the people who live in the territory of Yakutia. In the last two decades of the republic, there have been more than 30 statutory regulations aimed at protecting human rights related to the protection of traditional ways of life, culture, and religion of the peoples of Yakutia.<sup>137</sup>  
(Kulikova 2009, 144-45)

The cultural revitalization movement which swept Yakutia in the 1990s has continued to gather strength unabated to the present time. One prime example of the power such a movement has is how it was able to take a "forgotten" genre like olonkho and catapult it into the spotlight of an international arena like the UNESCO Masterpiece awards.

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<sup>136</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>137</sup> Translation mine, from the original: «В настоящее время возрождение культурных ценностей народов Якутии является одним из важных направлений национальной политики республики Саха. Это отражается в региональном законодательстве, где максимально учитываются аспекты культурной самобытности народов, проживающих на территории Якутии. За последние два десятилетия лет в республике были приняты более тридцати нормативных актов, направленных на обеспечение прав в области сохранения традиционного образа жизни, культуры и религий народов Якутии.» [Kulikova, Анна Николаевна. 2009. Современные этнокультурные и этнорелигиозные процессы в Якутии, 144-5]

### From “forgotten” to Masterpiece

The story of how the Sakha epos went from “forgotten” to “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” is a tale that in some ways reminds me of an olonkho plot, with heroines and heroes, good powers and evil, enemies and fellow-warriors. It also provides insight into the inner workings of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) section at UNESCO, as well as into the crucial turn of events that began in late 2003 and culminated with the Masterpiece proclamation for olonkho in 2005.

In December 2011, I interviewed the committee members who spearheaded the application to UNESCO, and asked them to describe the turning point for olonkho. Elizaveta Sidorova, co-chair for the National Committee of Yakutia for UNESCO, was the primary driving force behind the initial application. Over tea and cookies, in a modest temporary office for the “House of Olonkho” in Yakutsk, she sat with colleagues Elena Protodiakonova and Anastasia Luginova, and recounted the story of how it all began:

It was a very, very complex and difficult task, and we had to do it quickly. In short, at the end of November, 2003, I went to Paris on a business trip and there I found out, before the affirmation of the Convention for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), that they had three competitions between countries and these cultural objects (in 2001, 2003, and in 2005).

So I got a meeting with the UNESCO sector (in Paris). In the ICH sector, Mr. Riëks Smeets (a Dutch gentleman) and I sat and talked about the convention and the competitions, and he asked me if we, in Yakutia, could participate, and he said that eventually the Convention would be accepted, after the three competitions were held.

At that time, the idea of epos didn't even enter my head. I thought right away about the Yakut festival “*Ysyakh*” and he asked if it was a governmental celebration, and I said that it was. He told me that it would not make it through the competition and I asked why. He said that the Convention would only support those elements that were disappearing, in order to help them, to protect them. This was one of the main criteria.

So, I suggested the possibility of choosing “shamanism” (for our entry) and he said that probably it could work, although there is shamanism among all the peoples. And then I got frightened and thought to myself, “What in the world am I doing supporting shamanism?”

At that time, I had no idea of what epos even was, eh? [RH: It had disappeared to that extent?!] To me, *toyuk* and epos were the same thing! The same basic thing. In fact it was like that for everyone! When people would mention “epos” to me, I would think that they meant simply “singing.” To that extent I was, how do I say this.... Well, I am a grown woman, and it just shows to what extent there was a lack of understanding of what epos was. I’d say “epos” but in my head I’m thinking *toyuk*.

But when I mentioned about epos to him, he thought, then said, “Yes, the Yakut epos could make it through the competition.” It turns out that he himself was a scholar of epos! He said that he knew about all the epics of Siberia and the Far East. He even studied the Mongolian epics, so he knew about the Turkic epics. And we got all inspired, and he told me, “Fill out the application!”<sup>138</sup>

Sidorova’s transparency in admitting she did not even know the difference between the *toyuk* singing style and the epic genre of olonkho is worth noting, as well as her suspicion that many others shared this rather vague conception of olonkho. The four large published volumes featuring olonkho in the *Monuments* series had apparently not served to popularize knowledge about olonkho, despite the fact that two of the volumes, *Kyys Debiliye* and *The Mighty Ėr Sogotokh*, specifically focusing on these two respective epics, featured translations into Russian and accompanying recordings.

The lack of knowledge about olonkho in the mainstream consciousness of Sakha people was about to change. This amazing Sakha woman, with her combination of collaborative leadership skills, love for Sakha culture, and sheer “I will die on this hill” determination, was going to pull together several streams of already-existing revitalization potential (including a key scholarly community)<sup>139</sup> and catalyze these resources into a revitalization movement for olonkho:

[Smeets] gave me all the regulations for the competition, although it wasn’t officially ready to pass out, so he told me, “Don’t show this to anyone, just take it

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<sup>138</sup> Interview with leadership of Olonkho Association, Elizaveta Sidorova, Elena Protodiakonova, and Anastasia Luginova, in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 7, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>139</sup> The Institute of Humanitarian Research and the Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of the North (IGI) had a “Department of Olonkho” at the time, and was the ideal collaborative partner for putting together the scholarly documents needed for the application.

back and start preparations on your documents.” Because it was a lot of work to prepare these documents, and the time available was very short, very compacted. He gave it to me at the beginning of December, 2003, and officially they opened the competition in May (on the UNESCO site). We got half a year—six months—of advance warning!

So we took the English version home, translated it into Russian, and then I appealed to Vasily Nikolaevich Ivanov at the Institute of Humanitarian Research and told him about the competition, and said, “We should participate in the competition!” He said, “Yes, of course, I suppose we could do that.”<sup>140</sup>

The Institute of Humanitarian Research and the Cultures of the Indigenous Peoples of the North (IGI)<sup>141</sup> had at that time a Department of Olonkho, a small collective of scholars, most of whom had significant roles in writing the volumes in the *Monuments* series. During the deep winter of 2004, the department gained a new head, Agafia Zakharova, to lead the UNESCO research project for olonkho. Sidorova described her to me as being an *operativniy* (dynamic, strategic) person whom she knew would get the work done quickly. And with her appointment, the collaborative power of Sakha academia was put into motion. Sidorova recalled:

After that we worked fearfully hard. The demands of the application were *horrific*! By the end of May we had a pile of paper, 800 pages. From January, February, March, April, May—in five months they wrote 800 pages! And so with all of those pages under my arms, I went to Moscow. I had to get a special recommendation letter from the Russian House of Folk Creativity. I had to get the official approval of the Russian Minister of Culture, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, so that the candidature could be representative of Russia, because they would only accept *one* candidate from Russia.<sup>142</sup>

As this story unfolds, one should not underestimate the power differential between the characters and the ways in which this Sakha woman and her collaborators used skill and determination to negotiate with post-Soviet Russian power, often referred to as the “center” (Kempton 1996). The Republic of Yakutia is six time zones from

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<sup>140</sup> Sidorova, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>141</sup> The fore-runner of IGI was established in the 1930s by Oiyunskiy himself, “one of the founders of Yakut literature,” (Yakovlev 2002, 125).

<sup>142</sup> Sidorova, 2011. [See DVD]

Moscow, and its distance from Moscow is not only measured in thousands of kilometers, but in centuries of marginalization and exploitation of the Sakha people by the center.

In addition to the dynamics of majority cultural hegemony, the story speaks to the interactions between men and women; the beseeching is done usually by women and the permissions are generally granted by men. But the heroes in this story, although they are largely women, are remarkably human and vulnerable, willing to sacrifice their future for what they value, and determined to wring the needed permissions from the power center, come what may. This was demonstrated by Sidorova [ES], as she continued her narrative:

I arrived in Moscow, and didn't even know before I arrived that I was going to need all those signatures. Oi! I became so scared? It was such a shock for me! How in the world am I going to get the permission of the Minister of Culture? The Minister of Foreign Affairs!? For two days, I didn't eat or sleep, I just chewed myself out so hard... what a *fool* I am! Not knowing all this stuff. What was I thinking? Why have I made all those people do all that work... day and night?

And, all the sudden, almost like from above, someone says, (it was early morning, and I haven't slept at all). I'm thinking, "*My God, how am I going to return to Yakutsk? What am I going to tell people?*" I hear, "*Call Nikolai Yefimovich Mikhailov (the first president of Yakutia).*"

And I, like, ask him, "*What in the world for?*"

And I hear: "*There was an association of olonkho that he created in Yakutia. Let him gather those signatures for you.*" Like that! As if someone from on high was dictating to me!

In short, before that I had given the documents to the House of Folk Creativity, who in 2001 had done the successful application for the Old Believers rituals. And Elvira Semënovna Kunina<sup>143</sup> received me warmly there and I when I showed her the documents, it was she who told me I needed all those signatures! We'd had a film done, which I showed her, and in two days she had written me a very nice recommendation letter in the name of the Russian House of Folk Creativity that said the Yakut epos should enter the competition.

So I called Nikolai Yefimovich, "I'd like to meet with you. It's very urgent."

He said, "Okay, 5:00, come to the Yakutian *pospredstvo* (permanent place of residence for the Republic of Yakutia in Moscow)" and so I went and told him about what we wanted to do.

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<sup>143</sup> See [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=26807&URL\\_DO=DO\\_PRINTPAGE&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=26807&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html)

He said to me, “Okay, let’s just say olonkho becomes a [UNESCO] “Masterpiece.” Who is going to renew it? Who is going to work on it? It has completely disappeared!

And I told him, “Well, we have an Association of Olonkho in the Republic. They will work on it.”

“What’s this Association?” he said (just like a president!).

RH: What? He created it himself!

ES: ....and forgot!

I told him, “*You* are the president of the Association! You created it in 1999.” That stopped him short, and he began to pace back and forth.

Then he asked, “What do you need from me?” So I showed him all the work we had done and I told him we needed these signatures. I told him I would prepare the letters for the Minister of Culture, to get the signature of Minister Sokolov. And I told him I’d prepare the letter for the Minister of Foreign Affairs too. And told him to go to those Ministers and get their signatures, and then I would take it all to Paris, and get registered, so that we could participate as the Russian candidate.

Right away he grabbed the governmental telephone, and called the Minister of Culture. It was a Friday, and the Minister of Culture was going on Saturday to the Smolensk area, as it was the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mussorgsky, or something like that. In short, they talked and Mikhail Yefimovich [Nikolaev] says, “Can I go with you?” The Minister was happy, of course, to have him go, so they went together. And Sunday, Nikolaev calls me (and I have a ticket to go back to Yakutsk on Monday). He says “Get your ticket changed to an open return. You are going to get this finished, and only then will you go home.”

By that time, I had completely run out of money! Our business trips were always scheduled for a certain amount of time (i.e. and money). In short, I prepared the projects for these Ministers to sign and they said the Minister would be there at six in the evening. They said to come with my diskette and the forms; they would get it all set up and Sokolov would sign it.

I arrive at the Ministry at five o’clock, and no one would let me in. They said no one had invited me! I didn’t have a pass or anything. Somehow or other I slipped through, and made it to the reception room for the Minister of Culture. The secretaries were sitting there, one younger and one older and I told them, “I have come to see your Minister. He is supposed to sign this paper.”

They told me they did not know whether he was going to come or not.

I said, “Yes, I know he is. He’s at the Legislature Building now, and at six he is coming here.” While we are waiting for him to come, let’s get this letter printed out on your letterhead so it will be ready when he comes.” In short, I started bossing them around, and they were being very attentive and supportive.

We got everything printed out, and this guy all of the sudden shows up. The new minister, by the way, was Sokolov, and the folks sitting there were attached to the old minister and were on their way out, because he had chosen new workers. So anyway, this guy comes in to the office.

He grabbed the papers from me and says, “What in the world is this? What’s going on? Who gave you permission to do this?”

So I said, “And who exactly are *you* to tell *me* what to do?”

He just about exploded with apoplexy. “I am the *only* official representative of the Minister!”

And here I had asked him “Who are you?”... and was bossing him around! Then I became afraid and said, “Yes,... well, please....!”

So he read it and said, “Oh alright, let’s cut this and cut that” and I’m thinking to myself, “Cut it in a thousand places, just let him sign it!”

At six o’clock on the dot, Sokolov comes in, the tall, handsome Minister guy, takes it from me and signs it. I took it to the bookkeeper to get it all approved.

But I had to get the signature of the department of folklore first, but they had all been fired, and the new ones hadn’t shown up yet! I *had* to have those signatures for the bookkeeper to sign off, and the bookkeeper had to sign off or the document was not valid.

So I said to them, “My Lord God, nobody is *there*! What am I supposed to do?”

They say, “Oh alright.” And they approved it.

After that, on Wednesday or Thursday, Nikolaev went to Lavroviy, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. All I had left in the world was 50 rubes [\$2], and I still had several days left! So in short, I arrive at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with my diskette and my project for the Minister to sign.

The Minister drives up in his car, and I give it to him. He comes in and I stand there near the Ministry buildings.... The rain is pouring, and the wind is cold... I was frozen. So I crossed the road and went into a cafeteria and got a cup of coffee for 50 rubles. It’s a good thing that coffee was only 50 rubles then, and not the 250 it is now! I drank a cup of coffee on my last bit of money.

Nikolaev had told me, “You must, before you leave, get it approved by the bookkeeper.”

I was like, “What do you mean before I leave?”

He said, “If you don’t get that done, it won’t be valid.”

Anyway, after a couple of hours, the Minister comes out and throws the paper in my direction, and I jumped and grabbed it out of the air! Our “golden paper”! And that is how we got the only spot representing Russia for the competition.<sup>144</sup>

Sidorova’s efforts to have olonkho named as a UNESCO Masterpiece were far from a *fait accompli*, however. The Tatars, an ethnic group from the Republic of Tartarstan in the Volga Federal district, far to the west of Yakutia, had already lost one bid to have *sobontoi*, their epic genre, declared as a Masterpiece, and were determined to squeeze in line ahead of Yakutia. The deadline for registration in Paris was July 1st, and

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<sup>144</sup> Sidorova, 2011. [See DVD]

the jostling at the finish line and the bureaucratic posturing by government officials had begun in earnest:

By the time I got there, the Tatars had “woken up” (matured), and were going to try for a second time. They were preparing for the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kazan. They had an organizing committee at a national level in preparation for this, and the president of the organizing committee was President Putin! In short, they had *all* the cards in their hand! When they realized what we were doing, they began to lay siege to Paris. But UNESCO was rooting for us – the Yakut epos.

We were still struggling with our translation into English, as that was required. We had three or four people working on it, but then it had to be put together into one document, and the translation was so complex. In short, I asked them to wait until the 10<sup>th</sup> of July for the registration.

I arrived there on a Friday, and right that day Lavrov was at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and we met with the [UNESCO] General Director, and asked him to accept two candidates from Russia—the Tatar *sobontoi* and the Yakut epos. The General Director said, “All the rules are the same for all countries. This is your internal affair which candidate to put forward. Only one candidate!”

So I arrived at the ambassador for UNESCO, who was also rooting for our epos, and I said, “What should we do?” I had also called some of the ICH people too, and I told him, “I am going to go there and register us. I have all the needed signatures. Let them get their signatures and come and register when they can after me.” They didn’t have their signatures yet, and I did!

He agreed with me, and said, “Today the Minister flew back to Moscow. He will give his opinion on Monday and we will receive it a week from then. He may say that the Yakut epos should *not* be registered. Don’t tell anyone here at the *pospredstvo*, but here is my councilor; go with him to Paris and get registered. If it doesn’t work out, we will say you went on your own authority to register it.” (After all, they are diplomats! But I’m not.)

So I said, “Even if you forbade me to go and get registered, I would go anyway and get it done.” I told them, “Don’t worry, they can’t exile me any further away than Magadan... and Magadan in the winter is a *whole* lot warmer than Yakutia!! [uproarious laughter]. What’s there to be afraid of? I have never had, and never will, a diplomatic career! So don’t be afraid for me.”

I called Smeets and he came right away, and we got it registered, registered in the name of Russia. Poor Smeets spent ten days of his own personal vacation working on that with me in Paris! It was so incredibly hot... but he waited for the Yakut epos to be registered so that the Tatars didn’t cut in front of us. He held out so that they wouldn’t do that, isn’t that great?<sup>145</sup>

Sidorova’s story poured out, as she recounted the work during the intervening months until November 2005, when the voting and competition results were announced.

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<sup>145</sup> Sidorova, 2011. [See DVD]

She painted a picture of intrigue and maneuvering, but pointed out as well that Yakutia's application not only won the award, but set a standard for excellence:

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of November when they announced the winners, the [UNESCO] General Director said in his concluding remarks that the very best material was provided for the Yakut olonkho, that it had been very scholarly, very grounded, the best packet of materials among them all! All the other countries should try to follow that model.<sup>146</sup>

The result of their triumph back in Yakutia was predictably jubilant. Sidorova, with her team of scholars and olonkho enthusiasts, had achieved an international coup of sorts, and the Republic of Yakutia erupted in celebration. She recounted:

When we arrived home, there was jubilation! Everyone rejoiced, and from that time, we have moved forward with enthusiasm in every form of olonkho. In the oral form, and in the theater, in teaching methods, ballet, opera, the Yakut circus even puts on olonkhos; they do a great job with the demons! The Dance Ensemble has done some performances too. So, we work! And it is very interesting.<sup>147</sup>

UNESCO's pronouncement is cited by most Sakha people as the primary impetus for olonkho revitalization. Sergei Vasiliev, at the Northeastern Federal University in Yakutsk, said:

When the status of "Masterpiece" was announced by UNESCO, there was a very emotional reaction of joy on the part of many people and an explosion of activity to begin putting the plan into place. Even Russian physics professors approached me with their sincere congratulations and delight at the pronouncement. It was especially appreciated by the "carriers" (performers) who felt affirmed and valued by this pronouncement.<sup>148</sup>

Anna Larionova stated that the 2005 UNESCO Masterpiece proclamation "turned things around in the direction of support for olonkho."<sup>149</sup> It was not just scholars, however, who named the Masterpiece Declaration as the turning-point for olonkho revitalization. Many

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<sup>146</sup> Sidorova, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. [See DVD]

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Sergei Vasiliev, Director of "Olonkho Informational Sytem" at SVFU in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on June 24, 2010. From field notes of our conversation.

<sup>149</sup> From field notes of a conversation with Larionova in Malden, Massachusetts, on April 19, 2010.

ordinary Sakha citizens, both musicians and non-musicians alike, expressed similar opinions on this subject.<sup>150</sup>

In celebration of UNESCO's proclamation of olonkho as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," a billboard four stories high was placed on a building at the central bus stop in the capital city of Yakutsk and the Sakha Republic's president, Vyacheslav Shtyrov, issued a decree declaring an "Olonkho Decade 2006-2015," calling for legislation to support ten years of government-sponsored programs for the preservation, study, and promulgation of olonkho.<sup>151</sup> That legislation, Yakutia's "Action Plan" for olonkho safeguarding, was drafted over the next year and signed into law in March of 2007.

#### Olonkho reception at the time of the Masterpiece declaration

Dekabrina Vinokurova is a scholar and researcher at IGI, and has been researching olonkho and its reception with other colleagues since 2004. Her 2007 article was the result of research undertaken shortly after the Masterpiece declaration (see Appendix F for a full translation). In this article, Vinokurova surveyed 505 people in Yakutsk and the town of Berdigestyakh to examine levels of familiarity with olonkho.

In summarizing her research results, Vinokurova makes it clear that an appreciation for olonkho was not widespread at the time. Only 3% of the respondents said they were admirers or fans of olonkho, and those claiming complete disinterest in olonkho totaled 15% of respondents. Among the Sakha respondents alone, close to 20% had never heard olonkho. The other 80% had heard it at events like the national ethnic

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<sup>150</sup> For example, interviews with Dmitri Krivoshapkin, Valentina Ustrushkova, Anastasia Ivanova in Berdigestyakh, Yakutia, on June 20, 2010.

<sup>151</sup> See the decree at [http://olonkho.net/russian/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1102](http://olonkho.net/russian/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1102).

Ysyakh festival (53%) or through concerts featuring “performing artists” (17%), who performed memorized sections of olonkho for exhibition purposes (Vinokurova 2007, 113).<sup>152</sup>

When participants in the survey were asked about the prognosis for revitalizing olonkho, 43% believed olonkho would disappear. Another 25% believed olonkho would become at most a hobby for amateurs. Only 24% of respondents gave it a prognosis of likely rebirth. The most likely reasons for its demise were listed by respondents as being the small numbers of true olonkhosuts (32%); declining interest in olonkho (28%); and lack of focused, systematic work toward supporting olonkho (11%), with 3% listing deeper reasons and a full 27% not answering the question at all (Vinokurova 2007, 114).<sup>153</sup>

Ekaterina Romanova, a specialist in mythology and ritual studies at IGI and author of several articles on olonkho, talked with me about the early efforts to popularize olonkho through festivals and theatrical presentations like the “Ysyakh Olonkho:”

Of course we understand that this is an innovation. We should be careful to put forth the tradition in a way that will not bring harm to it. I would have liked very much for them, when they began to write the scenarios for the Ysyakh Olonkho, that they would have done it in a way that didn’t turn it into some kind of “performance” (show).<sup>154</sup>

While noting her concerns about wanting to protect the tradition from harm, Romanova also acknowledged that it is important to carefully define “tradition” and she asked me my definition of tradition. When I said I believe that tradition is comprised of many

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<sup>152</sup> Statistics quoted here are rounded to the nearest percent. See Appendix F for details.

<sup>153</sup> It is important to note that this research was carried out as the government-sponsored efforts to revitalize olonkho were just beginning. It is likely that the 11% who did not observe efforts in supporting olonkho would now, five years later, answer differently, as the level of top-down (from the government to the people) communication supporting olonkho is now quite strong. Since current research is forthcoming in the next year, this information will become available soon.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with ethnographer Ekaterina Romanova in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 8, 2011. [See DVD]

layers of innovation laid down over the years, she responded, “Absolutely right! It was very nice for me to hear that you agreed with me on this point. Because some people think it should be just the same way it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it can never be that way again!”<sup>155</sup> This was a common theme I heard in response to my questions about the future of olonkho; as important as it is for olonkho to maintain its connections to traditional performance practice, it must also be renewed through innovation, as the level of interest in traditional olonkho performance has not been very high.

#### State of olonkho reception in 2011

Researchers like Vinokurova, Zhegusov, Romanov, and their colleagues at IGI are continuing their investigations into the current level of knowledge and attitudes toward olonkho in eight (about one quarter) of the regions of the Republic. They say if they had more researchers, they would be in more regions. Their work is still in progress and their results are not due to be published until 2012. Thus, my conversation with them, just as they returned from a period of field research, was to get a preliminary overview of what they are learning, and to see if it matched the conclusions I was coming to in my own fieldwork.

I found we were all discovering similar trends, most specifically the trend toward few appreciative audiences for the traditional olonkho performance. This was distinctly visible at the olonkho summer festivals of 2009 and 2010. Vinokurova’s response was a familiar refrain I had heard from many others, including the olonkhosuts themselves:

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<sup>155</sup> Romanova, 2011. [See DVD]

“There weren’t many listeners!...That *sreda* no longer exists.”<sup>156</sup> There are exceptions to this overall trend, ameliorating this generally grim prognosis.

One of these encouraging elements is the “enthusiast” crowd, a scattering of people who are fascinated by olonkho and willing to work very hard to see it revitalized. One enthusiast, Dora Gerasimova, was my traveling companion during my 2010 field research. On our way back to the capital city from the *Ysyakh* summer festival, I asked her what she had learned there about olonkho and her impressions about what she had seen and heard. She replied:

I came to understand many things at that Ysyakh. We have not heard olonkho for two, or three, or even four generations. We grew up almost without olonkho. So I saw that olonkho is sung pretty much in the old way. That’s what I observed and heard. It’s almost the same as it was, especially in the texts, which were all similar. This very much surprised me—the main idea of olonkho: that there is a description of nature, then the description of the warrior hero who saves the girl... and that’s it, I didn’t see anything new in those olonkhos. How can I say this? I was disconcerted, or however you say it in Russian, because maybe the interest in olonkho is being extinguished among the people because of this.

It appears that the government is trying to revitalize our culture, but among the people I have not seen much (regarding olonkho). It only seems to be interesting to the performers themselves, that’s all. Because people are not used to listening, and they probably already know all the things that olonkho talks about; like a fairy tale that tells how the girl is rescued from the evil spirits by the warrior-hero. I liked that they performed *Jëbiriëljin Bërgën*,<sup>157</sup> I liked it very much, the theatrical version that they did at the opening. That was new.<sup>158</sup>

When I asked her about the level of audience engagement for the solo-performed, traditional form of olonkho, she answered,

There were virtually no listeners! There were performers, and you all, and me and that’s all. Even the children who came to perform from my ulus, the Megino-Khangalas Ulus, they were telling their teacher that they didn’t want to perform, and when she asked why, they said, “There aren’t any listeners; nobody needs

<sup>156</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>157</sup> A theatrical version of the olonkho “Jëbiriëljin Bërgën” (“Дьэбириэлдьин Бэргэн”) by S. G. Alekseyev-*Uustarabys* (local olonkhosut of the last century) was performed for the opening ceremonies.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Dora Gerasimova, Sakha amateur musician, in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on June 24, 2010. [See DVD]

this.” They (the children) kind of wanted to be involved in olonkho, but the fact that there weren’t any listeners is, of course, very bad.<sup>159</sup>

Pyotr Reshetnikov, master olonkhosut, also mused with regret about the lack of enthusiastic audiences for olonkho performance.

I have been to many festivals of olonkhosuts here in my own republic, the very best of the olonkhosuts. Of course they don’t let me participate in the competition. I recount, like in a master-class, olonkhos, and I listen to olonkhos. If you look at those events, they give 20 minutes, or maximum half an hour—that’s all! So they are not recounting all over the place, not singing olonkho, so it is not developing. Olonkhosuts can’t exist in those conditions! Like I said, there isn’t a community of listeners. I will tell you about a funny episode that happened:

Last year they invited me to the House of Culture of the Republic (named after Kulakovskii) and videotaped me there. At first there were two listeners, and they were listening pretty well. Then later on, there was only one operator and that one began to sleep! The cassette was for one hour. I’m recounting the olonkho, and thinking that the hour is up, and so I began to wake up the operator. If that is the kind of listeners we have, then olonkhosuts will not develop. We have a saying, “*If there are a lot of listeners, then the olonkhosuts will sing with feeling.*” But if the listener sleeps, the olonkhosut can’t sing, of course.<sup>160</sup>

The lack of attentive audiences was only observed in response to the traditional solo form of olonkho, however. Grand scale theatrical presentations of olonkho are a regular feature of large Ysyakh summer festivals, with hundreds of performers, dancers, staging, props, animals, and all the main characters of the olonkho story.<sup>161</sup> They are quite popular and apparently enjoyed by all ages.

### Key elements of change in olonkho performance

The following section summarizes some of the common threads concerning change during the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. In particular, I examine the verbal responses of audiences, the transformation of olonkho from an oral-based to literature-

<sup>159</sup> Gerasimova, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>160</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>161</sup> At <http://vimeo.com/37968248>, see “Ysyakh Olonkho Festival Montage.” [See DVD]

based art form, emerging derivatives of olonkho, the role of youth in olonkho performance, and the importance of broad Sakha language fluency in olonkho reception.

### *Audience verbal response*

It is important to note a characteristic of early olonkho performance—the audience’s audible interaction with the olonkhosut as they became engrossed in the story. Writers ranging from Soviet-era archeologist Okladnikov (1970, 266) to modern accounts (Harris and Fortunato 2010, 113) have documented this feature. Similar phenomena in other epic traditions parallel this such as Korean *p’ansori* (Pihl 1993),<sup>162</sup> the *Sunjiata* of Mali (Johnson 1992), Japanese *kabuki* theater, and the *Pabuji* epic of northern India (Jang 2001, 103n).

Chekhorduna, in remembering her own childhood, described the driving force behind the audience’s verbal responses, saying that they often were directed at characters in the stories:

Sometimes they are responses of empathy, like for the plight of the girl who is in captivity among the demons; they empathize with her verbally. Or they are amazed at the feats of the heroes, or even the feats of the villains. The timbre of their responses are expressive, and reflect their emotional response.<sup>163</sup>

When asked why people don’t respond much verbally during modern olonkho performances, she pointed to a general disengagement with the olonkhosut, replying:

They don’t get into the *temp* (rhythm). They can’t get into the rhythm of the olonkho. They just listen and try to understand what is being recounted. The

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<sup>162</sup> “Historically, *p’ansori* has always been in a state of flex; the *kwangdae* were very responsive to the tastes of their audiences, “adding here and deleting there, emphasizing one theme at the expense of another, all in order to shape a whole that would gain the beset response from the audience of the moment and hence, financial reward... In this sense, popular audiences of the early nineteenth century were parties to the act of composition and thus had an indirect role in shaping the content and emphasis of *p’ansori* songs” (Pihl 1993, 229).

<sup>163</sup> Chekhorduna, 2011. [See DVD]

listeners of an earlier time, the listeners during my mother's time, they could go right away into the rhythm of the olonkho. They would *live* with the characters of the stories for three days! Live in the world of olonkho. They would go, with the olonkhosut on his horse, the horse of the warrior-hero, to the upper world, the underworld, the middle world, they could go everywhere with him. Only *then* do you get that kind of reaction. If you don't have that, you won't get the reaction, and in fact, they can even fall asleep. They fall out of the rhythm! They get tired, after all.

The *mir olonkho* (the world of olonkho)—that is the real olonkho. This is what we are trying to pass along to children. We should have been creating this kind of *sreda* of olonkho for children. [...] Olonkho is of course an heroic epos. It tells about light powers and dark powers—that's required. So it helps preschool children to develop wonderful aesthetics.<sup>164</sup>

Chekhorduna's use of the term "aesthetics" in this case is best translated, not as "artistic aesthetics," but more in terms of spiritual aesthetics, that is, forming in children an *obraz myshleniia*, or "a way of thinking" which includes value judgments about what is good and evil. These are worldview issues; she feels they are important for children.

As audiences changed and the epic *sreda*—the attentive, appreciative atmosphere valuing olonkho—disappeared, the audience's traditional verbal response also waned, making it difficult for olonkhosuts to perform at their best. This, in turn, produced shorter performances, creating a cycle of less and less attention to the actual performance of traditional olonkho.

### *Transformation to literature-based art form*

The movement away from orality to literacy during the Soviet period clearly had a significant effect on olonkho. Vinokurova's primary conclusion from her research in 2007 was that literacy was the primary factor leading to the demise of the improvisational art. She reports:

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<sup>164</sup> Chekhorduna, 2011. [See DVD]

With the appearance of written language and literature, people began to collect olonkhos and turn them into literature, as well as studying and interpreting them. In time, they began increasingly to use pre-processed texts of olonkho. Little by little, professional artists and amateur performers learned to perform olonkho as a pre-memorized work. In this way, there was a process in which the performance of olonkho and its actual creation (authorship) became divided. This led to a loss of the originally unified creator-performer aspect and variability of olonkho. (Vinokurova 2007, 109)

There appear to be only a few olonkhosuts alive today capable of improvisatory creation. Although it is possible that there may be more than the two acknowledged master olonkhosuts, they have not yet been recognized. I asked Elizaveta Sidorova (co-chair of the UNESCO committee) why there weren't more olonkhosuts. She said there was a committee responsible for reviewing the candidates, but in her opinion, "They should not pick masses of them, just those who are worthy, those who work with children, those who pass along the tradition."<sup>165</sup> But it is also quite possible that increasing numbers of written olonkho texts in Yakutia are having a dampening effect on the olonkhosut's improvisatory art. Lord wrote that fixed written texts actually have the effect of attenuating the practice of an oral tradition:

The oral singer thinks in terms of these formulas and formula patterns. He *must* do so in order to compose. But when writing enters, the "must" is eliminated. The formulas and formula patterns can be broken... An *oral* text will yield a predominance of clearly demonstrable formulas... A *literary* text will show a predominance of nonformulaic expressions. (2000, 130)

Scholars (and even public figures) in Yakutia also hold this opinion. The vice-speaker of parliament, Aleksandr Zhirkov, said in a speech in November 2011 that he is concerned recordings and printed publication of olonkho are causing performers to "follow each letter of the text."<sup>166</sup> He believes that because of this, olonkho's foremost inimitability—

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Elizaveta Sidorova in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 7, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>166</sup> 28.11.11 – YCIA – "Deputies of Il Tumen participate in the Decade of Olonkho" (See [http://www.ysia.ru/full-news.php?id\\_news=46556](http://www.ysia.ru/full-news.php?id_news=46556)). Accessed December 1, 2011.

improvisation—is slowly being lost. Furthermore, written texts should not be considered “definitive” in any case, since each master olonkhosut’s performance is different. It is therefore impossible to transcribe a text by filling in the holes on successive performances; this merely results in a composite text. This was aptly illustrated and documented in the experience of the research team who wrote the *Monuments* volume, translating, transcribing, and analyzing the olonkhko *Ėr Sogotokh* using two different performances by the same olonkhosut. They encountered endless trouble, especially in notation, as there were significant differences between the two performances (1996, 44). Because they documented the problems they encountered, we have a clear picture of olonkho’s oral, malleable nature. Ultimately, written versions can strongly affect its performance as a verbal art.

### *Derivatives of olonkho*

Although olonkho derivatives such as theatrical performances began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these performances have been ongoing, although rare, throughout the Soviet period.<sup>167</sup> For example, P.A. Oiyunskiy’s *Tuiaaryma Kyo* was performed in 1938, and his musical-drama/olonkho *Nyurgun Botur the Swift* was adapted for the stage by M. Zhirkov and G. Litinskogo in 1947. At the current time, staged performances are undergoing a rebirth by folklore collectives (Biliukina 2006, 125). In addition to this, the government sponsored “Theater of Olonkho” was created by the 2007 legislation for revitalizing olonkho. Andrei Borisov, the Minister of Culture directs it himself. Many feel that olonkho’s future is in these popular staged versions.

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<sup>167</sup> The First Yakut theater performance was the setting of the olonkho “Udaliy dobriy molodets Bèrièt Bèrgèn” in 1906 and “Bogatyr Kulantai na rezhvom kone” in 1907 (Biliukina 2006, 125).

Yuri Zhegusov [YZ], in a discussion about olonkho derivatives, first mentioned the move from oral forms to literature-based forms, which were, along with theater, the first offshoots of olonkho. He then recounted his understanding of other derivatives that appeared, along with his vision of what further changes might be useful for popularizing olonkho. He also mentioned the problem of quality control—when derivatives lose the core of what makes them feel “right” to Sakha people. His observations, along with those of Dekabrina Vinokurova [DV], were quite interesting:

YZ: [After the written form], it became available in audio form (records) and was played on the radio. The next stage was in the visual arts; Stepan Timofeev put it into visual form... He was the first to incarnate olonkho into pictures so that people could not just hear it, but to see it as well. Then the next stage was needed, something that was audio-visual like animation or films. But this has not happened yet.

RH: I hear they did an animated film recently.

YZ: Well, they wanted to do an animated version, but it turned out to be a kind of Hollywood version. Not the real thing, more like an imitation (reflection) of some kind.

DV: Not truly “national.” The people that did it didn’t know Sakha language, it’s possible that they didn’t even read olonkho, didn’t even listen to it maybe; this is the kind of people who made that film.

YZ: Yes, a lot of dilettantes have grabbed onto olonkho. Comics are the latest thing—have you seen those? Some kind of girl who doesn’t even know the language or have an artistic education has made *Nyurgun Botur* into some kind of a striptease [both chuckle]. You look at it, and it’s just not the real thing. I have talked to experts and they say that many dilettantes have begun to create things.

DV: You should note this [in your reporting], unfortunately.

YZ: The person who did the film just wanted to make money.

DV: And after the [Masterpiece] proclamation, it became a fad. Anyone who is not too lazy latches on to it and some projects are more successful, some are less successful. This is a natural process. There are always those who want to “get in on the act,” as they say.<sup>168</sup>

Although olonkho revitalization is attracting enough attention to call it a “fad,” some who are “getting in on the act” are doing so from sincere motives, even if they are amateurs and not sure if their results are approved by scholars. Furthermore, some are interested in

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<sup>168</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

seeing new stories written for olonkho performance. For example, Dora Gerasimova believes new stories would be more interesting for audiences, stories that reflect the worldview, values, and modern life of Sakha people. She said, “Most people now say that olonkho is backward. It’s kind of like no one is interested... But it seems to me that we need to exchange the contents of olonkho and bring in the new, and then maybe there will be a reawakening of interest, I think.”<sup>169</sup>

Gerasimova has been inspired by the example of Maria Kononova, who wrote a poem featuring elements of olonkho which was based on the Creation story recorded in the Bible. Although some people in her denomination have traditionally viewed olonkho as belonging entirely to their “pagan” past, Kononova and others feel there are some striking parallels between some characteristics of olonkho plots, worldview, and values, and their own Christian belief system.<sup>170</sup> When Kononova’s olonkho–styled creation story was performed in Ulan Ude (central Siberia) at a Christian “Ethno” festival there, the audience received it with great enthusiasm. It was also performed by children at a grade school in Churapcha, Yakutia for their lessons in “national culture.”<sup>171</sup>

While their critics express dismay at this unusual use of olonkho, there are increasing numbers of people who believe olonkho can be revitalized in the context of Sakha Christianity. Alekseyev observed,

The very idea of creation in both olonkho and the Bible, an understanding of how the world was created, and how it developed—these are close, archetypal ideas. We see similar ideas in many religious books, inspired books. For that reason, it seems to me that when we see living offshoots that combine religion and olonkho, we will discover a type of living “hybrid,” if you can call it that.

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<sup>169</sup> Gerasimova, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>170</sup> Interview with church pastor Valeri Sidorenko (Russian) in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 10, 2011.

<sup>171</sup> Personal correspondence with Maria Kononova, December 15, 2011.

In any case, I imagine that it is quite possible that through the means of olonkho, one might be able to convey some of the concepts and ideas which lie at the heart of religious books. Not the details, this is an important point... but the most important things, such as faith in one's belief system and one's worldview. I am prepared to believe these experiments will yield interesting results.<sup>172</sup>

Valeri Burtsev, the Sakha pastor of a church in Yakutsk, agreed, noting that change will be necessary for sustainability. He said, "We need new themes for olonkho so that people will get enthused! ...And olonkho might then go further and develop."<sup>173</sup>

Other olonkho derivatives during the post-Soviet period have been seen in Sakha arts and crafts such as knitting and crocheting (both with horsehair and with yarn), carving (with wood, mammoth bone, and stone), and paper cutting. Olonkho-themed rugs and hangings made with yarn, leather, fur, and other materials are also popular (see Appendix G). At each summer Ysyakh festival, there are exhibitions and booths set up with these products, available for sale to festival-goers.

One of those olonkho derivative exhibitors is Valentina Ustrushkova [VU], who creates large knitted wall hangings on olonkho-related themes. I asked her about her work, and was surprised to hear that she chose olonkho as a theme even before olonkho revitalization started in earnest; the spark that set her off was an unusual experience with none other than Gavril Kolesov himself, once again testifying to the power of his performances:

VU: I was in the hospital for a long time and over the years, as a result of nothing to do, I learned how to knit and crochet, and am now a specialist in it. After I went on disability, I began to create clothes and sweaters, but at exhibitions, people were not that interested in knitted things. So I began to search for a theme, and found the theme of olonkho. I have been doing this now for ten years on the theme of olonkho.

The young people.... Well, olonkho is very difficult (complex) to read these days, but if a person can see it, if young people see it, then it is easier for

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<sup>172</sup> Alekseyev, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Sakha pastor Valeri Burtsev in Yakutsk, Yakutia, on December 12, 2011. [See DVD]

them to receive it. So I thought about it and began to do [works on the theme of] olonkho. Then when I had done this for three years, it became a “Masterpiece of UNESCO” and now I travel around to all the *ysyakh*s on the theme of olonkho and set up these displays.

RH: So then, you began to knit on the olonkho theme even before it was named a Masterpiece?!

VU: Well, because in those years it had been kind of forgotten. There were no olonkhosuts.

RH: Why [do you say] “forgotten”?

VU: Well, in those days there weren’t olonkhosuts, as such, just concert numbers. *Toyuksuts* (praise song singers) would sing them. One time we got a visitor to our town—the performer who did the *Nyurgun Botur* records, Gavril Kolesov—and he came for a concert. But in the hall there were only 3–4 people who came to listen! It was so disappointing to me! His face just fell, totally changed, and I felt so sorry for him. I thought to myself, “If a person is willing to do this kind of thing, I want to help him in some way.” I felt I owed him this, so with my knitting I created this work. It’s impossible to haul around large pictures of olonkho, but my works are transportable. So, through UNESCO, when olonkho was defended as a Masterpiece, they took it with them to Paris. And through [this work], I was in New York.

RH: Your work was in New York! Is that so?!

VU: I have the paper to prove it. They were in New York, without me, but sent me the papers. I took my olonkho work with me and traveled a year and a half ago to a conference on Turkology, or whatever it’s called. I took my work on the “Nine *Aiyy*” (our Yakut gods) and traveled there. I was able to find common ground with them; it was really interesting and fun. So I’m glad that I chose [the topic of] olonkho for my work.

When children.... You know they have competitions for children-olonkhosuts sometimes. And they say that when they have these [works] nearby with these kinds of *bogatyrs* (warrior-heroes) and heroes of olonkho, it helps them to better *vosprinimaetsya* (receive/experience) the olonkhos, and they perform better; that’s what the children say. So it appears that I chose my theme well.

RH: So in this way you are supporting the revitalization of olonkho?

VU: Yes, in some way it has helped this masterpiece to be restored, I think.<sup>174</sup>

Ustrushkova’s delight in her part of olonkho revitalization is hard to miss; I conclude that the current widespread engagement in other (non-musical) artistic domains to depict olonkho themes has a connection to the pride that many Sakha feel toward the genre.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with artist Valentina Ustrushkova in Berdigestyakh, Yakutia, on June 20, 2010. [See DVD]

They are delighted that it belongs to them and is now being recognized “by the world” (via UNESCO) as a Masterpiece of humanity.<sup>175</sup>

When I was touring the Yakutsk National Gymnasia (a grade school and high school specializing in teaching national culture), the young Student Body President was my tour guide. When he showed me the studio for the rock band they have there, I asked him if there was any influence in the rock scene coming from olonkho. He told me that in 2007, there was none whatsoever, but ever since then (for the last four years), it has been increasing every year. He said that “ethno” themes, including themes from olonkho, are increasingly appearing in the rock music performed at festivals. This phenomenon is a sign that the revitalization of olonkho among children and youth is having an effect, not just in performing traditional music, but contemporary musical expressions as well. One wonders whether these kinds of themes are coming from a true interest in olonkho or whether there is a perception that rock themes on olonkho are “cutting edge” or in some way reflect national ideals, giving these songs an edge when it comes to winning a prize. These are good questions for further study.

### *Sakha language vitality*

One of olonkho’s features that poses enormous barriers to revitalization is its archaic language, at once a primary source of greatness and yet a source of difficulty in accessibility for modern audiences. As far back as 1896, Seroshevskii noted that the language of olonkho contained archaisms that even the olonkhosuts themselves did not understand, but which they stubbornly repeated in their recounting (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1993, 589). It is therefore not surprising that over a century later, the language of olonkho is still

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<sup>175</sup> For pictures of some examples of Ustruchkova’s and others’ works, see Appendix G.

obscure to Sakha ears. Vinokurova and Zhegusov, in recounting the results of their recent field research to me, underscored the difficulty of transmitting the olonkho tradition when the level of Sakha language vocabulary, especially for descriptive imagery, is declining:

DV: They say that they don't understand the archaic language, especially the children with whom I talked. They say it is very difficult to understand—it is not very accessible. I don't know if our linguists will be able to do something with these archaisms, if someone will take on this task. Even in Russian language, there are a lot of archaisms, old Russian works that are now difficult to understand, and that are published with commentaries now, at least they did during the Soviet times, I don't know if they do now. So this is a problem now, especially for young people, and for middle-aged people.[...]

YZ: The most important thing in transmission is language. In order to listen well to olonkho, you need to really know Yakut language very well. If you don't know Yakut well, it's useless to try and listen to it.

DV: Even Yakut people sometimes struggle with the archaisms in olonkho. There are many, many archaisms.

RH: This is a difficult problem then...

YZ: The process of language loss is speeding up. The use of borrowed words and jargon is growing, foreign words.

DV: Let me tell you what! I teach children too, and they can't speak normally in either Yakut *or* Russian! They stand there and simply can't say anything. I tell them to say it in their own mother tongue, and they can't say it in that language either! How in the world are they going to deal with something like olonkho, where all the "salt" of the language is concentrated! The imagery, and the archaisms, and all that, and when the language is on a primitive level, or even a neutral level, the academic level isn't understandable.

YZ: Nowadays, people don't have an imagination anymore. It used to be when people heard olonkho, they didn't have mass media, so they used their imaginations.

DV: In general, they say that Yakut language is imagery-oriented.

YZ: Nowadays, they have all of the images already pre-processed and ready to show you.

DV: If I am honest, even I struggle with a speech that doesn't use visual aids [laughter].<sup>176</sup>

We talked further about the chances that olonkho will be revitalized in its traditional form, and whether there are forms that might successfully hold the the modern generation of listeners' attention. Vinokurova and Zhegusov felt that change and derivatives are

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<sup>176</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

inevitable if olonkho is to experience a renewed popularity, and that the traditional form of solo performance will continue to experience decline.

RH: What is your opinion about the future possibilities for olonkho?

YZ: Probably we just need to change to another means of transmission for the young generation.

RH: What means are you thinking about in particular?

YZ: I think maybe something like film; this is what people tell me: “It would be so great to have an olonkho film in the style of *Lord of the Rings*.” ...They tell me that it would be so interesting if it had special effects and all that.

DV: After all, the story itself is really a “fantasy” story, so that’s maybe why there seems to be a pull toward doing a film in the fantasy genre.

YZ: Also, maybe through the help of music.

DV: Like opera, or theatrical presentations.

YZ: They are showing it the theater now, you know [...] I haven’t ever been, but my brother, he went to see *Nyurgun Botur the Swift*, and he said, “Finally, I understand what olonkho is!”

DV: And by the way, children’s reception of these kinds of presentations is really strong! It attracts their attention.

RH: If I’m understanding you correctly, then, you’re saying that there is little hope that the live tradition will be passed along the oral tradition.

DV: Yes, the oral tradition won’t be passed along. Because you yourself saw what happens at these performances for the olonkho festivals. I was also in Borogontsi myself, and was talking to people... in a focus group that I had gathered, and they said that the olonkhosuts had left that festival completely offended, because there were so few listeners, and they were taken off to some kind of a not very great place for their performances, and there was the circus performances and all that.

But this is a natural process, basically. This isn’t because we’re such bad people. It’s a result of the “mass-ness” of those venues. This is not a “mass” art, you will agree! And the further we get from the traditional venue, the more it becomes an elite art, for the specialists. So to make it a “mass” art, you have to do it in a different way, new methods.

I even had this put into our questionnaire, and people responded that you needed to change it. You have to change it! The traditional performances are only for the specialists—for the elite.

YZ: Like classical music is in the West, where rich people go to performances and all that.<sup>177</sup>

In summarizing their views, Vinokurov and Zhegusov agreed that olonkho’s disappearance is due to the fact that the “appreciative audiences” disappeared. Many Sakha people have even stopped listening to radio due to their busy lifestyles. In addition,

<sup>177</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

the influence of mass media and an over-abundance of information all have contributed to the disappearance of olonkho. Vinokurova added one last comment, clarifying that Soviet ideology has played a role in olonkho's decline:

The government of the Soviet Union was rather passive about this...they didn't have any goals or anything regarding olonkho. If people wanted to listen they could, but they didn't promote it. They didn't have any competitions, or anything like that. If they had, it might have been preserved to this day. So you should note this one-sided level of activity for spreading information and that's all.<sup>178</sup>

When I asked master olonkhosut Pyotr Reshetnikov about olonkho's future, he emphasized that the improvisatory nature of traditional solo olonkho performance may have an important role in preserving the Sakha language, an issue about which he is clearly concerned:

Just as was acknowledged by UNESCO, olonkho is the unique work of an individual person—the olonkhosut. The great Suoron Omolloon [Sivtsev] wrote and said that the olonkhosut is “the one and only performer/actor of the grand theater of olonkho.” He performs all the roles of all the heroes, which can be more than 30; around 40 can happen in one olonkho. And the olonkhosut creates all the heroes with various words, motifs, toyuk songs, with different tones, and during the performance they create the words and plot of the olonkho, which is why it turns out so long. They don't learn them for memory!... When he tells an olonkho, the needed words come from within him, which is why he is called an *iye-olonkhosut* (master olonkhosut)—that's the kind of olonkhosut he is.

So this is why I say that olonkho could only be developed further in the Republic of Yakutia—because our leadership, as well as our scholars, our linguists are all turning their attention to the development of Yakut language, because in Asia, Yakut language is already considered an ancient language.

Some say that our Yakut language will be forgotten within 50–60 years, as a language of the people. So there is a danger. In Yakutsk [the capital], our children are not speaking in Yakut, and olonkho is not understood at all! ... This is not only in Yakutsk, but even in the uluses (regions) we can see this kind of behavior.

So now, through olonkho, they are turning their attention on the development of their mother tongue, the Yakut language, because as a people, we should preserve our own language, Yakut language.

So for that reason, there are good prospects for the development of olonkho. That's it in a nutshell.<sup>179</sup>

<sup>178</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>179</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

The connection between language vitality and olonkho mentioned by Reshetnikov was a recurring theme in a number of interviews as well as in archival and written resources. For example, in 2010, Vera Solovyeva interviewed me for a video being created for the Sakha Diaspora Internet site that she manages with her husband Zhargal. The interview was focused on my study of olonkho revitalization, but Solovyeva connected that topic to what she perceived as an alarming trend of waning interest by the federal government for Sakha language development. She told me,

The reason they stopped supporting it is because of the political powers that are on high. Because of that, there's a danger that if there aren't teachers of Sakha language, if the Federal program won't support them, they'll just teach the Russian language. So there's a danger that eventually the Sakha language will just disappear.<sup>180</sup>

This concern about language revitalization appears to be connected in people's minds to the topic of olonkho. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kulakovskii reflected on how sitting “under the mouth” (listening to olonkho) as a child created the desire to learn Sakha language better (Cruikshank and Argunova 2000, 109). Reshetnikov expressed the hope that the threat of Sakha language decline will motivate the government to continue to support olonkho. But there are contradictions between peoples' vision of how this works out. Some hope for olonkho's language to be modernized so it will reach broader audiences; others want for the archaic language to be preserved and for audiences to grow in their comprehension of the older words. The one thing they agree on is that there is a tie between Sakha language vitality and Sakha epos appreciation.

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with Coordinator of “Sakha Diaspora” Internet site, Vera Solovyeva, in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 10, 2010. [See DVD] For the online video, see <http://vimeo.com/37109431>.

### *Youth and olonkho*

Another factor which characterizes olonkho performance in modern contexts is youth involvement. Some are being trained in olonkho and encouraged to participate in olonkho competitions, performances, and research. During the Soviet years, Pukhov wrote that childhood is the best time for learning the art of olonkho. He maintained that through repeated exposure to the improvisational art of olonkho and opportunities to practice before relatives and neighbors, not only did the number of young olonkhosuts grow, the size of audiences did too:

Olonkho was learned from childhood. In the past, it was not rare to meet children 5–7 years old who could not yet sing, but were completely familiar with the texts of enormously long olonkhos and who re-told them to other children. Most of the outstanding olonkhosuts learned their skills at a young age. (1962, 8)

Pyotr Reshetnikov was privileged to grow up hearing olonkho because of his father's habit of gathering olonkhosuts for performances:

In my youth, my father was a nobleman of the third Noshkhomskii *nasleg* (region)—which was called Baturusskii *ulus* (county) at the time—here in Cherkëkh. He loved to listen to olonkho. So he would gather together all the best olonkhosuts from nearby—Churapchinskii and Tatinskii uluses—and listened to them. So from our earliest childhood we listened to olonkho. Olonkho is attractive to all listeners, including children. Although we were small children, all the same, it was very interesting to us to hear the best olonkhosuts.<sup>181</sup>

Although he only began to perform olonkho later in life, he credited his performing ability to those early years of intense olonkho exposure and to what he perceives as the right genes: “I’ve listened to olonkho from my childhood, good olonkhosuts. Secondly, if you take into account genes, my older brother and my grandfather were also olonkhosuts. Something is probably passed along from that direction, maybe—don’t you think?”<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>182</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

He also talked about his work with children in the town where he lived. One of the roles of a government-recognized master olonkhosut is being available to teach this art to the next generation. Because there are so few master olonkhosuts, this does not happen in many places around the Republic, but it is a good model that, if replicated in more places, would likely have a positive impact on the sustainability of olonkho traditional solo performance. He explained:

I have been attached to the preschool “Alënushka” in Cherkëkh. This preschool is the only one which is training children “in the spirit” of olonkho, through an “olonkho method.” Preschool teachers and children’s workers come in from around the republic, from the uluses, for seminars... and they often invite me to go and teach.

I wrote three half-hour olonkhos for children, and one hour-long olonkho. Two of these olonkhos... have been printed in books this year. They printed many copies which are being used around the Republic in preschools. Because recently there has been a lot of attention given to the training of children in their own mother tongue and in the traditions of their people. This is the kind of preschool in Cherkëkh. They came from the institute expressly for the purpose of attaching me to the preschool. And I often perform for them. Preschool children, although they are small, do a good job of performing the roles of heroes in olonkho.<sup>183</sup>

Regarding the practical benefits for children studying olonkho, Vinokurova reported from her research among schools and kindergartens that some parents have discovered intriguing positive side-effects from their children’s study of olonkho:

I have noted that among parents there has appeared a kind of pragmatic interest in olonkho. One time I was interviewing a parent and asked her why she was having her children study olonkho (this particular person had four children, and three of them were studying olonkho).

She told me that it develops their memory! In school they aren’t having children memorize poems anymore, so how are we going to develop their memory? She said they need to memorize a very large body of texts and that also, she found that they immediately improve their abilities in their schoolwork. They become very goal-oriented, and learn how to value time. Not just “yakking” with friends, but they have to go here and there and they begin to decide rationally how much time they can spend on something. In all of that, she was very content with the results.

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<sup>183</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

She said that one child had begun very strongly and then got interested in something else, but even then, the good things he had learned still stayed with him. And another child wants to continue learning olonkho into the future, for a longer period of time. She said she doesn't know how it will turn out, but she is convinced that in any case it will help them in their studies... So, in short, there is a pragmatic side that exists. Parents have already seen this.

In the Ust-Aldan ulus, a *vospitatelnitsa* (preschool teacher) who has worked all her life in pre-school training institutions, at first during the Soviet years (she is about my age – over 50), told me that young people in the villages are already trying to live independently from their parents. They begin their own families and live separately from their parents. She said that they don't talk much with their children [RH note: both parents usually are working], and the children develop speech defects. This affects their education, as they enter first grade. Children are mean, after all, and if a strange sound is spoken, they think it's a tragedy. This lady said that the children that are learning olonkho from her (she said they are very enthusiastic about this), learn how to breathe more correctly, and within just a couple of months, they are freed of their speech defects. She said they don't even need a speech therapist! So that's the first thing, the second is that, naturally, their memory is developed. The children that have studied in her group are all getting As and Bs.<sup>184</sup>

Many of the people I interviewed felt that children were the key to olonkho's future. When I asked Zakharova about her prognosis, she replied,

Realistically, if children will start to sing olonkho from their youth, these children, with texts in their memory, turn out to be very thoughtful children. They are good students, they are polite, they are good children. They are not going to quit doing olonkho. Olonkho really helps them to get through life. There are a lot of children like this. They have dedicated their lives to olonkho, and in the future, they can become researchers, performers.<sup>185</sup>

I noted her generally positive prognosis for olonkho was predicated with a large “if”—and she did not address whether the traditional, improvisatory quality can be revitalized. She only said that these children who are now working with olonkho will continue to be involved in ways that will support the performance tradition in some way. Her response did indicate that she expects to see an ongoing cadre of researchers studying olonkho,

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<sup>184</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>185</sup> Zakharova, 2011. [See DVD]

such as the ones she is training now at IGI. When I asked her about the loss of interested audiences, she pointed out,

Yes, it is because the epic *sreda* is already gone. We think that it has to be revitalized locally, not with a lot of people, but like it used to be, in families. To gather only those who love this kind of thing, and then it spreads in a more natural way. During the winter weekends, on Saturdays, we have begun to do this... in the families. So that it can be heard in the family circle. We are doing this in Yakutsk now, but hope to spread to the villages as well. We also want to teach classes to children here at the Olonkho Center, to have a studio. My students want this. There are a number of children in the city here who want to learn.

Valeri Kononov (Figure 4.1), who is enjoying his retirement with his wife Maria, served as a driver for my fieldwork in Yakutia during the summers of 2009 and 2010. He told me that children's performances are actually more interesting in some ways than those of adults, especially in their clarity. "The thing that makes me most happy is that children and young people perform it, not like in the past when only old people performed it... the elderly, old folks. Now young people, with their young imaginations and voices—it's very clear to understand what they are saying, what they're singing about. Everything is clear."<sup>186</sup> He also remembered the performances of Kolesov with great fondness, mentioning that Kolesov was relatively young during those days. When I asked what he liked about Kolesov's performance, he said,

The level of his performance was very high. He was an artist. So he performed really well. And when the folk singers perform—this is my own opinion—they were elderly—completely old. But Gavril Kolesov was young, and when the young people perform, it's good. You can feel it their energy—the creativity you can feel... Good performances.<sup>187</sup>

Kononov's focus on performances by youth as a key to olonkho's future is paralleled by others, and connects to an emphasis on transmission, especially transmission to the next generation, mentioned by the many of my respondents.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with fieldwork driver Valeri Kononov in Borogontsi, Yakutia, on June 19, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>187</sup> Kononov, 2009. [See DVD]



Figure 4.1: Valeri and Maria Kononov, with Bill and Robin Harris (June 15, 2009)

On the Internet portal he is creating at <http://olonkho.info>, Sergei Vasiliev showed me information about a yearly event for children in the Suntaar Ulus.<sup>188</sup> He observed,

[The town of Kiukei]... started an olonkho club for kids in 1999 and it eventually became a Summer camp for kids in 2005... Time will pass, and some of these kids will become performers, and we will be able to have bios on them. In this way, over time, we will develop a file of information at the site on some of these performers and how they developed. Of course, this would be an ideal happenstance, and only would happen if that person, that child would continue to be involved in working on these kinds of things.<sup>189</sup>

The site also records another olonkho-themed summer camp for children in Khangalas Ulus.<sup>190</sup> When combined with the yearly competitions and the training that some pre-schools and grade-schools are offering, there do appear to be opportunities for children who wish to learn about olonkho.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, these kinds of occasions were in place in the five years leading up to the Masterpiece declaration. Sysoliatina (2006, 181–184)

<sup>188</sup> See more information at: <http://tinyurl.com/suntaar-olonkho-camp>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>189</sup> Vasiliev (at his computer), 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>190</sup> See more information at: <http://tinyurl.com/khangalas-olonkho-camp>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>191</sup> Sysoliatina (2006) reports that there is a yearly festival-competition of young performers of olonkho called *Min olonkho doidutun oghotobun*. Cruikshank and Argunova (2000, 106) also document a children's camp near Cherkëkh.

notes the history of children's olonkho competition-festivals in Yakutia, titled "*Olonkho Doidutun oghotobun*" (Children of the Land of Olonkho):

- 1998-1999 there were two festivals in which children from ten uluses participated
- 2000 - 3rd Festival of Young Performers of Olonkho: 218 children from 13 uluses, including the city of Yakutsk
- 2001 - 4th International Festival for Young Performers of Olonkho: children and their trainers came from Kyrgystan, Buratia, Tuva, and Altai
- 2002 - 5th Festival: 78 people from 8 uluses
- 2003 - 6th Festival: 131 performers from Yakutia and Tuva
- 2004 - 7th Festival: 57 children from 8 uluses

Another site ([www.olonkho.net](http://www.olonkho.net)) continued the report, showing the following numbers of participants in children's festivals for the following years:

- 2005 – 8<sup>th</sup> Festival: 117 children and 37 teachers from 8 uluses and Yakutsk
- 2006 – 9<sup>th</sup> Festival: 145 children from 11 uluses, of which 22 were olonkho researchers, 13 children's creative folklore clubs, 26 individuals were traditional performers of olonkho, and 60 seminar participants, and 200 participants of the cultural events
- 2007 – 10<sup>th</sup> Festival: 150 participants from 11 uluses of the republic and the city of Yakutsk, of which 26 were researchers of olonkho, 12 children's creative folklore clubs, 36 individuals were traditional performers of olonkho, and 120 participants of the cultural events

The generation of children, however, who are beginning again to learn about olonkho are largely learning memorized texts, rather than the improvisatory art of the epic tradition. This is a real concern, as the true art of olonkho is not a memorized or "fixed" tradition. Lord's caution in this regard is significant; he asserts that using fixed texts leads to the demise of the oral creative process and to "the rise of a generation of 'singers' who are reproducers rather than re-creators" (Lord 2000, 137).

#### Respondents' prognosis for revitalization of olonkho

Opinions are divided among Sakha people concerning the prognosis for olonkho revitalization. Some are confident it will succeed and others certain it will die. Spiridon

Schischigin, a renowned *khomus* (jaw harp) performer, asserted that revitalizing olonkho needs to be done in a way that somehow preserves its traditional solo character. He said,

You need to revitalize it in its clean form, its traditional form. Like it used to be; one person performing the whole thing, and creating it right there, not performing for memory, but improvising... imagining... He closes his eyes, like this, and “sees” it, and everything he sees in his imagination, he recounts. This is the kind of olonkhosuts that we need, who will perform true olonkho.<sup>192</sup>

When I asked him about the lack of audiences at traditional performances, he reminisced on the successful revival of his own instrument, *khomus*, which is experiencing a robust and ongoing renewal in Yakutia: “There will be [listeners], probably, slowly but surely. Take *khomus*, for example. It is being played more and more!”<sup>193</sup>

Valeri Burtsev, a respected elderly leader among evangelical Christians in Yakutia, asserted that the pressure of Western culture and music is crowding out the traditional expressions of culture. When I asked him about olonkho’s future, he replied:

First of all, life is changing now. [Before] it was... well, not so much forbidden, but there was *disdain* for it. People got out of the habit. But in the past, in every ulus, in every village maybe, there were these olonkhosuts. And now they aren’t there. Why are they not there? Because first of all, communication is good now.

Secondly, there are new genres like *éstrada* (pop) songs, television, radio is everywhere – you hear strange/foreign music. People “catch” it. The “world culture” is pretty much everywhere, right? They’re even preaching rock now! In Yakutia? Rock?!

So wherever you have developed countries, their civilization is spread... And they are stronger than the indigenous peoples. So, the pressure keeps coming. And they have become stronger. Western culture is stronger. Take, even Russia, for example. In my opinion, Russian songs are not heard as much, even though Russians are a huge group of folk—150 million. They accept everything that is Western! All the more so, for Yakutians. So for that reason, it is my opinion that olonkho will remain in the institute and the theater, and that is all.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Interview with Spiridon Schischigin, well-known Sakha *khomus* (jaw harp) performer and educator in Pokrovsk, Yakutia, on June 25, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>193</sup> Spiridon Schischigin, 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>194</sup> Burtsev, 2009. [See DVD]

Boris Mikhailov argued that the current revitalization, in contrast to the brief revival of olonkho that happened during the “Great Patriotic War,” is one in which we will see a significant change in performance practice. He said,

The storyteller’s art had a period where it really flourished, a peak time. But I somehow feel, that although there was a decrease, then a kind of revitalization that replaced it, the long-term revitalization will be in a little different format in the modern world. But the youth will remember that it is not the “real olonkho.”<sup>195</sup>

Dekabrina Vinokurova also felt this way, remarking on the responses she received during her fieldwork, “When I asked people about the further development of olonkho, they of course responded that it will be for shows—like concert performances. Not so much the development of language and images, plot lines, etc, but more along the lines of performing what has already been written.”<sup>196</sup>

Radion Savinov [RS], an employee at the Berdigestyakh Museum, expressed a viewpoint I often heard from respondents concerning that which should be preserved from the olonkho tradition.

RS: The “canon” should be observed, but at the same time, olonkho should be allowed to develop in its own way.

RH: What is your opinion—is it okay to change certain aspects of olonkho in order to attract a new generation of listeners?

RS: This is absolutely needed, but with caution. You still need to hold to the canon. You can, of course, use some kinds of new *sredstvo* (means) to renew/update it, like to “arrange” it, but it should be done with caution, in order to not lose the salt of the central meaning or significance.

RH: What should not be changed?

RS: The “canon”—it’s the oldest epos in the world, you understand.

RH: The plot lines?

RS: The plots: how it started, how our world came into being, the main *iziuminka* (flavor/zest), the dark powers and the light powers, good and evil, that good will always win—this is the most important. The most important, for good to always be victorious, and for the three worlds that we have, upper, middle, and lower, does not disappear. This is the thing—our world, our

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<sup>195</sup> Mikhailov, 2011. [See DVD]

<sup>196</sup> Vinokurova and Zhegusov, 2011. [See DVD]

*worldview* should not be violated and should not disappear. So if we are doing something new, and we throw out these things, then it is not olonkho anymore.

RH: In my research, I am finding out ways that we can attract a new generation—new audiences to hear olonkho, right? But at the same time, you can't change everything; some things have to stay.

RS: [You have to be] very careful, very careful that the most important part of the “canon” remains, the worldview. You need for the new generation to understand, yes? But you need to somehow present it to them in a way that they can accept it, right? Use new technical means, like you can use television, cinematography, etc, but only in a way that protects the canon, the plots, the worldview, and is understandable and accessible.

You need to attract their attention from the earliest years, so that they can accept it into their souls. This is my fondest wish—that little children can fall asleep to the sound of olonkho and wake up to the sound of olonkho. Then a new generation, without losing the canon, will be able to create their own olonkho.

RH: Can the next generation—children and youth—create their own olonkhos? Their own plots that reflect their own world?

RS: In order to produce one's own olonkho, you will need *life experience*. You need life experience. You need to fathom—to penetrate the core, the essence of it—you understand me, right? A boy, or a girl, fourteen years old or so, has only a worldview that is the purest child-like worldview. So they cannot understand the essence of it and might deviate or stray. They need to listen to it from their childhood and remember it and get some life experience.

Also, in olonkho there are archaic words that even our generation does not understand. In order for them to fathom the meaning of those archaic words, they have to have some sort of magic power. You must understand this.

So I think (to myself) that for this youngest generation, in order to take it on themselves to write olonkho... maybe there would be some kind of *wunderkind* that could do this, those that have were created to do this from a young age, from on high, they can of course. These are the chosen ones from among a thousand, only one could do this. Gifted from outside of themselves, from out there: “You should do this!” type of gifting. The most gifted... for the creation of olonkho.<sup>197</sup>

Anastasia Ivanovna [AI] has taught folklore to children for the last 10 years, focusing on olonkho performance. She brought a group of children to the Berdigestyakh summer festival in 2010 to perform their olonkho and to learn more about the performing tradition. When I asked her about her methods for teaching children, she replied:

AI: Our method is simple. It is a project activity. The children choose their own role—either a warrior-hero (*bogatyř*) or some kind of a [shamaness]

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<sup>197</sup> Interview with museum curator Radion Savinov in Berdigestyakh, Yakutia, on June 20, 2010. [See DVD]

woman (*udaghan*, *analakhchytun*), some kind of character. So they choose their own hero to act out. They even draw and write about that character—its age, appearance, clothing, even the smell of their hero. So they themselves study their role, and I am just a helper, like a supervisor. So they themselves choose and fill out their role.

RH: [...] In my dissertation I'm asking the question, "What is causing the revitalization of olonkho? What is behind this resurgence of interest?" Because it died down during the years of Soviet power. So what is your opinion about why there is a rebirth of olonkho now?

AI: During the many years of Soviet power, the hours given to teaching Yakut language (in the school) were very few. Lessons on folk traditions didn't exist at all (Yakut national culture). In the recent years, they have started putting on large Ysyakh festivals. Ysyakh used to be like a [Soviet style] "meeting" – now it is done with all the traditional songs.

So I think that our leadership thinks that we are on the verge of extinction. How many of us are there in this Republic? 400,000 in all. So we will disappear eventually if we lose our language, our folklore, our roots. So that is where the revitalization comes from. In this way we can be revitalized.

RH: What do you think; will the revitalization continue into the future?

AI: I think so, yes. Because from preschool, children are now studying their own folklore.<sup>198</sup>

This training is beginning in some of the Sakha-language schools in Yakutia and is encouraged by the yearly Republic-wide olonkho competitions for children.

In addition, Yakutia's efforts to document and revitalize olonkho have resulted in an impressive amount of digitization and archival work. By 2009, the Yakut Scientific Centre of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as other archives in the republic, had in their collections 127 full manuscript versions of olonkho. Additionally, they held more than 100 extracts and short summaries of plots and around 300 phonograph and video recordings, (Larionova 2010). Studying, collecting, and publishing olonkho works is continuing at the Institute of Humanitarian Research and Problems of the Minority Peoples of the North (IGI).

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<sup>198</sup> Interview with olonkho teacher Anastasia Shishigina in Berdigestyakh, Yakutia, on June 20, 2010. [See DVD]

The wiki-based Internet Portal ([www.olonkho.info](http://www.olonkho.info)) is another outstanding example of a government-sponsored, multi-year program for archiving, digitizing, educating, and disseminating knowledge about olonkho. This project is coordinated by Sergei Vasiliev (see Figure 4.2) and housed at the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. Vasiliev hopes that when it is complete, it will be a hyper-media online encyclopedia, providing the material needed for preserving, spreading, and popularizing olonkho.<sup>199</sup>



Figure 4.2: Sergei Vasiliev with Robin Harris (June 24, 2010)

In short, the prognoses I hear from Sakha people for olonkhho's future range from grim and dire to hopeful and even confident. Those involved in the revitalization process are (predictably) the most positive in their hopes for a sustainable future for olonkho. The typical "man on the street" is less likely to predict revitalization, as demonstrated by

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<sup>199</sup> A more detailed look at this resource is found in Chapter 5.

Vinokurova's and Zhegusov's research. The most common themes in the responses are related either to people's ideals, (i.e. a feeling that olonkho *should* be revived in the traditional manner) or to more realistic guesses of a likely path (for example: "If olonkho is revived, it is likely to be in this form or that").

In 2012, we are now over two thirds through the "Decade of Olonkho" (2006-2015) with three years left before the vast government budget energizing revitalization ends. At that time, the funding will either be increased (this is unlikely), continued at current levels into the future, somewhat reduced, or cut to purely symbolic levels. What will be the response? What about the proponents fueling the enthusiasm? What will be the resulting directions for olonkho in 2016 and beyond? The following chapters will examine a few factors which play a large role in answering these questions.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE ROLE OF UNESCO IN OLONKHO REVITALIZATION

*A real tradition is not the relic of a past that is irretrievably gone;  
 it is a living force that animates and informs the present...  
 Far from implying the repetition of what has been,  
 tradition presupposes the reality of what endures.  
 It appears as an heirloom, a heritage that one receives  
 on condition of making it bear fruit before passing it on to one's descendants.*  
 - Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in Six Lessons* (2003, 57)

A key event took place in 2005, when UNESCO proclaimed the Sakha olonkho to be a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” Although the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) program has been criticized for its inadequacies<sup>200</sup> and has not always had the same positive results in other places as it has in Yakutia,<sup>201</sup> I demonstrate in this chapter that the Masterpiece Proclamation for olonkho had (and is having) a profoundly energizing effect on the olonkho revitalization, an outcome which has led to significant olonkho-related activity in the Yakutia. I believe, however, that although these activities have given olonkho greatly improved visibility in the Republic and beyond, its long-term survival as a “theater of one person” is still in question.

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<sup>200</sup> In a plenary address at the ICH Meetings in Nairobi, Kenya, Mr. Kono criticized the ICH program for a variety of failings, including a lack of follow-through on important issues such as cataloging ICH in member countries and lack of integration of scholarly and scientific activities into the Convention (from the unpublished conference proceedings provided by Brian Schrag, a delegate at the event).

<sup>201</sup> See for example, a panel on ICH presented by Justin Hunter, Man Yang, Da Lin, and Robin Harris at the Society for Ethnomusicology meetings in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Nov 19, 2011. Accessed October 22, 2011 at <http://www.indiana.edu/~semhome/2011/pdf/SEM2011%20Program%20101911.pdf> (pp. 21–22).

### ICH program overview

The General Conference of UNESCO met in Paris in the fall of 2003 and codified the text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The Convention entered into force in 2006 for the nations (or “States” in UNESCO terms) that ratified it (UNESCO 2009c).<sup>202</sup> While 137 States have ratified, accepted, or approved the Convention, Russia has not.<sup>203</sup> This means Russia has not obligated itself to protect or promote ICH on its territory. The energy behind revitalization for olonkho is only at the regional level, coming almost entirely from governmental and educational institutions in the Republic of Yakutia.<sup>204</sup>

Much could be said about the Convention and its impact worldwide. For the purposes of understanding its role in olonkho revitalization, however, I limit my remarks here to four basic arenas. First, I explore three key terms used in the Convention and the ways these terms are defined by UNESCO. Second, I examine UNESCO’s desired outcomes for the ICH program and compare them to Yakutia’s plan for olonkho revitalization. Third, I look at the degree to which these outcomes are being achieved in Yakutia to this point. Finally, I outline some of the questions that still remain concerning the program and its impact in Yakutia.

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<sup>202</sup> For the Convention text, see <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>203</sup> For a list of States Parties, see <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00024>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>204</sup> See: Law of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) on the State program for the preservation, study, and propagation of the Yakut heroic epos olonkho for 2007-2015. Passed into law March 15, 2007. № 436-3 N 887-111 (in Russian).

### Key terms of the Convention defined

The ICH Convention was careful to define some key terms, providing clarity for its desired outcomes. In the following section, I will elaborate on UNESCO's definitions of *intangible cultural heritage*, *masterpiece*, and *safeguarding*. I explain the discontinuation of the "Masterpiece" concept, a term initially used by UNESCO but eventually abandoned in favor of "representative" examples of ICH. I will discuss threats to the safeguarding process and problematize aspects of Yakutia's approach.

### *Intangible Cultural Heritage*

The UNESCO Convention was created for the purposes of safeguarding *intangible cultural heritage* (ICH), defined by UNESCO as early as 2001 as being

peoples' learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity.<sup>205</sup>

Cultural heritages have been protected by UNESCO since 1972, beginning with the "Convention for the Protection of World Heritage" which covered both nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties.<sup>206</sup> The new ICH program expanded that concept to include those things which were intangible, although those aspects of culture often overlap with tangible objects:

Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices,

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<sup>205</sup> See [http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&meeting\\_id=00057](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&meeting_id=00057). Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>206</sup> See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.<sup>207</sup>

This expansion from safeguarding tangible, material objects to include the intangible emphasized transmitting knowledge and skills related to a tradition, rather than merely the concrete cultural manifestations themselves.

### *Masterpiece*

The ICH program has evolved over time, sometimes retreating from earlier-established emphases. For example, the Masterpiece program, formulated in 1997, implemented three proclamations (2001, 2003, 2005). They focused on six crucial features for judging applications. To compete for a Masterpiece award, cultural expressions of ICH had to do the following (emphases mine):

- 1) demonstrate their *outstanding value* as masterpiece of the human creative genius;
- 2) give wide evidence of their *roots in the cultural tradition* or cultural history of the community concerned;
- 3) be a means of affirming the *cultural identity* of the cultural communities concerned;
- 4) provide proof of *excellence* in the application of the skill and technical qualities displayed;
- 5) affirm their value as unique testimony of *living cultural traditions*;
- 6) be *at risk* of degradation or of disappearing.<sup>208</sup>

In addition, each file had to “provide proof of the full involvement and agreement of the communities concerned, and to include an action plan for the safeguarding or promotion of the cultural spaces or expressions, which should have been elaborated in close collaboration with the tradition bearers.”<sup>209</sup> In Yakutia’s application, it may have been difficult to demonstrate that olonkho was a “living tradition,” but the presence of one or

<sup>207</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00002>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>208</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00103>. Accessed February 28, 2012.

<sup>209</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00103>. Accessed February 28, 2012.

two master-performers must have been enough to qualify it for the award. All of the other requirements were easily met for olonkho.

Although the UNESCO awards originally contained the idea of an ICH having “outstanding value,” the Masterpiece program was discontinued and those ICH forms named Masterpieces were folded into the “Representative List” when the Convention went into effect in 2006. Nonetheless, in Yakutia, olonkho is always referred to as a *shedevr* (from the French *chef d'oeuvre*, or “masterpiece”). The fact that olonkho was named a “Masterpiece” is key to Sakha pride in the genre. Furthermore, if olonkho had been declared simply “representative” rather than a “masterpiece” in 2005, it is possible that the governmental efforts to revitalize it would not be so intense.

A 2006 UNESCO document explains the thinking behind the changes:

The question of *outstanding value vs. representativity* was discussed at length by the governmental experts who elaborated the Convention. They felt that since the Convention protects elements of the ICH that are relevant for the identity and continuity of groups and communities, the instrument should not attempt to create a hierarchy among such elements, or among cultures.<sup>210</sup>

Since the Convention was not fully ratified and thus not in force until 2006, olonkho did not become subsumed into the Representative list until that time, fully a year after it had been designated a Masterpiece.<sup>211</sup> The highly competitive environment that drove the Yakutian application forward was already in the process of being changed by the ICH policy-making bodies.

For olonkho’s proud proponents, this serendipitous three-year lag in UNESCO policies regarding *outstanding value vs. representativity* was a delay that “saved the day,” for it is precisely the fact that olonkho was declared not merely representative of the

<sup>210</sup> See p. 6 at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001473/147344e.pdf>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>211</sup> See Section VIII, Article 31 – at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

intangible cultural heritage of humanity and of the Sakha people, but had been proclaimed a “masterpiece” that was significant for the Sakha people with whom I spoke.

As we saw in the previous chapters, the most common answer to the question about the primary cause leading to revitalization for olonkho was the Masterpiece declaration. Most people knew that UNESCO was the source of the declaration, and furthermore, they saw it as a declaration of world-wide significance. The Masterpiece proclamation tapped into something running deep in Sakha consciousness—a pride in their peoples’ artistic, linguistic, and cultural accomplishments. I believe that if the Masterpiece Program had been subsumed in the Representative List even one year earlier, the impetus behind revitalization would have been robbed of one of its primary engines—ubiquitous and heartfelt pride in the UNESCO’s proclamation that the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) had a hidden treasure of comparatively outstanding value, a masterpiece, worth enormous amounts of government resources to protect and preserve.

### *Safeguarding*

A crucial concept in the Convention is *safeguarding*, defined in terms of ensuring the ongoing transmission of cultural heritage knowledge and skills. The measures engaged in the safeguarding process are

aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.<sup>212</sup> (Article Two, No. 3)

This broad-ranging approach to ensuring the ongoing presence and viability of the cultural expression is crucial to the Convention’s success and coincides with the themes

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<sup>212</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

of my research, focused on observing and assessing the revitalization and sustainability of olonkho.

The Convention elaborates on the nature of safeguarding, and the need for continuous reinvigoration of the cultural heritage expression, explicitly emphasizing the development of support systems for recreating a living tradition and its transmission to younger generations, rather than celebrating a particular canonized version or expression:

To be kept alive, intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another. There is a risk that certain elements of intangible cultural heritage could die out or disappear without help, but safeguarding does not mean fixing or freezing intangible cultural heritage in some pure or primordial form. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. Transmission—or communicating heritage from generation to generation—is emphasized in the Convention rather than the production of concrete manifestations such as dances, songs, musical instruments or crafts. Therefore, to a large extent, any safeguarding measure refers to strengthening and reinforcing the diverse and varied circumstances, tangible and intangible, that are necessary for the continuous evolution and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage, as well as for its transmission to future generations.<sup>213</sup>

This definition stresses the facets of safeguarding emphasized in this project, namely continuous recreation (or evolution), and transmission, rather than simple “preservation.”

### Threats to safeguarding

The Convention lists some problems which play a significant role in the decline of ICH transmission around the world, posing a threat to safeguarding. These threats are remarkably germane to olonkho decline. The UNESCO site lists them as the following:

Threats to the transmission of this living heritage come from such factors as social and demographic changes that reduce intergenerational contacts, for instance from migrations and urbanisation that often remove people from their knowledgeable elders, from the imposition of formal education systems that devalue traditional knowledge and skills, or from intrusive mass media. The response to such threats

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<sup>213</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00012>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

must come from the communities and groups concerned, assisted by local organizations, their governments and the international community.<sup>214</sup>

The UNESCO emphasis in responding to these pressures is a mix of grass-roots and top-down approaches, promoting measures that spring from both smaller, more local communities and groups, as well as national (even international) entities. This is an important issue for olonkho revitalization, as the ICH program has been very successful in generating initiatives at the highest levels of Yakutian government. But a key question remains to be answered: To what degree are these top-down initiatives engendering a grass-roots response? The complaints by olonkhosuts in the preceding chapters demonstrate their ongoing disappointment about the lack of engaged audiences for their performances of olonkho.

The threats to safeguarding ICH expressions such as demographic changes reducing intergenerational contact, formal education systems that devalue traditional knowledge and skills, and intrusive mass media, all played a role, along with other factors, in olonkho's decline during the Soviet period. Other threats are succinctly outlined in regard to olonkho in a UNESCO document about the Masterpiece awards:

The political and technological changes in twentieth-century Russia have threatened the existence of the epic tradition in the Sakha Republic. Although there has been a growing interest in Olonkho since the perestroika years, this tradition is endangered in view of the very low number of practitioner [sic], all of old age.<sup>215</sup>

These are just a few of the factors which speak to the need for safeguarding measures for an example of ICH such as olonkho.

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<sup>214</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00078>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>215</sup> See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001473/147344e.pdf>, p. 83. Accessed January 18, 2012.

### UNESCO and Yakutia's desired outcomes compared

The degree to which UNESCO's desired outcomes overlap with those stated by Yakutia in the legislation for olonkho is significant. UNESCO's purposes for the ICH convention are stated in Article One (emphasis mine):

- (a) to *safeguard* the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) to ensure *respect* for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned;
- (c) to raise *awareness* at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual *appreciation* thereof;
- (d) to provide for international *cooperation* and *assistance*.

Other statements of valued outcomes can be found at various places on the ICH site. For example (emphasis mine), "Intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in *maintaining cultural diversity* in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with *intercultural dialogue*, and encourages *mutual respect* for other ways of life."<sup>216</sup> In addition, the ICH program emphasizes the desired outcome of strengthening *transmission* systems: "Safeguarding ICH means ensuring its viability among today's generations and its continued transmission to tomorrow's."<sup>217</sup>

What are the specific measures the ICH program recommends for achieving these outcomes? UNESCO states they should be "measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission through formal and

<sup>216</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00002>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>217</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00078>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.”<sup>218</sup>

These measures factor into the three primary goals of Yakutia’s plan, signed into law in March 2007:

- a) the preservation of the Yakut heroic epos of *olonkho* as an outstanding cultural monument for transmission to future generations;
- b) the creation of the conditions necessary for the rebirth of the oral storytelling tradition;
- c) the promulgation of *Olonkho* as a Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.

The clear way in which UNESCO’s recommended measures correspond closely with Yakutia’s goals is a testimony to careful planning on the part of the people who drew up the law. In addition to the goals outlined above, Yakutia drew up a list of basic tasks in order to achieve these goals and included them in the March 2007 legislation. They are listed below, with the corresponding methods goals outlined by UNESCO in brackets:

- 1) ascertainment and collection of epic monuments [*identification, documentation, preservation*];
- 2) systematization of scientific research in the areas of epic studies and the intensification of publishing activities [*research, promotion*];
- 3) provision for safeguarding of materials related to epics located in the archives of the Republic [*documentation, preservation, protection*];
- 4) creation (on the territory of the Republic) of a single organizational-legislative model and comprehensive standard for the legal protection of the epos of *Olonkho* [*preservation, protection*];
- 5) formation of an epic environment [*promotion, enhancement, transmission*];
- 6) support of the activities of the narrator-*olonkhosuts* [*protection, promotion, transmission*];

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<sup>218</sup> See Article 2.3 - <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf> . Accessed January 18, 2012.

7) introduction of Olonkho into the educational curricula of learning institutions [*transmission through formal education, revitalization*];

8) establishing a system of training children in the art of storytelling [*promotion, transmission through formal and non-formal education, revitalization*];

9) improvement in the quality of the personnel involved in the spheres of preservation, study and promotion of traditional culture [*enhancement, research, preservation, protection, promotion*];

10) promotion and dissemination of Olonkho [*promotion, transmission, revitalization*].

From the synchronization seen above, one can see that the design of Yakutia's "Plan of Action" has a high degree of overlap with UNESCO goals and desired outcomes.

#### *Ancillary programs*

In addition to the general goals outlined in Yakutia's Plan of Action, there are ancillary programs which were signed into law. I have listed them here with their respective coordinating entities in italics:<sup>219</sup>

1) "International Center for Olonkho and the scientific study of epos" – *Institute of Humanities Research (IGI), Yakutsk State University (YaGU)*.

2) "Protection, preservation, and activities providing for the protection of epic heritage" – *Institute of Humanities Research (IGI), Yakutsk State University (YaGU)*.

3) "Protection and rebirth of the authentic oral epic tradition in the Republic of Sakha" – *Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development RS(Y)*,<sup>220</sup> *Institute of Humanities Research (IGI)*.

4) "Olonkho and future generations" (educational goals for teaching the art of olonkho) – *Ministry of Education RS(Y)*.

5) "Theater of Olonkho and the development of modern forms of epic expression" – *Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development RS(Y)*

<sup>219</sup> None of these coordinating entities were created specifically for the purpose of olonkho revitalization; all four were extant governmental and educational structures.

<sup>220</sup> RS(Y) indicates the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

One of this plan's confusing features is the use of the word "authentic" in the third ancillary program, "Protection and rebirth of the authentic oral epic tradition in the Republic of Sakha." But who decides what is authentic? James Cowdery writes about the early debates over the term "authenticity" within the International Folk Music Council (IFMC), noting it was affirmed that "*authentic* should not be confused with *old*" (2009, 807),<sup>221</sup> and that "authenticity must always be a comparative rather than an absolute quality" (2009, 808).<sup>222</sup>

After six years of debate, IFMC finally produced a general statement on the important ingredients in "authentic folk music," reaffirming "the importance of continuity, variation, and selection; ...that 'it is the refashioning and re-creation of music by the community that gives it its folk character'" (2009, 811).<sup>223</sup> The debates in the literature of ethnomusicology did not end with that definition, however; they continue to abound. Aubert calls authenticity "clearly a topic of debate" (2007, 6).

The use of such a confusing term in Yakutia's plan is problematic, as it potentially creates tension between the third item and the fifth, which encourages the "development of modern forms of epic expression" through the creation of a Theater of Olonkho. One hopes that Yakutia's definition of "authentic" will be broad enough to include the contemporary forms of epic expression necessary for olonkho to appeal to current audiences.

Having noted the one problematic term (authentic), I note that the ancillary programs listed above are fairly logical expressions of the project's goals and outcomes.

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<sup>221</sup> Walter Wiora. 1949. "Concerning the conception of authentic folk music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 1:14–19.

<sup>222</sup> Maud Karpeles. 1951. "Some reflections on authenticity in folk music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 3:10.

<sup>223</sup> Maud Karpeles. 1955. "Definition of folk music," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 7:6.

Each of these programs is assigned to a particular Ministry of the Yakutian government or educational entity for coordination. It is these entities which are the recipients of the budgeted funds signed into law by the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

### *Program funding*

The budget to cover these programs was ambitious. The overall cost of the plan was stated to be over 2.1 billion Russian rubles, or the equivalent of over 80 million US dollars in the exchange rate of 2007.<sup>224</sup> The expected funding sources totalled over 2 billion rubles (over 77 million USD) from the Republic's governmental budget, 47 million rubles (approximately 1.8 million USD) from other sources of financing, and 52.4 million rubles (approximately 2 million USD) from extra-budgetary sources.

When I ask Elizaveta Sidorova (who led the UNESCO team to obtain Masterpiece status for olonkho) about this large budget, she pointed out that the budget was for 10 years, so 2 billion rubles over 10 years was only 200 million rubles per year. She also pointed out that with today's exchange rate, "a million rubles isn't even really [significant] money anymore. Money is losing its value, so sometimes we can't make ends meet."<sup>225</sup> When I asked whether the money is really being allocated or whether there were problems with getting it released, she affirmed that the money is being allocated and there is still support for expeditions, conferences, festivals, and the like. I expressed concern that with the financial crisis, there might be some budget cuts that

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<sup>224</sup> Approximately 26 rubles to the dollar in 2007 (see <http://en.rian.ru/business/20070315/62046014.html>), the rate was hovering in early 2012 at around 30 rubles to the dollar. (see <http://www.x-rates.com/d/RUB/USD/hist2012.html>). Accessed April 24, 2012.

<sup>225</sup> Sidorova, 2011. [See DVD]

would affect the olonkho project, but she assured me there would not be budget cuts because the program was accepted in the form of a law, not just a yearly budget item.

Sergei Vasiliev, responsible for one of the large projects in the plan (the Digital Information System and Internet portal), reported in 2009 that although budget cuts did happen to his part of the program, they did not hit his program as much they did in other spheres. He reported that at that time, the vast majority of what was budgeted for his part of olonkho project was still being allocated, and most of the program was moving ahead, despite the fact that the plan was quite optimistic.<sup>226</sup> While there may be varying reports of how the budgeted money was being spent and the degree to which the crisis has affected these expenditures, it was clear that Yakutia's support for the project was strong, at least in 2007, as evidenced by the large budget planned for olonkho revitalization.

When I asked Sidorova whether UNESCO, as part of the award, provided financing for the revitalization budget, she said it didn't, due to the fact that Russia had not signed the convention. A UNESCO document states that many of the ICH awards did come with financial support from UNESCO: "Thirty out of the 47 Masterpieces proclaimed in 2001 and 2003 benefited from this support, and some 21 Masterpieces included in the 2005 Proclamation are expected to receive similar financial assistance"<sup>227</sup>

### *Expected outcomes*

Outcomes expected from the above ancillary programs overlap significantly with the goals outlined on page four of the legislation summary. They are listed below, again with UNESCO's ICH goals in brackets:

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<sup>226</sup> Vasiliev, 2009. From field notes of our conversation.

<sup>227</sup> See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001473/147344e.pdf>, p. 6. Accessed January 18, 2012.

- 1) gathering of epic works into databases and the identification of experts in the epic tradition [*identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection*];
- 2) provision of archival safety for hand-written, audio-, video-, and film materials related to epics by transferring them to digital formats [*preservation, protection*];
- 3) protection and further development of the epic tradition on the basis of the creation of curricula and educational systems [*promotion, enhancement, transmission*];
- 4) appearance of new directions in the arts as a result of the creation of the Theater of *Olonkho* [*enhancement, transmission, revitalization*];
- 5) spread of *Olonkho* through the publication of texts with translations, scientific publications, art albums, the creation of new works with epic plots in various arts domains, the development of the Internet-portal *Olonkho*, and the organization of cultural-ethnographic complexes [*identification, documentation, research, preservation, promotion, transmission, revitalization*].

Clearly, Yakutia's "Plan of Action" with its ancillary programs overlaps significantly with ICH goals. In fact, there was overlap on every single item, demonstrating that if the Republic follows through on their plans, it should achieve the desired results from UNESCO's point of view. But is Yakutia actually succeeding in achieving this list of five ambitious outcomes?

#### Results of the ICH program and Yakutia's Action Plan

The first three goals listed above are being met primarily through the efforts of one project, the "Computer Informational System *Olonkho*" which includes collecting and digitizing *olonkho* materials, as well as creating an Internet portal for access to the materials. This crucial initiative, directed by Sergei Vasiliev and housed at the North-Eastern Federal University (SVFU), was conceived as one integrated project of 1) physical archives, 2) digitalization of those archives, 3) web access for much of the digitally archived information, and 4) plans for its use in the educational sphere. Work on

this project has seen steady progress. The archive is the most realistic hope for digitizing and preserving olonkho resources and information as well as a foundation for an educational program to transmit the olonkho performance tradition. Figure 5.1 outlines the three major pieces of the initiative: 1) an Internet portal (wiki-site) which provides access to many of the resources which are located in the archives, 2) the digital and physical archives themselves, all of which provide impetus for 3) an educational initiative for transmitting, promoting, and promulgating these materials.

Speaking about the Internet portal part of the project (available at <https://olonkho.info>), Vasiliev said, “We think of it as a window to the outside world...the Internet Portal is an important part of this work, because it allows all the people who need it to get access to this material for their education, their work, and their various interests. Our task is to develop this portal in such a way that the informational resources are accessible.”<sup>228</sup>

Regarding the project’s second portion (the digital and physical archives), Vasiliev reported in 2010 that there were about 320 manuscript items, including 127 full texts. He said,

This is quite a lot of folders, and in fact the first time I looked over this material I was very surprised to see that those who began to write at the end of the 30s – 1939, 1940, 1941 – before the beginning of the war, for example, wrote and wrote in a granary book and when they ran out of room, they then continued in a *tetrad* (copy book). When that ran out of room, they wrote on cigarette paper; when that ended they wrote on newspaper... so of course these manuscripts are not in very good condition. So the task to put these into digital format is an important one.<sup>229</sup>

The digital and physical archive project, in addition to manuscripts described above, also includes items such as magnetic tape, photographs and slides, and an electronic library.

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<sup>228</sup> Vasiliev (at chart), 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>229</sup> Vasiliev (at chart), 2010. [See DVD]

The project's final component is the educational initiative. Vasiliev described the reasoning behind this portion of the project: "There are those who do independent study, and they are of various age groups, from various nations and places, and if they show interest, they will need material that is already prepared. We also are preparing pedagogical material and describe teaching methods, so that people can use it – all of this is going into the project."<sup>230</sup> Figure 5.1 shows the basic schema for this project.<sup>231</sup>

Important to the Internet portal part of the project is that it is wiki-based and will thus have the potential for ongoing growth and self-regulation after the initial funding for the site's creation has ended. This is key, and although it remains to be seen how well this feature of the project will work, in theory it provides hope for the site's ongoing viability and accuracy. In addition, the site provides for expansion into a several languages besides Sakha and Russian (English, French, German, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Turkish). Vasiliev says, "The initiative of UNESCO in the support of multi-language cyberspace for the preservation of digital heritage has been of immeasurable importance for the preservation of world culture heritage in all its diversity" (Vasiliev et al. 2009, 7).<sup>232</sup>

When I asked Elizaveta Sidorova, Elena Protodiakonova, and Anastasia Mikhailovna their opinion on which of the initiatives of Yakutia's Action Plan was the most useful in revitalizing olonkho, they reported this:

The Informational System for Olonkho is the most useful thing we have right now. They make discs that are being used all over the uluses... CDs and DVDs, the Internet portal... they use these things in the school programs, in kindergartens. They produce material that is ready to use!<sup>233</sup>

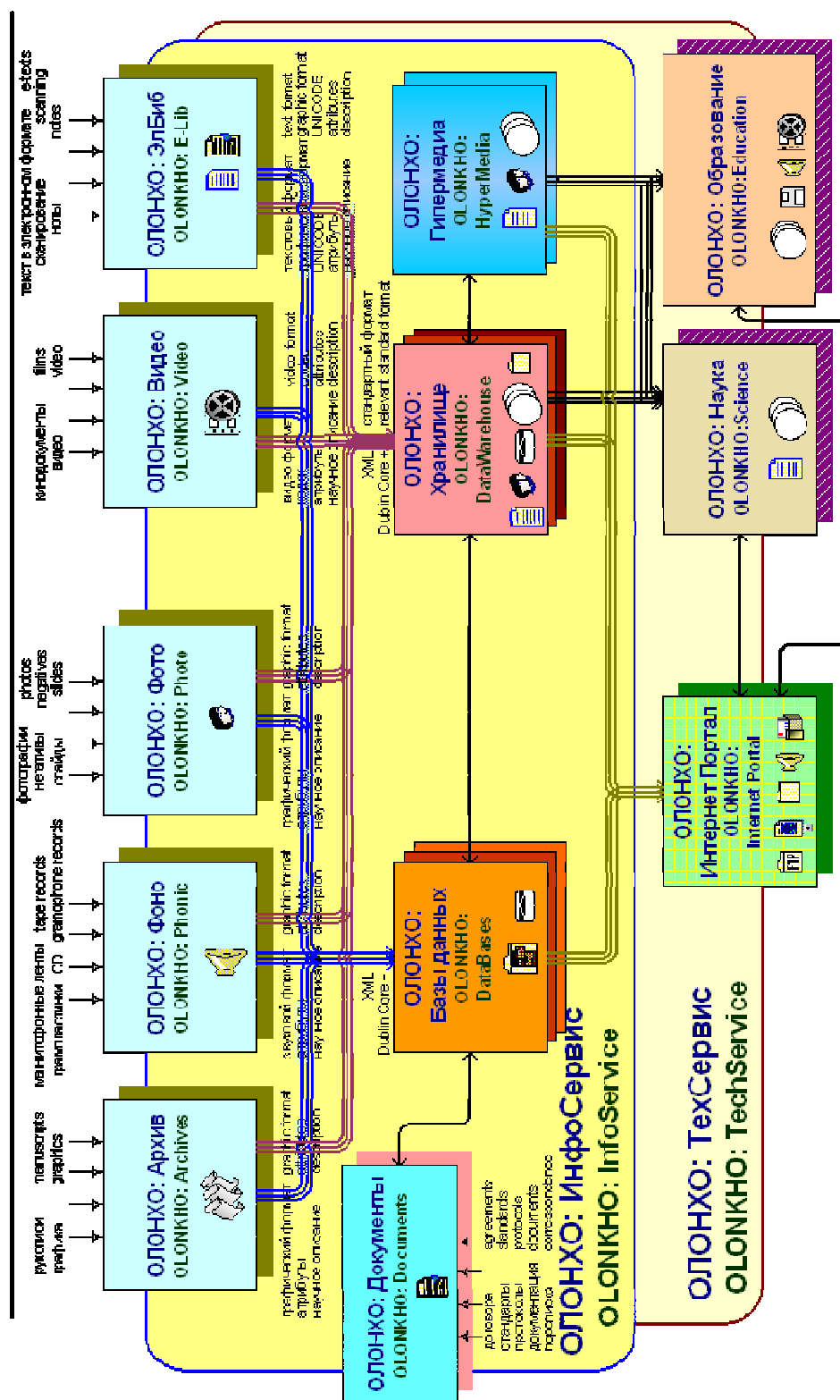
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<sup>230</sup> Vasiliev (at chart). 2010. [See DVD]

<sup>231</sup> This chart was provided by Sergei Vasiliev, and is used with permission. A video interview in which Vasiliev describes the project (in Russian) in detail is available at <http://vimeo.com/33848504> or the DVD.

<sup>232</sup> My translation, from the original: "Инициативы ЮНЕСКО в обеспечении многоязычия в киберпространстве и сохранении цифрового наследия имеют неопределимое значение для сохранения мирового культурного наследия во всем его многообразии" (Vasiliev et al. 2009, 7).

<sup>233</sup> Sidorova, Protodiakonova, and Mikhailovna, 2011. [See DVD]

Figure 5.1: Schema of the Computer Informational System *Olonkho*

If three of the five outcomes are largely being achieved through the work of the Informational System, what about the fourth and fifth outcomes? The fourth initiative planned by Yakutia is the Theater of Olonkho, with funding received through the Ministry of Culture<sup>234</sup> and led by Andrei Borisov, the Minister of Culture and the recipient of Russia's "Golden Mask" award. The Theater of Olonkho is not a physical stage, it is a collective of people staging such olonkhos as *Uluu Kudangsa* (The Great Kudangsa) and *Kyys Debiliye* (The Girl Debiliye), the latter of which was exported for performance to Japan in 2005.<sup>235</sup>

Borisov is known for including modern elements in traditional olonkho plots (Leete and Firnhaber 2004, 194). It remains to be seen whether his Theater of Olonkho will result in the appearance of "new directions in the arts." Certainly its creation is a step in the direction of fostering new creativity with roots in olonkho. It remains unclear, however, which new directions stage artists pursue and whether the Theater of Olonkho is successfully fostering revitalization for olonkho.

Point number five of the listed initiatives in the Yakutian plan is a catch-all collection of ideas. It reads: "The spread of *Olonkho* through the publication of texts with translations, scientific publications, art albums, the creation of new works with epic plots in various arts domains, the development of an Internet-portal *Olonkho*, and the organization of cultural-ethnographic complexes." In most of the listed areas there is observable progress (see examples of visual art in Appendix G). Scientific publications

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<sup>234</sup> This full title for this governmental structure is actually "The Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development" (*Ministerstvo kulturi i dukhovnoy razvitiia*) and is sometimes translated (for example, in UNESCO documents) as the "Ministry of Culture and Intellectual Development" (see the last page of the booklet prepared for UNESCO, "Yakut Heroic Epos Olonkho – a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," Ed. A. E. Zhakharova, n.d.

<sup>235</sup> See an interview in Russian with Stepanida Borisova, wife of Andrei Borisov, where she talks about the Theater of Olonkho and the Borisovs' approach to setting olonkho for the stage: <http://olonkholand.ru/teatr-olonkho/teatralnyjj-format-olonkho>.

and texts abound; many of them are including in the bibliography of this project. My respondents tell me that “Houses of Olonkho” are being built all over Yakutia; these are likely to be the “cultural-ethnographic complexes” referred to in the Plan. One area which is not yet clearly being achieved is the “new works with epic plots in various arts domains,” as the plots being used, with few exceptions, are largely recycled from the canon of established olonkho tales.

#### Progress in Yakutia in regard to other UNESCO concerns

In examining the goals outlined by UNESCO for the ICH program, it is worth addressing how the initial results of olonkho revitalization in Yakutia compare with other outcomes for which UNESCO was hoping:

##### *1) Maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization:*

Globalization is a powerful force in Siberia. Although UNESCO’s influence has carved out a small space for olonkho within the larger cultural milieu, it is not olonkho which is creating cultural diversity in Yakutia, but other expressions of cultural diversity which are easier and more readily accepted than olonkho. For example, the use of Sakha language, crafts, pop music, sports (like wrestling), and traditional dress are all flourishing, but each of these is bolstered by having either valued functions in society or a broad audience who enjoys that heritage expression. Traditional solo olonkho is neither easy to perform nor is it conducive to keeping the attention of modern audiences.

*2) Fostering intercultural dialogue:* This is difficult to do when funding difficulties don’t provide the needed budget for people to travel—either to Yakutia to hear an olonkho performance, or from Yakutia to demonstrate it or promote it to others; it

is rare for scholars to come to Yakutia to study olonkho. Pyotr Reshetnikov reported that he had only had visitors (other than me) from Holland, Germany, and Japan.<sup>236</sup>

I should note that the most active level of dialogue concerning olonkho has been between Yakutia and Japan. Culture worker Radion Savinov pointed out in an interview in 2010 that an olonkho had been translated into Japanese “through UNESCO.”<sup>237</sup> While it is possible that UNESCO played a role in the project, the translation was in fact done by M. Yamashita, of the Japanese Society for Researching Folklore. According to the translator, it included just the first half (1341 lines) of the olonkho “Non-Stumbling Nyusur Berge” by N.M. Tarasov (Yamashita 2006, 48).

Although Yamashita cannot be said to be a disinterested party in evaluating the effectiveness of this translation in fostering intercultural dialogue, his comments on the challenges of successfully translating olonkho are important to note:

When Olonkho is decoded, the particular rhythm and melody are lost. And when the decoded text is translated, the beauty of the poetry, such as alliteration, is also lost. But Olonkho is such an amazing work of art that it is still very interesting to read the Japanese translation. Through the translation the Japanese people learn a lot, for example, the richness of similes and metaphors, the captivating nature of the plots, the similarities with the Japanese mythology. (Yamashita 2006, 48)

Even if, as Yamashita suggests, a number of Japanese people enjoyed their acquaintance with olonkho, it is doubtful that translations alone have led to true intercultural dialogue. More significant in this regard was the theatrical performance of a well-loved Sakha olonkho (“*Kyys Debiliye*”) in Japan. Yamashita wrote the subtitles for this performance by the “Theater of Olonkho” in March 2005. Although a lone example of what might be termed *intercultural dialogue*, it is nevertheless a step in that direction.

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<sup>236</sup> Reshetnikov, 2009. [See DVD]

<sup>237</sup> Savinov, 2010. [See DVD]

There have been a few other examples of olonkho translations into other languages. For example, *Ėr Sogotokh* by Afanasi Uvarovskii (1800-1861) was translated into Russian, German, Turkish, and a fragment into Altaic. The most successful translations, however, (and the only ones leading to actual performances of olonkho in other languages) have been into closely-related Turkic and Mongol languages which preserve some of the phonetic, lexical, and grammatical structures of the Sakha text (Vasilieva 2006, 49).

An important ingredient needed to foster dialogue is a minimum level of revitalization, a solid base of enthusiasts who understand and promote olonkho, and who have the connections with other cultures through which dialogue can be facilitated. This is a problem in the Yakutian context, because even within Russia itself the vast majority of people have never heard of olonkho. There is a complete lack of interest on the part of the mass media controlled by Moscow. In an interview with Sakha ethnomusicologist Anna Larionova, she reported, “When they [UNESCO] announced the olonkho as a “Masterpiece” – there was absolutely no sign of it, complete silence in the [national] mass media. The regional news media had it on every single channel! But in the mass media... not a word.”<sup>238</sup>

A good beginning for intercultural dialogue about olonkho would be within the borders of the Russian Federation itself—between its majority and minority cultures. This is beginning to happen in very modest ways between scholars and academics in conferences about olonkho. For example, I participated in the December 2012 conference “The Unified Space of the Cultures of Eurasia” which included some papers on olonkho. There was some international participation in the plenary sessions which addressed

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<sup>238</sup> Larionova and Alekseyev, 2010. [See DVD]

various broad issues related to Eurasia, but in the session on olonkho, there were only two other scholars beside myself from outside of Yakutia, both of them from other places in Siberia. In short, I have not observed that intercultural dialogue is being fostered through olonkho revitalization.

3) *Encouraging mutual respect for other ways of life*: If intercultural dialogue would happen between peoples because of olonkho, this would foster mutual respect, but if there is little or no dialogue, the result is simply self-respect, which while it may be argued that this is a worthy goal, it is not the stated goal of the ICH program.

4) *Safeguard ICH through bolstering transmission systems*: The transmission systems for olonkho became so severely attenuated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that it may take a very long time and much effort in order to bolster them to sustainable levels.

Transmission of any kind requires several basic components: a transmitter, content, method of delivery, and a receptor who decodes the message. The *transmitters* in this process for olonkho include, among other things, those people who have been designated *olonkhosuts*, or master performers (improvising performers). In addition, certain kinds of mediated forms, such as the Kolesov recordings, television, and radio, can also serve in the popularization of olonkho, enabling performances in places where no live olonkhosuts are available.

To ensure ongoing transmission, UNESCO “encourages States to create national systems of ‘Living Human Treasures’ that honour exemplary tradition-bearers and encourage them to transmit their knowledge and skills.”<sup>239</sup> The standards for eligibility for such nominations are not limited to merely the perfection of the artistic performance; it includes a recognized ability and dedication to passing along their cultural heritage to

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<sup>239</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00078>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

others. The ICH site states, “In nominating a person or a group to the rank of ‘Living Human Treasure,’ the Commission should consider the following criteria for eligibility:

- a) excellence in the application of the knowledge and skills displayed;
- b) dedication of the person or group;
- c) ability of the person or group to further develop his knowledge and skills;
- d) ability of the person or group to pass on the knowledge and skills to trainees.”<sup>240</sup>

Yakutia recognized only two such qualified tradition-bearers in the half-decade following the Masterpiece Proclamation. One of those, Darya Tomskaya, has since died (and was eventually replaced by Afanasii Solovëv). With only two elderly people currently recognized, one wonders whether there are simply too few master olonkhosuts in existence and the short list of “Living Human Treasures” simply reflects that reality. There is also the possibility, however, that there has not been enough work done to identify other master performers. It is not likely that financial factors are hindering the identification of these experts. While each Living Human Treasure is awarded a stipend of 33,000 rubles per month (approximately \$1100; more than an airline pilot earns in Russia and more than twice what the average Russian worker makes),<sup>241</sup> adding stipends for new master olonkhosuts would be a small drop in the sea for olonkho funding. It is more likely that the standards for such a title are extremely difficult to attain.

The purposes of the funding are to free up the master olonkhosut to focus on dissemination and transmission of the olonkho tradition to the next generation. The UNESCO site explains: “Besides public recognition, the system includes measures for the provision of, for example, special grants/subsidies to designated Living Human

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<sup>240</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf>, p.8. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>241</sup> See <http://www.worldsalaries.org/russia.shtml>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

Treasures, so that they can assume their responsibilities for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. These measures aim especially at:

1. The perpetuation and development of their knowledge and skills;
2. The transmission of their knowledge and skills to the younger generations through formal or non-formal training programmes;
3. Contributing to the documenting and recording of the intangible cultural heritage concerned (video or audio recording, publications, etc.);
4. Dissemination of their knowledge and skills;
5. Any additional duties entrusted to them.”<sup>242</sup>

The small number of officially recognized master olonkhosuts is clearly a hindrance to olonkho promulgation and transmission. In trying to determine why there were so few of them, in 2010 I asked Sakha ethnomusicologist Anna Larionova, “Who decides when a singer becomes a “real” (master) olonkhosut?” She replied, “The people. They decide.” When I pressed further and asked, “How do they decide?” She replied, “People can sense whether a performer is doing it by memory, and when he is creating as he goes. When there is creation happening, then they decide that he is a master. That’s the way I understand it.”<sup>243</sup>

Elizaveta Sidorova pointed to a committee for the “Decade of Olonkho” as the arbiters of these awards, but did not elaborate on the process by which new olonkhosuts were chosen. It is unclear to me whether more people qualifying for the title of master olonkhosut could be identified with the application of a little more effort. However, it is clear that with just two living “Master Olonkhosuts” to model and transmit olonkho to future generations, the transmission portion of Yakutia’s plan will not be robust, possibly not even adequate. Certainly, there should be a high priority on identifying the currently

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<sup>242</sup> See [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/21909/10897056533Guidelines\\_lht.pdf/Guidelines\\_lht.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/21909/10897056533Guidelines_lht.pdf/Guidelines_lht.pdf). Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>243</sup> Alekseyev and Larionova, 2010. [See DVD]

living masters and compensating them in a way that encourages a focus on transmission to the next generation.

Another transmission system frequently mentioned by those whom I interviewed was the recorded performance by Gavril Kolesov of *Nyurgun Botur the Swift*. At least one performer (Pyotr Tikhonov, who does memorized performances) and a number of olonkho fans trace their love for olonkho back to these recordings.<sup>244</sup> But as far as we know, they have never produced a master olonkhosut, capable of re-creating and improvising in the art of traditional olonkho.

Yet another important link in the transmission system is the schools, one of which is in the town of Cherkëkh, where Pyotr Reshetnikov was living in 2009. One of the children at that school, a student of Reshetnikov's, performed a short memorized portion of an olonkho for us. I also met and interviewed groups of children from two other schools who attended the summer festival and performed short sections of olonkhos that they had been learning. But the small number of transmitters cannot help but negatively affect the level of success for other schools in transmitting the olonkho tradition. Other schools without a master olonkhosut like Reshetnikov nearby must rely on other, less effective means of transmission.

Written resources and recordings, helpful for expanding olonkho audiences, are not as effective as the live performances of a master olonkhosut in transmitting a living art. That is why the emphasis in transmission is on the people who can transmit, rather than on the data bases, archives, recordings, and theatrical companies. People are the most ideal transmitters, because they are the ones that can most effectively respond to the

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<sup>244</sup> P.A. Oiyunskiy, *Nyurgun Botur Stremitel'nyi: Yakutskii geriocheskii épos – olonkho* [Nyurgun Botur the Impetuous: The Yakut Heroic Epos of Olonkho]. Performed by Gavril Kolesov. Recorded in 1962 by the Leningrad Studio of Recording. Remastered in 1997 by Studiya Poligram [KYDYK].

changing environment and to the receptors of the content being transmitted. In other words, living persons are the best transmitters of a living tradition.

UNESCO's guidelines for identifying and monitoring the Living Human

Treasures reflect this, emphasizing the transmission of a malleable, living tradition:

Intangible cultural heritage, or living heritage, consists of practices and expressions, as well as the knowledge, skills and values associated therewith, that communities and groups recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, for the most part orally. It is constantly recreated in response to changes in the social and cultural environment. It provides individuals, groups and communities with a sense of identity and continuity and constitutes a guarantee of sustainable development.<sup>245</sup>

When olonkho is *transmitted* by master olonkhosuts to a new generation in an oral manner, and *recreated* in performance in response to changes in the social and cultural environment, then sustainable development is guaranteed.

We have seen in this chapter that two key principles in revitalization are *transmission* and *re-creation* (or *innovation*). In the next chapter, I explore how these two principles have impacted the experience of “sitting under the mouth” as olonkho has interacted with the fluctuating elements of continuity and change over time.

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<sup>245</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf>, p. 3. Accessed January 18, 2012.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN REVITALIZATION

The historical chapters of this work provide a narrative frame that informs the discussion in this chapter of continuity and change in olonkho performance. Although measuring change (or “shift”) for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a complex task, sociolinguists are addressing issues of language shift in ways that may provide some helpful models for measuring music shift as well. While sociolinguistics may seem far removed from the discipline of ethnomusicology, I demonstrate in this chapter that sociolinguistic and other communication-based models are not only being effectively modified for use in measuring music change, but that they can provide insight for the key factors needed for sustainable revitalization.

In exploring the relationship between the disciplines of sociolinguistics and applied ethnomusicology, I will provide models for gauging language vitality levels and highlight a model measuring music vitality and change. In addition, I have created a diagnostic decision tree demonstrating the primary factors leading to decline or revitalization in ICH expressions, giving insight to effective revitalization plans for stressed genres such as olonkho.

### Parallels in language and music safeguarding

UNESCO is not only involved in safeguarding ICH, it also promotes similar activities in regard to language revitalization.<sup>246</sup> There are several reasons why I believe there are parallels between ICH and language when it comes to vitality issues. First, they are cultural expressions which are vulnerable to analogous forces (both from outside and from within) which can lead to their attenuation and even extinction.<sup>247</sup> Second, the safeguarding programs for ICH feature many of the same initiatives as those employed in safeguarding languages, such as revitalization and inter-generational transmission. UNESCO documents about language death state that “...this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible: well-planned and implemented language policies can bolster the ongoing efforts of speaker communities to maintain or revitalize their mother tongues and pass them on to younger generations.”<sup>248</sup> It is interesting to note that people who understand the epic *sreda* in Yakutia, experts such as Pyotr Reshetnikov, Dmitri Sivtsev–Suorun Omolloon, and Dekabrina Vinokurova (among others) have repeatedly emphasized the strong connection between Sakha language vitality and the future of traditional solo olonkho.

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<sup>246</sup> See the “Endangered Languages” program of UNESCO at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/>. Accessed 28 February, 2012.

<sup>247</sup> A UNESCO document on “Safeguarding Endangered Languages” states that for language, the most significant force is connected to attitudes toward the language itself, a factor which could reasonably apply to other ICH expressions. It says, “A main reason for this phenomenon is the negative attitudes and lack of prestige of minority and indigenous languages among speaker communities, in turn due in large part to the insignificant role these languages are given in public life.” See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001502/150220e.pdf>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>248</sup> See <http://unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/FlyerEndangeredLanguages-WebVersion.pdf>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

### Models for measuring language and music shift

In 2003, the UNESCO ad-hoc group for endangered languages published a list of nine factors that can be used to assess the vitality of a language and to determine appropriate safeguarding measures:<sup>249</sup>

1. Absolute number of speakers
2. Proportion of speakers within total population
3. Intergenerational language transmission
4. Shifts in domains of language use
5. Type and quality of documentation
6. Availability of materials for language education and literacy
7. Response to new domains and media
8. Community member's attitudes towards their own language
9. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use

Based on these factors, UNESCO established six degrees (levels) of vitality vs. endangerment (2003, 7–9), noting that in these levels, the most important factor is *intergenerational transfer*. The six degrees (ordered from “safe” to “extinct”) are:

- 6) Safe: language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
- 5) Vulnerable: most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
- 4) Definitely endangered: children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
- 3) Severely endangered: language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
- 2) Critically endangered: the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
- 1) Extinct: there are no speakers left

According to these factors, the Yakut (Sakha) language is listed as “vulnerable” (Moseley 2010) even though it is the most widely-used indigenous language in Russia.<sup>250</sup>

<sup>249</sup> See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001836/183699E.pdf>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

<sup>250</sup> Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010. *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd edition. Paris, UNESCO Publishing. Online version: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap.html>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

Its vulnerable state is largely due to the stresses which were placed on the use of Sakha language during the Soviet years. These stresses are now being ameliorated through the general level of cultural revitalization in Yakutia, but the consequences of those stresses and resultant weakening of Sakha language use is still felt strongly in Sakha society, as noted in interviews with Reshetnikov (2009) and Vinokurova (2011).

Some models worth examining have come out of SIL International, a faith-based non-governmental organization for which (beginning in 2010) I provide services as an ethnomusicology consultant and help in designing training curriculum. SIL International is an advisor to UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage<sup>251</sup> and a number of SIL workers are involved in sociolinguistic and ethnomusicological scholarship supporting that advisory role. Their scholarship has informed the ongoing academic dialogue on sustainability and revitalization issues. A model by sociolinguists M. Paul Lewis and Gary Simons addresses issues of language shift (2009, 2011), and extended field-based research by Neil Coulter and Brian Schrag, both with PhDs in ethnomusicology, addresses the topics of safeguarding and music vitality (Coulter 2007, 2011; Schrag 2005, 2009, 2012). This chapter engages with these models, applying their insights to the Yakutian context in general and olonkho performance in particular.

Coulter's dissertation on music shift (2007) as well as a recent article (2011) elaborating and expanding on his original model, offers a schema for the "diagnosis of shift in music preferences within a language community... draw[ing] from current discussion of language shift from sociolinguistics" (2007, 2). He posits that although

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<sup>251</sup> Correspondence with Brian Schrag on March 16, 2011. For a description of SIL, see the section on Abbreviations found on page xvii.

methodologies coming from the field of sociolinguistics (such as Lewis and Simons' work) may serve to inform music research, they need to be adapted because language vitality, although vulnerable to cultural and extra-cultural forces, is less vulnerable than music. He states, "... in many cases language is among the last parts of a culture to die. Other elements, such as visual art, music, dance, and oral storytelling, can be subject to extinction long before the language itself is weakened" (2007, 5).

The sociolinguistic models providing theoretical foundations for Coulter's work trace back to Joshua Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). This model describes eight stages of language shift, with Stage 8 being very close to extinction ("People who still know the language are few and elderly") and Stage 1 as demonstrating the highest level of vitality ("the language can be used in higher-level education, occupations, government, and media..."). The six levels in between 8 and 1 represent an increasing number of functions being engaged for that particular language. Language shift in the direction of extinction (language death) occurs when a language increasingly loses functions in society. To reverse this process, the community must act to bring those functions back. Fishman's model thus includes suggested goals for each stage to help reverse the process of language death (Fishman 1991, 87-109).

The recent model proposed by Lewis and Simons (2010) enlarged on the GIDS model, resulting in an "Expanded GIDS" (EGIDS), providing a more nuanced model. The EGIDS model for measuring language vitality increases the stages from eight to thirteen, but preserves the category numbering employed by Fishman, merely dividing a few of them into *a* and *b*, as well as adding new stages to the beginning and the end of the original GIDS. The resultant EGIDS stages range from most viable to most threatened:

International, National, Regional, Trade, Educational, Written, Vigorous, Threatened, Shifting, Moribund, Nearly extinct, Dormant, and Extinct.

*Factors in adapting GIDS/EGIDS to music shift*

In adapting the concepts and methodology of language shift measurement to that of music shift, Coulter (2007) draws on a connection between linguistics and ethnomusicology. He points out that although there is not a one-to-one correspondence between language death rates and music death, when a language disappears, often related cultural elements disappear as well. He outlines two reasons in particular why language shift approaches can be used to inform the study of music shift. First, language, like music, expresses identity, is a repository of history, and utilizes local communication modes connected to the cultural context. Similarly, the music of a community is uniquely connected to that space. Second, he points out that intergenerational transmission is the most significant element for sustaining both music and language.

Since intergenerational transmission is a large aspect of UNESCO initiatives, it is important to note that whereas in language shift, intergenerational transmission happens primarily in the home, in music transmission, it can happen in a far broader variety of contexts. Coulter says,

Music can be transmitted in a men's initiation house, in a church, or in school, as well as in the home and other contexts; transmission might take place from man to man or woman to woman, rather than from parent to child. Therefore, to adapt language shift methodology to music shift, one must look at more intergenerational transmission contexts than the home. (2007, 13)

In addition to face-to-face transmission methods, modern technology allows for a certain amount of transmission to happen in mediated formats, such as radio, television,

Internet, and various other recording forms. These transmission methods can help to bridge long distances, especially relevant in a space such as Yakutia where transportation infrastructures are severely limited and expensive. In whatever form it takes, transmission of a tradition is key to keeping the genre from becoming “frozen” or dormant.

### *The Graded Music Shift Scale (GMSS)*

Coulter’s work has engaged both GIDS (2007) and EGIDS (2011), proposing and fine-tuning a model that features an eight-stage framework designed particularly for studying music shift. Since EGIDS is used widely by organizations like SIL, UNESCO, and other organizations measuring language shift, Coulter attempts to keep each stage as close as possible to the EGIDS model, facilitating dialogue between linguistics and ethnomusicology. The resulting GMSS stages are:

- 1) International: A music reaches this level when an international “community of practice” forms around it. Ideally, international participation in this music will include performance as well as consumer consumption.
- 2) National or regional: The music’s reputation grows beyond the home community. Community members may receive financial or other support from the regional or national level. People outside the home community learn to perform the music, and the performance becomes iconic of the region or nation. Though not the ultimate goal of music revitalization, it can increase confidence in the home community.
- 3) Vigorous: This is the pivotal level for music vitality. In this level, oral transmission and largely traditional contexts of education are intact and functioning. People have sufficient opportunities for performance and young people are learning by observation, participation, and appropriate educational contexts. A music can exist comfortably at this level without needing to move higher.
- 4) Threatened: The first level that hints at downward movement, toward endangerment. Music is still performed, but changes are becoming noticeable: diminishing performance contexts, more time given to more recent introductions, more rural-urban movement.

5) Locked: The music is known by more people than just the grandparent generation, but its performance is restricted to tourist shows or other contexts that are not integrated into the everyday life of the community. The performance repertoire is fixed and nothing new is being added to it. Participation, creative freedom, and grooving decline noticeably.

6) Shifting: The grandparent generation is proficient in this music, but fewer contexts exist for passing it on to younger people. Possibly the younger people do not express interest (or are perceived that way by their parents and grandparents). The music is not dead or endangered at this level, and can be revitalized, but signs point to downward movement and likely endangerment.

7) Dormant: Functional contexts for performance are gone, but recordings and other ethnographic description exist. A community could re-acquaint itself with the music, but its rebirth would likely be something different than what it was.

8) Extinct: No one in the community is capable of creating or performing in this style. Probably no performance has occurred in the lifetime of anyone currently living. No documentation exists. This is rarer, as most musics grow into other styles, or stylistic elements are perpetuated in related styles. But people may be able to name music styles, genres, instruments, or ensembles that they have never actually heard.

Coulter's sole departure from the terms used in EGIDS is "Stage 5—Locked," which reflects a common phenomenon related to music but not to language. Although language use in ritual can become "locked," it is uncommon for a language as a whole to be used only in a "locked" (performance) mode. Coulter defines *locked* in regard to music as "the stage at which a music style is performed for tourist shows or other basically non-functional occasions, and the repertoire is not being added to but is frozen" (2011, 11). This addition to the EGIDS model is important, as it reflects reality for some genres of music, including to a certain extent, some of the current performance contexts for olonkho which are showcasing memorized versions of canonical olonkhos. Overall, Coulter's model is useful for olonkho, providing insight and helpful descriptions about music vitality levels that olonkho has experienced, as well as commentary on movement considerations (both upward and downward) within the spectrum of vitality levels.

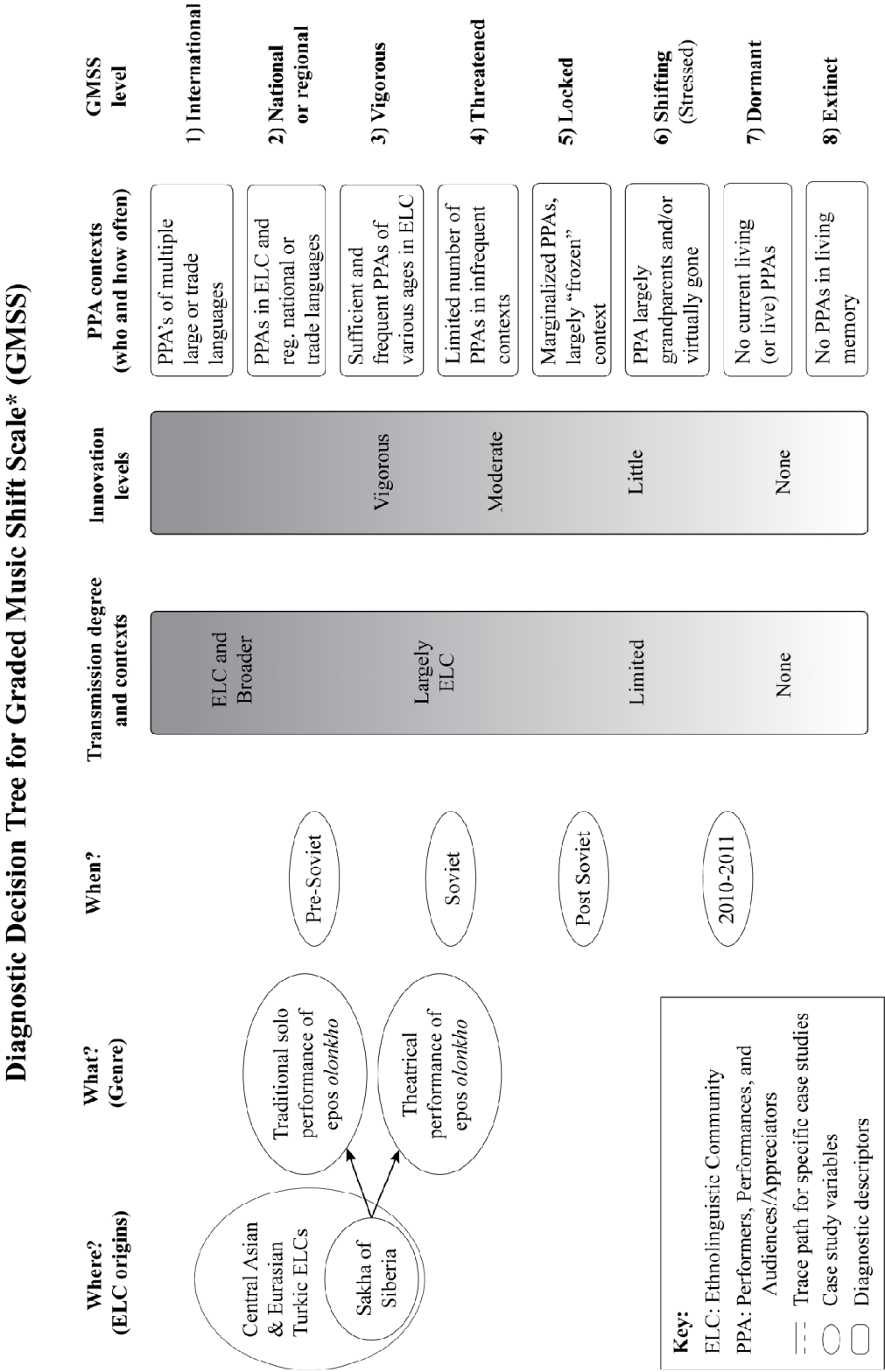


Figure 6.1: Diagnostic Decision Tree for the Graded Music Shift Scale (GMSS)

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### The Diagnostic Decision Tree for the Graded Music Shift Scale

One of the limitations of the GMSS is that it does not directly address the key factors concerning how a genre ends up in one level or another. I noted that Lewis and Simons created a “Diagnostic Decision Tree” (DDT) for their Expanded GIDS. This tool uses a series of questions to predict the level of language vitality, questions such as a) What is the level of official use? b) Are all parents transmitting the language to their children? and c) What is the youngest generation has some proficient speakers? (2009, Figure 1).

In order to expand the usefulness of the GMSS, making it more practical for those interested in the factors influencing vitality, I have likewise created a Diagnostic Decision Tree (DDT) shown in Figure 6.1. This diagnostic tool begins with several oval-shaped fields, the content of which is determined by the researcher and which delimits the genre or style and a specific time period under consideration. The first column of oval shapes defines the ethnolinguistic community (ELC) and its broader context, which can be either broadly or narrowly defined, and the second column inputs at least one (or more if comparison is desired) example of a community’s genre or intangible cultural heritage (ICH). In the third column, a time period is defined for the project, with an option for several differing time periods plotted in different colors if a comparative study is desired.

This DDT posits that there are two key variables which affect the outcome in terms of GMSS level, and those two variables are listed in the fourth and fifth columns: *transmission* (the number and diversity of transmission paths and ethnolinguistic contexts) and *innovation* (evidences of creativity within the boundaries of the genre—is it a living tradition?). Since the levels in these two variables are often connected, I posit

that movement from columns four to seven is likely to be more or less horizontal, not having large peaks and valleys in the lines indicating the paths toward GMSS levels. In other words, the GMSS levels will largely reflect parallel realities according to degrees of transmission and innovation in the genre.

For example, if transmission is happening in some form, then the resultant GMSS levels are likely to be 1 to 6. If there is no transmission, the GMSS levels are likely to be 7 or 8. If transmission goes beyond the ethno-linguistic community (ELC), it often results in a GMSS level of somewhere between 1 and 3, depending on the degree of innovation. Less broad amounts of transmission and innovation result in GMSS levels of 4 to 6. The *Locked* level can exist in tandem with other levels if there is the presence of a memorized corpus of works as well as thriving and broad transmission. I should note however, that the boundaries between each of the levels in columns 4, 5, and 6 are permeable, in reality representing more of a continuum than bounded sets.

The sixth column (the last one before the GMSS levels) defines the contexts for Performers, Performances, and Appreciators/Audiences (PPAs), that is, who is performing and listening and whether there are adequate opportunities for performance. Each level corresponds to a level in the GMSS and serves to briefly describe it.

There are a few items in the GMSS descriptors that I would change. Under the *Extinct* description, Coulter includes the statement, “No documentation exists.” I posit that the existence of documentation does not necessarily disqualify a genre from the extinct level. For example, Homeric poems are extinct as a performed epic genre, but documentation does exist for them. In fact, Lord and Perry were able to do research on

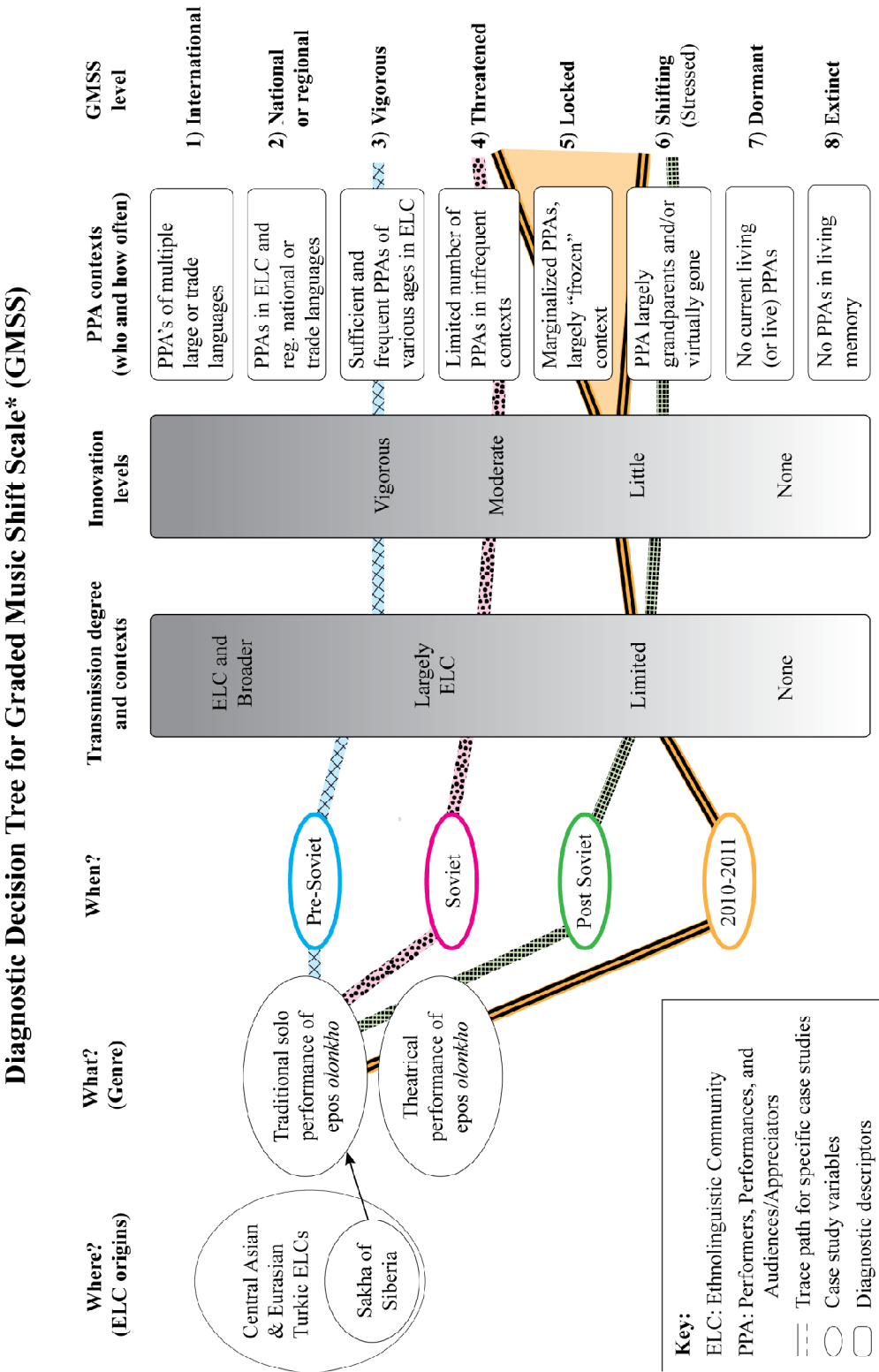
them from the extant documentation by comparing it with research from living epic traditions (Lord 2000).

The second modification I suggest for the GMSS and EGIDS is that level 6, *Shifting*,<sup>252</sup> would be better titled *Stressed*, as Coulter rightly notes that the term “shift” should be neutral, indicating both 1) shift in the direction of increasing viability, or 2) shift in the direction of disappearance. Measuring music shift, (in Coulter’s terms), happens for the full spectrum of GMSS levels. He writes, “I like the term ‘music shift’ because it affirms that music preferences are constantly changing; the word ‘shift’ need not imply downward movement toward endangerment” (2011, 11). His continued use of Lewis and Simons’ term *Shifting* at level 6 confuses the matter, as that is not a term descriptive of a state of vitality as much as it is one of movement. This is an important distinction because the entire GMSS is measuring “music shift” in multiple directions. With those two suggested changes for the GMSS, I propose using the Diagnostic Decision Tree I have provided in Figure 6.1 to give insight into how genres arrive at viability levels such as proposed by the GMSS.

This Diagnostic Decision Tree for GMSS can be used to compare the vitality of two of olonkho’s main performance practices (traditional, solo performance as well as theatrical presentations). It also allows the researcher to compare how olonkho vitality levels changed in various periods of Sakha history and demonstrates how various transmission levels and innovation relate to a given GMSS level.

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<sup>252</sup> *Shifting* in Coulter’s GMSS is a level of vitality between *Dormant* and *Locked*.



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Figure 6.2: Traditional solo performance of olonkho over four time periods

*Placing olonkho and its variants on the GMSS*

This research has focused largely on the performance of traditional olonkho solo versions during three history periods: pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet up to the present. By inputting the variables into the chart, it is possible to see how olonkho has moved from Level 3 – *Vigorous* (during the pre-Soviet period) to Level 4 – *Threatened* (during the early Soviet period), and further to Level 6 – *Shifting/Stressed* – by the end of the Soviet Period. Figure 6.2 shows the different paths for olonkho during these periods.

Note that Level 6 is the lowest level at which revitalization is practically possible, as it is the last level at which transmission of a living tradition is likely to happen. By the end of the Soviet Period, a description of “a whole generation of grandparents who are proficient in the genre” (Level 6) would be far too optimistic for olonkho, as there were a severely limited number of performers of “grandparent” age. According to the interviews reported in Chapters 3 and 4, that number would put olonkho at Level 6. Some reports would even place it closer to Level 7, with virtually no performers at all.

In the post-Soviet Period, vitality for olonkho began to slowly turn around and appears to be moving back up through the levels. Currently, it has at least some elements of both Level 5 (*Locked*) and mid-range Level 6 (*Shifting/Stressed*). If one includes the performers who are not creating in the genre but merely performing memorized sections, then Level 5 (*Locked*) becomes a clear reality. Since there are a few master olonkhosuts, one can say that there is some upward movement and that olonkho is not trapped at Level 5. Some would put olonkho moving slowly toward level 4 (*Threatened*) which is still endangered but more vigorous than just a “grandparent generation” of performers.

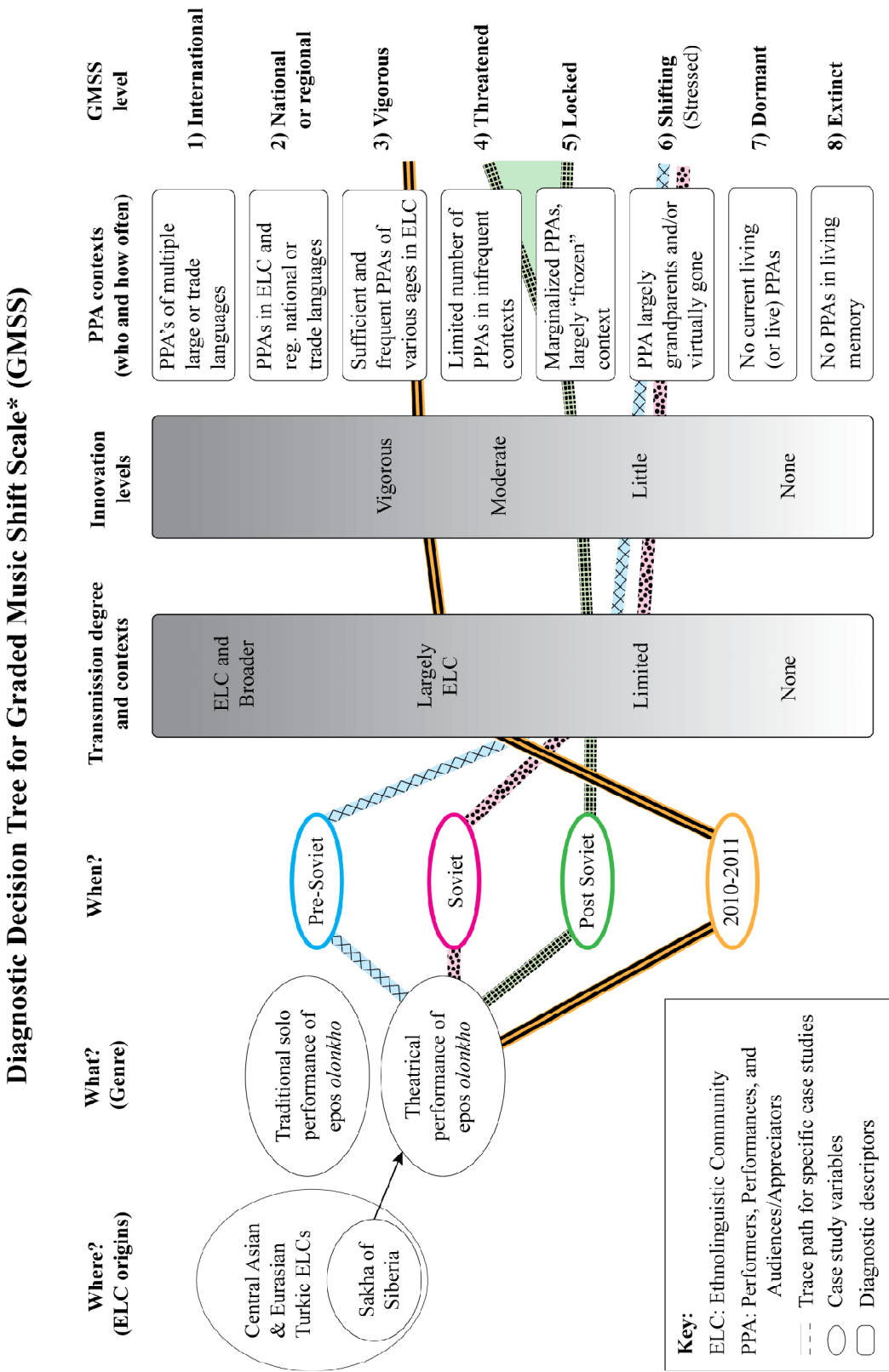


Figure 6.3: Theatrical performance of olonkho over four time periods

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Olonkho theatrical versions, a primary derivative, can be plotted at GMSS Level 4 (Figure 6.3). This is largely based on the fact that each time a theatrical production is staged, creativity and innovation come into play as well as expand to a broad spectrum of people, both performers and audiences. Since new works are not being written for the stage, I also include Locked (where innovation is not happening).

If a higher level of innovation is employed in performing olonkho, for example, staging a broader variety of olonkho plots or even commissioning new olonkho stories written specifically for the stage, it is quite possible that the genre will move in the direction of being vigorous, as it has a fairly broad audience of appreciators. This is especially possible since the stage is a hybrid genre which does not require the years of transmission and intensive exposure to olonkho performance, making it easier to transmit than traditional olonkho.

*Transmission – a key factor in placement on the GMSS*

*Transmission* and *innovation* are the two factors posited by this research as influencing olonkho's placement on the GMSS during each period in its history. Without some measure of transmission, a genre is automatically reduced to two options: 7 (*Dormant*), or 8 (*Extinct*). Given that some form of transmission is taking place, the question becomes "how broadly?" or "to whom?"

The ethnolinguistic community is the foundational audience for olonkho transmission (and many other forms of ICH which are tied closely to linguistic communication). If this community is experiencing moderate to vigorous transmission levels, (even including to groups broader than the ethnolinguistic community), then the

GMSS level is likely to be somewhere in Levels 1 to 4, unless *innovation* has slowed or ceased, in which case the level could conceivably drop to Level 5 (*Locked*). If the transmission is very limited, the resulting GMSS level is rarely higher than 5, as the number of performers (and thus performances) is attenuated. If the transmission has reached such a high level that it is including groups broader than the ethnolinguistic community, there is a very high likelihood that there will be vigorous levels of innovation as well, and placement at Levels 1 to 3 will be the result.

Although olonkho recordings have had some effect on olonkho revitalization in Yakutia (especially among those who have become appreciative audiences of olonkho in this way), they have not been a significant factor in the kind of transmission that leads to people becoming master olonkhosuts. For example, even though Tikhonov credits a recording as helping him to memorize his first short olonkho, he does not claim to be a master olonkhosut and does not (yet) create his own olonkhos. He is among those, in fact, who believe that the olonkho canon is closed. He says, “My personal opinion at this point, is that everything has already been written—written when the language was at that (high) level. Olonkho is not created by a personality (an individual person). It is just passed along from one generation to another.”<sup>253</sup> Tikhonov, therefore, values olonkho recordings and printed versions, listing them as most important for revitalization.

Certainly the documentation of the olonkho epic tradition through audio and video recordings is important. These recordings are being accessed through websites and other mediated forms of communication. For olonkho to be seen and heard in places where there are no living olonkhosuts (which is most of the vast Republic) is a benefit only possible because of media. Furthermore, because recordings can have the effect of

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<sup>253</sup> Tikhonov, 2009. [See DVD]

expanding audiences for olonkho, these recordings have played, and will continue to play, a key role in olonkho revitalization. It is possible that increased numbers of good quality recordings, given play time on radio and television, will build up the epic *sreda*, as Sakha audiences learn to appreciate their epic tradition.

Another benefit of mediated transmission forms is that the viewer of the video (or the listener, if it is audio only) can enjoy the performance in a time and place which is convenient for the listener, not dependent on the schedule of the person performing. It can be transported in a smart phone, or a laptop computer, or a radio or CD player. In addition, these mediated forms allow for short, digestible sections of the recording to be heard over and over again, opening up possibilities for greater analysis and processing in the minds of the listeners. For these reasons, the growth in the numbers of audio and video recordings, as well as their archiving on computers and Internet is a welcome phenomenon for those seeking to revitalize olonkho.

Although Kolesov's recording of *Nyurgun Botur* was cited by many of my respondents as being the primary olonkho source heard during the Soviet period, my research, however, did not find an instance of this recording resulting in anyone learning the improvisational art of olonkho, just the memorized version. Coulter stresses the importance of human transmission over recordings, saying, "...for communities interested in revitalizing their local musics, recordings can be useful but they do not replace the active human-to-human transmission of music knowledge" (2007, 17).

Transmission is important in both language viability and music viability. In addition to UNESCO's 2009 document on language vitality stressing the role of

transmission,<sup>254</sup> Fishman's GIDS also focus on transmission as a key factor. In fact, Fishman recommends strengthening intergenerational transmission as a first priority in language revitalization (1991, 39). Lewis and Simons, in their EGIDS scale for language vitality, measure intergenerational transmission as one of five important factors, the others being "the identity function, vehicularity, literary acquisition status, and a societal profile of generational language use" (2010, 103).

Albert Lord, in his ground-breaking work on oral epic traditions, explains the crucial role transmission plays in regard to epics: "With oral poetry we are dealing with a particular and distinctive process in which oral learning, oral composition, and oral transmission almost merge; they seem to be different facets of the same process" (2000, 5). In other words, transmitting oral traditions such as olonkho depends on repeated live performance opportunities over a long time period to appreciative audiences. So as I condensed Coulter's description of GMSS levels in creating the DDT, I have formulated a column which measures the number of Performers, Performances, and Appreciative Audiences (PPA). This "condensed description" reflects Coulter's thinking while distilling the important variables down to these three to create the diagnostic instrument.

*Innovation: The interaction of stable and malleable in living traditions*

As mentioned above, innovation is the second important factor in the vitality of an ICH expression. In explaining some of the dynamics of innovation, I have found Brian Schrag's model of stable and malleable infrastructures to be a framework providing powerful insight into how enduring creative traditions are energized. Schrag's model comes from his work with a dance group in Cameroon where he observed that stable

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<sup>254</sup> See <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001836/183699E.pdf> (p. 9. Accessed January 18, 2012).

infrastructures interact with malleable ones to create dynamism.<sup>255</sup> His conclusions are remarkably germane for olonkho:

Bamiléké music-makers create culture through the masterful exercise of the most plastic—or malleable—of their physical, social, and musical infrastructures to strengthen the most stable... Without creative, plastic, malleable structures to infuse new energy into the stable structures—by singing, for example—the stable structures will stagnate and dissipate. And without stable undergirdings, the creators in malleable forms will have no place to hang their hats. (2009)

My analysis of “stable and malleable” in olonkho is limited to four performance facets (music, dramatic, performer-audience interaction, and oral-verbal arts), rather than a broader socio-musical analysis such as the one Schrag did with Bamiléké culture. After exploring some of the stable and malleable pairs related to olonkho, I discuss the *interaction* of stable and malleable elements, demonstrating that their interdependent nature provides dynamism in olonkho performance. Finally, I address further approaches to understanding the stable and malleable concepts through the viewpoints of other scholars’ writings.

In Figure 6.4, I have outlined four olonkho performance facets (music, drama, performer-audience interaction and oral-verbal arts) with some examples of the corresponding stable and malleable pairs for each category. These pairs could be expanded to other olonkho performance aspects, such as clothing, gestures, or other derivative forms and performance settings.

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<sup>255</sup> Schrag’s definition of *infrastructure* for this model is “any social construct that enables and influences the transmission and reception of a message” (2012). He defines his terms: “a stable infrastructure as one that is temporally and locationally regular—and thus predictable—and exhibits tight ...organization. More malleable infrastructures, on the other hand, are temporally and locationally irregular, unpredictable, and are more loosely organized” (2012, 13).

	<b>Musical elements</b>	<b>Dramatic elements</b>	<b>Performers- Audiences</b>	<b>Oral-verbal arts</b>
<b>Stable</b>	Each character in olonkho has its own stable motif and distinctive manner of vocal production	Sitting posture on stool; preferably by the fire, legs crossed and uncrossed in encouragement for turn as the story unfolds.	Verbal responses from the audience provides encouragement for olonkshut as he sings.	Textual formulas & themes
<b>Malleable</b>	The performer chooses which characters to include and how they are personified.	Gestures, facial expressions differ according to the habit of the performer as well as character being enacted.	Length of performance depends on verbal, audible audience reaction and interest.	Improvised "re-creation" of text: each performed text differs from others
<b>Stable</b>	Use of both Sakha musical styles - <i>dageren</i> and <i>diereitii</i>	Presence of heroes and anti-heroes; themes of love, faithfulness, familial ties, battle of good vs. evil.	Performers are compensated for their performances in some form or another.	Alternation of narrative and song in performance event is required.
<b>Malleable</b>	Choices for musical styles and level of ornamentation differ between performers, also regional differences	Gender and/or characters of heroes: can be harsh and violent, brash or kind, good and even gentle.	Means of compensation: gifts or government stipend (now) vs. lodging, food & gifts (in the past).	Performer's choice of how much song vs. narrative employed for event: may depend on strengths.
<b>Stable</b>	Use of multiple texture layers: syllabic-based, formulaic segments, motifs	Each character in the narrative has his/her/its distinctive voice and mannerisms.	Oral transmission of tradition through repeated exposure to listening audiences	Worldview transmission which includes both spiritual and physical realities/spaces.
<b>Malleable</b>	Performer chooses the specific musical materials for each layer of texture.	Number of characters and their development can contract or expand depending on audience.	Age when performance begins (depends on exposure and individual levels of ability).	Religious views of spiritual realities vary from traditional beliefs to Christian expressions.

Figure 6.4: *Stable* and *malleable* in olonkho through the lens of four elements.

### Dynamism in the interaction of stable and malleable

Having outlined some stable and malleable elements in olonkho, it becomes clear that it is the *interaction* of stable and malleable which make the olonkhosut's art possible. If everything was stable, there would be no improvisatory spark and olonkho would become locked, or frozen. If there were no stable elements, such as formulas and themes, the olonkhosut's job would be too difficult. But in olonkho, the *stable* formulas and other elements are used in the *malleable* re-creation of the particular performance. These interlocking concepts can be seen in Bauman's observation about formulaic expression in epics (my terms noted in brackets):

The ready-madeness [*stability*] of the formulas makes possible the fluency required under performance conditions, while the flexibility [*malleability*] of the form allows the singer to adapt his performance to the situation and the audience, making it longer and more elaborate, or shorter and less adorned, as audience response, his own mood, and time constraints may dictate. (1975, 303)

Although this model may be useful for understand many characteristics of music and arts, it is especially true for epic forms, in which there is a complex web of stable and malleable structures interacting with one another, providing emergent performances bursting with creativity. For example, Lord contrasts the typical Western idea of *song* with the concepts understood by the epic singer in regard to what is "stable and malleable" in the song. He writes,

Whereas the singer thinks of his song in terms of a flexible plan of themes, some of which are essential and some of which are not, we think of it as a given text which undergoes change from one singing to another... His idea of stability, to which he is deeply devoted, does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story. He builds his performance, or song in our sense, on the stable skeleton of narrative, which is the song in his sense. (2000, 99)

Beyond the four facets mentioned above, there are other malleable elements that appear to be breathing new life into olonkho revitalization. They are exemplified by the following: new story lines—some based on history or legend, others fictional, humorous, or even (recently) erotic in nature; expanding the types of people performing olonkho to include children and young people; expanding expressions of olonkho to other related arts (like dramatic arts); and expanding olonkho themes to religious expression outside Sakha traditional Animist belief systems.

Other writers have observed this phenomenon of dynamism in stable and malleable interactions and have used different terms and approaches to describe similar realities intersecting with the topic of innovation. For example, Victor Turner, in writing about incorporation and transformation and of existing patterns in rituals, describes a level of innovation and transformation that may help breathe life into olonkho:

New meanings and symbols may be introduced or new ways of portraying or embellishing old models for living, and so of renewing interest in them. Ritual liminality, therefore, contains the potentiality for cultural innovation as well as the means for effecting structural transformations within a relatively stable sociocultural system. For many transformations are, of course, within the limits of social structure and have to do with its internal adjustments and external adaptations to environmental changes. (1980, 165)

If Turner is right and if olonkho flexes to adapt to the significant cultural environment changes during this period of post-Soviet turmoil (especially in areas such as changing worldviews, values, and entertainment tastes), it may enjoy renewed interest by its Sakha audiences. Another thoughtful author on transmission and innovation, Paul Ricoeur, asserts that tradition is

not the inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity. . . . [A] tradition is constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation. (1984, 68)

This enlivens the definition of a “stable” element like *tradition*, because even tradition is the product of both innovation and sedimentation built up over time. Connerty writes in similar terms, commenting on Ricoeur’s “innovation and sedimentation” model in relation to narrative forms:

Again the relationship is one of reciprocity; as in the concept of defamiliarization, the act of innovation presupposes a sedimented or conventional form, while the sedimented form can only be seen as conventional once it has an innovation which deviates from it.... the narrative paradigm is not ahistorical, but is itself a sedimented structure that could be transformed by innovation. (1990, 393)

So while a rubric of “stable and malleable elements” is the model I find most useful in understanding the phenomenon of dynamism and how it relates to innovation, the concepts of sedimentation, incorporation, and transformation all illuminate innovation for olonkho in useful ways. Regarding innovation’s role in revitalization, Coulter writes,

The revitalization goal is surely exemplified by a community that is actively creating, developing, and changing a music...with people playing around in that stylistic space. And though the upper levels of the GMSS include regional, national, and international support, the focus always remains on the home community. Therefore, the crucial stage for music revitalization is Stage 3, Vigorous. This is the point at which a music’s existence is very stable, and continued creation within that style is assured. (2011, 11)

The levels of creation, development and innovation in a genre like olonkho are clearly tied to its future survival. But when the revitalization of a centuries-old tradition like olonkho becomes tied to maintaining canonical texts, it may dampen or even completely snuff out the innovative moments and creative bursts needed for its survival as a living tradition. And unless that “live tradition” is transmitted to a new generation with both stable and malleable elements intact, the traditional live olonkho performance will eventually die out, only displayed in a “locked” form (possibly as a Sakha national symbol) for government sponsored concerts and exhibitions. The choice whether or not

to support innovation and transmission in olonkho performance will be decided by Sakha people in the coming decades as they continue to deal with the forces of change that are sweeping Yakutia.

## CHAPTER 7

## SITTING “UNDER THE MOUTH” IN CHANGING CONTEXTS

The attaining of the UNESCO Masterpiece award and factors like transmission and innovation in olonkho are crucial issues which largely rest on the shoulders of modern-day Sakha people. Olonkho revitalization has been (and will be) affected by their choices in these areas. There are, however, historical, global, and political forces which have affected olonkho and the entire epic *sreda* for more than a century. They continue to exert pressure on olonkho performance practice by changing the milieu in which olonkho is performed and enjoyed by audiences. “Sitting under the mouth” is undeniably a different experience now than it was a century ago. A summary of influences mentioned in the preceding chapters will include evidences of change in the following areas:

- a) three major political regimes (tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet);
- b) performance space (from intimate home contexts to concert stages);
- c) season and time of day (from dark winter nights to daytime year-round);
- d) competing venues of entertainment (from none to a vast array of media);
- e) levels of orality (from a pre-literate population to a highly literate one);
- f) Sakha language fluency (from understanding archaic terms to lack of fluency);
- g) competing musical styles (including Russian and globalized pop music styles);
- h) material compensation (from gifts of food and lodging to stipends or money);
- i) length of performance time (from unlimited to very small; e.g. 5–20 minutes);
- j) age of performers (from largely older people to a burgeoning number of youth);
- k) learning contexts (from relatives and home performances to lessons at school);
- l) repository of texts (from oral to written forms of the text);
- m) worldviews (from unified view of spiritual/physical realities to various views);
- n) performance format (from one-person format to multi-person and theatrical);
- o) economy (animal husbandry to collective farms; eventual urbanization);<sup>256</sup> and
- p) function (from entertainment to ethnic identity marker).

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<sup>256</sup> See E. Stuart Kirby (1963, 37–38).

Most of these forces of change have been discussed in the preceding chapters, but the last one (the change in the function of olonkho performance toward being an ethnic identity marker), is a significant element that deserves exploration, as it provides us with clues to possible future paths for olonkho.

#### The role of colonial and post-colonial relations in ethnic identity

Olonkho began to be perceived as an ethnic identity marker as early as the 1930s, when Joseph Stalin began to populate his gulags with members of the Sakha intelligentsia (especially poets and writers, but including spiritual leaders); a number of these were seen as olonkho proponents (Cruikshank and Argunova 2000, 103). Even some ethnographers writing about minority cultures in the Soviet Union were imprisoned during these years (Knight 2004). Although there is no solid evidence that an olonkhosut was sent to the gulags solely for performing an olonkho, many people were convicted for crimes of “bourgeois nationalism” (Cruikshank and Argunova 2000, 102) which usually entailed a package of accusations ranging from “inappropriate song texts” to religious beliefs not in accordance with the official Soviet policy supporting a “scientific-atheistic propaganda” (Khazanov 1993, 185; N. A. Alekseyev 2008, 17).

American anthropologist Ted Levin’s extensive experience in Russia, both before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, led him to the opinion that there was a disastrous ideological effect on the people colonized by the Soviets. He writes that the “Soviets were imperial micromanagers. No aspect of life or art was too trivial to attempt to bring into conformity with the prescriptions of Marxist-Leninist doctrine” (2002, 191-192). Levin goes on to point out that an obsession with control over ideas was a hallmark of

Soviet colonialism. It was not enough for the State to simply reform the political and economic foundations of the North. Ideological control was deemed necessary to achieve the State's goals, and the management of the content and performed expression of approved folklore genres was thought to be a crucial part of Soviet ideology. Levin calls the Soviet system's relationship to folklore one of "pathological coupling of demagoguery and repression... against the texts, against folklore experts, and with the entire traditional medium as a necessary context for folklore" (2002, 191-192). Levin's close friendship and collaboration on a variety of projects with respected Soviet ethnomusicologists such as Eduard Alekseyev and Valentina Suzukei lends a ring of credibility to his assertions. He writes that there was a battle against not only folklore carriers but against its scholars as well. "The ideological criteria and censorship that were applied in the world of literature were transferred to the area of folklore as well... It became just as dangerous to sing about what one wanted to sing as it was to publish" (2002, 191).

More than a decade ago, Cruikshank and Argunova asked people in Yakutia's Tatta ulus about their Soviet era memories. Their respondents spoke in terms of their "cultural roots" being pulled from the ground during the time that prohibitions against local writers were publicized:

All subsequent expressions of Sakha culture were forbidden on the grounds that Tatta manifested "the worst expressions of bourgeois nationalism" so that, in the words of one older man with whom we spoke, "to speak openly, they wanted to remove the roots from the ground so that no new cultural writers would emerge from this place. Those who continued to sing, to tell stories or to write them, were imprisoned or lost their jobs. (2000, 110)

Because of the repressions begun in the 1930s and repeated periodically throughout Soviet rule, Sakha people began to perceive olonkho as an "anti-Soviet" activity and the

seeds for its role as ethnic identity marker were planted deep into their national consciousness. As other changes took place in Sakha society that slowly edged out olonkho as a widely-enjoyed form of entertainment, these seeds began to grow, eventually transforming their perception of olonkho from one of pleasurable pastime to a marginalized and vaguely dangerous activity.

During the period of perestroika, Soviet opposition toward indigenous art expressions began slowly to thaw and a cultural revitalization movement began to develop. After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990–1991, the State finished the process of rehabilitating the names of those persecuted and killed in the gulags.<sup>257</sup> This process only sharpened the association between these historical figures of the Sakha intelligentsia and the activities for which they had been punished—actions connected to their ethnic identity. In this way, these names which at one time were linked to “bourgeois nationalism” became the cultural and national heroes of the Republic of Sakha. In fact, “...by 1996, the names of these writers were associated with widespread cultural revitalization throughout the republic” (Cruikshank and Argunova 2000, 111). They were celebrated with large monuments in the public squares and their names attached to universities and institutes.

But naturally, revitalization initially affected primarily those cultural elements which had not completely died out—that which was easily accessible to performers and audiences alike. The favorite national instrument, the Sakha jaw harp (*khomus*), and song forms such as *toyuk* and especially *dègèrèn* saw immediate revitalization, as did the circle

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<sup>257</sup> *Rehabilitation*: clearing the names and reputations of the people in question, with official State acknowledgement that they had been repressed for political and/or ideological reasons.

dance (*ohuokhai*).<sup>258</sup> But olonkho was less accessible for a number of reasons. Its practitioners, the olonkhosuts, had all but died out and the few remaining lived in remote locations far from the capital. Olonkho was no longer easy to listen to, and the language was archaic. Lifestyles had changed and no one wanted to stay up and listen all night for several nights in a row to a story they could barely understand. While some valued the Kolesov recording (enough to recommend it to me as a visiting American ethnomusicologist) and Sakha folklore scholars were busy documenting it and analyzing it before the last performers died out, virtually no one was thinking about its revitalization during the difficult decade following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Lauri Harvilahti's works (1996, 2000) explore a variety of epic traditions in which negotiations of national, ethnic, ideological, and religious identities and values play a central role, often superseding the actual perceived enjoyment of the epos.<sup>259</sup> He asserts that sometimes revitalization of an epic tradition has much more to do with the function of expressing a people's cultural ideals and identity than it actually does with enjoying a work's performance. He underscores that

the desire to reinforce the people's self-esteem and to arouse respect for their own heritage and culture is among the main tasks of an epos (even within an oral epic poetry culture)... The political role of the epics in strengthening cultural and national identity varies over a large spectrum according to the prevailing sociocultural situation. (1996, 45–46)

I believe that this phenomenon, which Harvilahti describes both in terms of its relation to *function* (being used for strengthening cultural and national identity) accurately describes the current role of olonkho in modern-day Yakutia.

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<sup>258</sup> See Appendix H and the DVD for examples of *khomus*, *toyuk*, and *ohuokai*.

<sup>259</sup> Harvilahti has studied Latvia's *Bear Slayer* and Tibet's *Geser*, a cycle of epic poems from Tibet, China, Buryatia and India (1996, 40) as well as Altaic epics.

Recently-published research by Olga Osipova, a researcher at IGI, confirms this function for olonkho in modern Sakha society. Osipova researched how olonkho reflects the ethnic identity of modern representations of the Sakha people and to what degree olonkho, as a cultural value of the people, is a factor in the formation of ethnic identity (2011, 1). Her sociological fieldwork during 2009-2010 was in the regions of Yakutia which were historically the strongest in terms of olonkho performance.<sup>260</sup> The resulting data demonstrates that “the recognition of olonkho as a masterpiece of oral folk creativity by UNESCO led to an increased status of the epos as a national symbol” (2011, 4).<sup>261</sup> When asked how they view the heroic epos of olonkho, 83% of Osipova’s respondents chose this answer: “Olonkho is the foundation of the national culture of the Sakha people” (2011, 5).<sup>262</sup> In those regions, at least, olonkho is recognized as being connected to Sakha culture and identity. A full 81% of respondents felt that olonkho is a folk heritage that should be protected (2011, 5).

Surprisingly, Osipova’s research showed that “the majority of respondents see the primary problem [is...] that olonkho is not needed by society, regardless of the acknowledgement of its value for people”<sup>263</sup> (2011, 7). She concludes that “olonkho, without a doubt, is seen as a cultural value for the Sakha people, although it does not

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<sup>260</sup> These were the “Amginskii, Megino-Kangalasskii, Tattinskii, Ust-Aldanskii, Gornii, Namskii, Khantalasskii, and Churapchinskii regions” (Osipova 2011, 3).

<sup>261</sup> “Признание олонхо шедевром устного народного творчества ЮНЕСКО привело к повышению статуса эпоса как национального символа” (2011, 4).

<sup>262</sup> These percentages are rounded to the nearest percent. The questions and answers mentioned here, in Russian, follow: “Как вы оцениваете героический эпос олонхо?” Answers: “Олонхо – фундамент национальной культуры народа саха” (83.2%)... “Большинство (81.1%) опрошенного населения считает, что олонхо – народное достояние, которое надо беречь и сохранять” (2011, 5).

<sup>263</sup> “Большинство опрошенного населения главную проблему видят ... в том, что сам олонхо не востребовано у общества, даже несмотря на осознание людьми его ценности” (2011, 7).

enjoy popularity in society” (2011, 8).<sup>264</sup> Since this is relatively recent research in comparison to Vinokurova’s in 2007 (see Appendix F), it affords insight into the effectiveness of the governmental programs for promoting olonkho as a vital cultural heritage of the Sakha, but reveals that the epic *sreda* is still weak.

Revitalization in the context of “national awakening” appears to be a common phenomenon, especially in post-colonial contexts. While “colonialism” is commonly used in terms of geographical distance (often including a body of water) from the imperial power to the colonized, Said, in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, suggests that a geographical definition of colonialism is not adequate in this case. He points out that “Russia... acquired its imperial territories almost exclusively by adjacence. Unlike Britain or France, which jumped thousands of miles beyond their own borders to other continents, Russia moved to swallow whatever land or peoples stood next to its borders, which in the process kept moving farther and farther east and south” (1994, 10).

In another model, Hechter provides a similar conclusion through his term “internal colonialism” (1975), which acknowledges the unusual nature of Russian and Soviet colonialism, problematizing, as Said does, a limited understanding of colonialism which defines itself in relation to distance and bodies of water. These two concepts (*internal colonialism* and *colonialism through conquest of adjacent territory*) are important for establishing the relevance of the term *colonialism* in relation to the Soviet period. Even the periods during which Soviet power ostensibly supported olonkho (e.g. naming of a WWII era tank after the hero-warrior *Nyurgun Botur*, staging an olonkho theatrical performance in Moscow, and receiving olonkhosuts into the Soviet Writers

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<sup>264</sup> “Олонхо, безусловно, рассматривается как культурная ценность народа саха, однако не имеет популярности в обществе” (2011, 8).

Union), these “supportive” actions can be understood in terms of primarily benefiting the colonial power rather than those colonized. Fanning writes in this regard about the conflicting ideological tensions that were reflected in how the Soviets treated indigenous musical culture:

As elsewhere, folk and popular musics helped to give these nations a voice. But at the same time, centralized support for those musics—generous subsidies for folk ensembles and for the dissemination of information throughout the Soviet Union—was conceived as contributing ultimately towards the cohesion of the State itself... in a spirit of affirmation and meta-national pride. (2005, 513)

These observations are important, as they place the Soviet support structures for folk music culture directly in the realm of colonialist impetus. The stated benefit focused not on the peoples from which the musics came, but on the State’s broader goals, which largely focused on meta-national pride and keeping the “regions” from revolting.

Aubert, in writing about the folklore ensembles supported by the State, emphasizes how they retained an outer appearance of tradition, while subverting the essence of its meaning to the people.

[T]he Communist states, which considered these groups an efficient means of mass education and consolidating sentiments of national cohesion... [through] propaganda and normalization. The intervention was to eradicate the substratum of beliefs and practices in which these expressions were anchored, preserving instead the appearance – or rather a counterfeit – deplete of all substance, all metaphysical significance. (2007 50)

In her insightful article, “Traditional music in the context of the socio-political development in the USSR,” Kosacheva describes in more detail the ways in which attitudes toward folklore reflected the colonial aspirations of Soviet powers under Stalin. The primary policy on the arts, she reports, was that of central control. This control was maintained through systems that the government and its apparatus could manage—folk music festivals, contests, and auditions. Kosacheva concludes that the consequence was

that it “largely suppressed and belittled the improvisational character of folklore. Folklore became professionalized; professional music of oral tradition had to comply with the requirements of European-type concert performance based on numerous rehearsals. It also had to comply with rather severe constraints on performance duration (1990, 18-19).

Olonkho performance practice changed during the Soviet period in exactly the ways Kosacheva describes, with a growing emphasis on olonkho theatrical performances performed in concert halls rather than homes, resulting in severely limited performance durations—measured in minutes, rather than days, for an olonkho.

#### Sakha responses to neocolonial relations with the center

It is important to note that in Yakutia’s case, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a period of post-colonialism in the sense that it is still dealing with the past and current effects of colonial policies. Although the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is still part of Russia, like other Russian “autonomous republics,” it is slowly losing the small measure of autonomy that it gained in the early 1990s. For example, beginning in December 2004, the president of Yakutia (and each leader of the other republics), is now appointed by Russia’s president and presented to the provincial legislature for ratification rather than elected by the people. In addition, in the mid-90s, the Russian government repealed a 1992 agreement which had allowed a large percentage of the profits from local mineral assets to be controlled by the republic rather than by Moscow (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 107). These are just a few examples of control being resumed by the center after a brief, initial period of autonomy. In his *History of Modern Russia*, Service writes about this period: “The authority of ‘the centre’ was ceaselessly confirmed” (2009, 557).

Moore uses the term *neocolonial* to describe those post-colonial contexts in which it is unclear whether the colonialist powers are withdrawing or advancing. His thoughts on the challenges facing post-colonial cultures are an apt description of the complex tensions in Yakutia today:

According to a rough consensus, the cultures of postcolonial lands are characterized by tensions between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence, between the desire for autochthony and the fact of hybrid, part-colonial origin, between resistance and complicity, and between imitation (or mimicry) and originality. ...And the danger of retrenchment, or of a neocolonial relation, is ever present. (2001, 111-112)

This concept of *neocolonial* relations, a recalling of freedoms once given, is exactly what is happening in Yakutia at this time. Moore believes the post-Soviet sphere is *uniquely* post-colonial and muses as to why writers are not addressing this feature of post-Soviet space (2001, 114). One of the key characteristics he emphasizes which applies directly to olonkho renewal is what he calls “compensatory behavior.” This is expressed in “an exaggerated desire for authentic sources, generally a mythic set of heroic, purer ancestors who once controlled a greater zone than the people now possess” (2001, 118). Certainly olonkho revitalization can be seen in this light.

All the same, having experienced at least two decades of relative freedom from centralized control, Yakutia has experienced some of the processes that the “breakaway” regions did and is therefore clearly in the spectrum of post-colonial space, exhibiting many of the characteristics of post-colonial reactions to Soviet power. Bhabha remarks on the complexity of those responses, noting that the resulting identities are often more multifarious than they are dualistic, especially if the colonizers were in power for an extended time period. He suggests that in examining the cultural resources of post-colonial contexts, we should be careful to “critique ...the positive aesthetic and political

values we ascribe to the unity or totality of cultures, especially those who have known long and tyrannical histories of domination and misrecognition. Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (2006, 155–156).

These observations certainly apply to Yakutia, where the rejoinders to a colonializing past are complex. Sakha voices are responding to their new freedoms in various ways, one of which is by negotiating a Sakha identity that includes *olonkho* as one of its major iconic representations. One of the most poignant illustrations of this phenomenon is that the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is often referred to as the *Land of Olonkho*. For example, a headline in the republic-wide newspaper *Yakutia* on June 6, 2009 heralded the presence of “Titans of wrestling in the Land of Olonkho.” The phrase *deti zemli olonkho* (“Children of the Land of Olonkho”) is the title for the annual children’s olonkho competition. *Mastera zemli olonkho* (masters of the Land of Olonkho) was the craft competition’s name at the 2011 summer festival. Such examples indicate that the idea of the “Land of Olonkho” is widely understood to be a metaphor for the Republic of Yakutia (Sakha) and the Sakha people.

Rethman, in an article on “Ethnography in the Post-Soviet Cultural Context” is another writer who acknowledges, as Bhabha does, the importance of a nuanced approach in understanding the complex ways people negotiate their positionality with respect to their colonizers. Rethman draws from Malkki’s concept of the nation as a “generative source of knowledge” (1995, 5) and emphasizes the active role that people in post-colonial contexts have in framing their own reality. Rethman writes,

Nations and communities associate and situate themselves in both parochial and transnational frameworks of identity and knowledge.... [Understanding this] helps us to move beyond the simple dichotomies of colonizer-colonized and oppressor-

oppressed by accentuating the links and associations nations forge to situate themselves within a web of extralocal cultural identities. (1997, 771)

The Sakha are highly adept at forming these links and associations, doing much more than responding in a monolithically defensive manner to the pressures from Moscow. Their use of the UNESCO Masterpiece program to bring recognition to olonkho and to the Sakha Republic is one response—and it is a powerful one, but there are other responses as well. The way I was enthusiastically received in Yakutia as an American olonkho researcher is a result of this reality—I am one of those extralocal links perceived as contributing to Sakha transnational identity as a culture highly valued and recognized by nations around the world. Although the Sakha are known for their hospitality and warmth to all outsiders, I have enjoyed the extra warmth afforded to me in this role of foreign researcher studying the “favored genre” of olonkho.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century began as an uncertain period for the Sakha Republic, especially in regard to the freedoms bestowed (and then retaken) by Moscow. Uncertainty also looms over the question about what will become of the Sakha Republic; stability there is elusive, yet highly sought after. Rethman asserts that one of the strategies frequently employed during liminal periods of turmoil is a return to nostalgia, invoking historical and geographical attachments which create an illusion of stability. Rethman engages Battaglia’s ideas (1995, 77) on the nature of nostalgia and how it expresses more than just our attachment to an idealized construction about the past but also articulates our desires for the present and future:

Nostalgia as a historical practice...on the one hand enables its users to appropriate and assert feelings toward their own history and, on the other hand, allows them to express their detachment from a disempowering, harsh present.... nostalgic practices articulate a vision that desires what cannot be had: stable histories and a stable reality. (1997, 772)

Is olonkho merely an instrument for nostalgia? Or is it an intrinsic part of constructing a stable future for Sakha people? Can it be both? Rethman and Battaglia posit that finding one's positionality in regard to the past is a key to grappling now with the future's challenges. If they are right, then a robustly revitalized olonkho may be crucial for the Sakha people's future as they seek to forge an identity that acknowledges their heritage and leverages it into tomorrow. Concerning the negotiated past-present-future nature of identity, Ernest Renan, in his article "What is a Nation?" observes that nationhood has two important foci: one lies in the past and the other in the present.

One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received ... A heroic past, great men, glory... this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions for being a people. (1990, 19)

I believe Renan has expressed here a core value in olonkho—it not only expresses the glories of the past, but also a common will in the present and a hope for the future, all of which is closely connected to negotiating the post-colonial (and neocolonial) realities faced by the Sakha.

There are a number of scholars engaging post-colonial approaches and applying them to revitalizing the indigenous culture in Russia's northern regions. For example, Schindler writes, "Hechter's model [of internal colonialism] predicts the assertion of indigenous cultures in response to overwhelming domination by the core, and this is

exactly what we see happening among the northern peoples... today” (1991, 76). Another example is Serguei Oushakine’s work (2000), which addresses Turner’s concept (1969, 103) of “liminal entities” and the ways in which people express their attachments to signifiers which they invoke from the past.

Turner explores the ways in which individuals negotiate choices in relation to cultural symbols, concluding that there are two responses which are quite common: one is to change the usage pattern of old symbols, a reaction which Oushakine calls the *paradigm of remake* (2000, 1007). According to Oushakine, another possible response is to alter one’s “attitude to the old symbols; this pattern of symbolic production can be labeled the *paradigm of revival*. Both strategies, however, are aimed at keeping the old signifier/symbol intact... [and] both activate the individual’s creative ability within the rigid symbolic frames of the previous era” (2000, 1007). Both *remake* and *revival* can be seen in the way that *olonkho* is being revitalized in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, Yakutia’s enthusiastic policies toward revitalizing traditional *olonkho* practices are examples of *revival*, while *remake* is seen in *olonkho*’s expansion to include new versions which extend the traditional understanding of what constitutes *olonkho* performance, such as theatrical and staged performances, strictly memorized (rather than improvised) performances, and a yearly Ysyakh summer festival on an *olonkho* theme.

Although epic traditions can be repressed and under some circumstances can even cease to function as “living epics,” relegated to the written word or lost forever, Rene Louis summarizes well the predisposition of the epic tradition to endure the ebb and flow of societal change. He observes that an epic tradition

passes from singer to singer and from audience to audience, to assume new forms according to the tasks and the profound tendencies of the eras which it traverses

and the countries into which [it] spreads, above all in response to the sovereign imagination of the singers who adopt it as their own. Within the supple and accommodating framework of tradition these singers of epic themes, narrative schemas, and formulaic styles never stop improvising new details, new episodes, and creating countless “variants” of the original work. (1958, 10)

If a tradition like olonkho is going to be transmitted from one generation to the next, then its sustainability as an epic tradition will lie in its malleability. This capacity for flexing is necessary to withstand the winds of change, winds that less flexible genres cannot withstand and which can cause their demise as living traditions. Change is inevitable, but a living epic tradition which taps into the deep values and identity of a people will create a dynamism that provides the epos with a long life.

#### Lessons learned from the revitalization of other Asian epic traditions

Olonkho is not the only epic being revitalized in the context of UNESCO initiatives. Van der Heide and other scholars have studied the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, and the Korean epic tradition *p’ansori* has been studied extensively. Because of the parallels which exist between these genres, especially between the two Turkic-based epics of *Manas* and olonkho, it is likely that observations and lessons learned about change in these other Asian contexts will be also applicable in understanding change for olonkho.

#### *Revitalization in the Kyrgyz Manas*

Van der Heide’s book on *Manas* reports it is largely transmitted through apprenticeship, a process which is being facilitated by UNESCO revitalization initiatives

including festivals, competitions, conferences, and other events often supported by government funding.<sup>265</sup> She writes,

Manas is passed on through a living and lively oral tradition... Manaschi... give recitals at festivals and Manas competitions, ...recite at social gatherings or in schools and universities, and their recitals are broadcasted on radio and television. There are Manaschis of all generations, all with their own version of the Manas epic, reaching audiences of all generations. (2008, 17)

The UNESCO description of *Manas* highlights the role of apprenticeship in transmission, noting that the epic still has a valued role in Kyrgyz society:

The epics remain an essential component of Kyrgyz identity and continue to inspire contemporary writers, poets, and composers; even today, the traditional performances are still linked to sacred cultural spaces. Although there are fewer practitioners nowadays, master[s] continue to train young apprentices and are helped by recent revitalization initiatives supported by the Kyrgyz government.<sup>266</sup>

*Manas* is also seeing both derivatives and innovation in its revitalization.

Theatrical performances, movies and novels are some of the derivatives noted by Van der Heide (2008, 218). Anthropologist Matthijs Pelkmans reports a parallel to the appearance of a biblically-themed olonkho in his study about Kyrgyz converting to Christianity. He documents a recital of an “*Isachi*” (or “Jesus teller”) performing a story about the life of Jesus in the style of a *manaschi* (2007, 893). The local Kyrgyz pastor informed him that five more “*Isachis*” were being trained. It is quite possible that this trend is being fed by perceived parallels between some *Manas* stories and those of the Old Testament. In 2009, Richard Hewitt, a *Manas* researcher living in Kyrgyzstan, presented a paper at a *Manas* conference at Arabaev University on this topic. His work

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<sup>265</sup> The UNESCO description of Manas highlights the role of apprenticeship in transmission: “The epics remain an essential component of Kyrgyz identity and continue to inspire contemporary writers, poets, and composers; even today, the traditional performances are still linked to sacred cultural spaces. Although there are fewer practitioners nowadays, master[s] continue to train young apprentices and are helped by recent revitalization initiatives supported by the Kyrgyz government” (UNESCO - <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00065>: Accessed January 18, 2012).

<sup>266</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00065>. Accessed January 18, 2012.

demonstrates that *Manas* oral tradition derivatives are ways in which Kyrgyz people are interacting with this epic, adapting it to reflect the values, spiritual beliefs, worldviews, and entertainment preferences of the times in which they live.<sup>267</sup>

The transcriptions of *Manas* produced by the Soviets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflected the push for literacy and the development of an academy of universities and research centers that was already a high priority to the Soviet government. Van der Heide notes the changes that took place as *Manas* began to be written down and analyzed:

The written [form of *Manas*] gained in importance over the oral, both as authoritative source for knowledge production and as forms of disseminating the tales. Scholars who worked with written texts gained prestige over learned persons who produced orally transmitted knowledge. The introduction of the scholarly view on *Manas*, in combination with the prestige awarded the scholars, transformed the ways people regarded the epic. Next to the image of *Manas* as an oral epic sustained by the spiritual world arose an image of the *Manas* as a book assessed by intellectuals. (2008, 207)

As a result of this intellectual image, the perceived high value for “the written” was a boon for those Kyrgyz and Russian scholars involved in proliferating *Manas* transcriptions. It did not last though. In fact, government beneficence came to an end during the economic crisis of post-Soviet government, and *Manas* publications virtually ceased as well. Scholars either did not receive their paychecks at all or were paid so little that many of them were forced to gain employment in other arenas. Eventually, Van der Heide reports, “funding for *Manas* publications slowly emerged from other sources, such as UNESCO, European, American, and Kyrgyzstani NGOs, Turkish government and private organizations and private Kyrgyz businessmen. Most of this funding was given in the framework of the 1995 *Manas 1,000* celebration” (2008, 209), i.e. through UNESCO.

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<sup>267</sup> For the text of the paper, see <http://manasepic.blogspot.com/2009/07/manas-conf-arabaev-university-june.html> or go to <https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=0AQ-TYowllUI9ZGdoOXQ1bnBfMTJjN2cyejZocA&pli=1&hl=en>. Accessed January 10, 2012.

In interviews during her fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, Van der Heide consistently found that most people reported reading the *Manas* was “better” than hearing the oral versions but that it was not often read either.<sup>268</sup> She noted that even *manaschis* did not read the written versions to learn the stories, although they did listen to recordings. This dual focus (on both the oral and written versions) represents the current state of *Manas* revitalization for Kyrgyz people. There is a perceived value, at the grass roots level, for the literary version (which is not read much) and there is an official position, supported by UNESCO and sponsored by the government, which values and supports the oral transmission process in addition to the literary versions.

#### *Revitalization in Korean p’ansori*

Korean *p’ansori* is another epic tradition which has experienced revitalization and an ongoing development of derivative forms. There are at least two *p’ansori* derivatives which appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – both of which Killick (2003) discusses at length. They have become significant carriers of Korean national identity.

The first is *ch’anggŭk*, a form of multi-performer musical drama which is based on the *p’ansori* style. After the *p’ansori* repertoire solidified into a “canonical” repertoire in the nineteenth century, the multi-person theatrical version *ch’anngŭk* served “as a vehicle for the introduction of new works” (Pihl 1993, 229). *Ch’anngŭk* was originally created by Yi Injik, a writer and politician who used it for political commentary in the early 1900s, but after some initial success, it experienced decline. In the 1930s, it was

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<sup>268</sup> “There was general consensus that books contained the truth, because they are well-researched, and if you read a book, you can study the details... However... in the two years I spent in *Kyrgyzstan*, I never saw anyone reading the *Manas* tale in any published form. The tale was not read by individuals to pass the time, and apart from the eldest son of my host family, no one ever claimed that they did. *Manas* books were not used in classes in schools or universities either” (Van der Heide 2008, 217).

revitalized as an expression of Korean identity and given new instruments to supplement the *puk* (drum)—the transverse flute, the double-reed pipe, and the two-string fiddle. Although troupes began as separate all-male or all-female casts, *ch'anggŭk* evolved to include mixed casts of men and women, which remain to this day.

Yet another *ch'anggŭk* style derivative occurred when the lead figures were increasingly cast to favor glamorous young female singers rather than experienced *p'ansori* singers. This led to the formation of the second derivative genre, *yŏsŏng kukkŭk* – an all-female theater, or “women’s national drama” (Killick 2003, 191). This new derivative came to be distinguished by embracing the sentimental and sensational, as well as the “modern and cosmopolitan alongside the national, and in today’s productions it is not unusual to hear traditional voices and instruments accompanied by synthesizers... it is regularly performed overseas (primarily, though not exclusively) in places with a substantial Korean population” (Killick 2003, 191).

A significant challenge has begun to affect *p'ansori* reception since it became identified as part of Korea’s cultural and historical heritage and declared “Intangible Cultural Property No. Five” by UNESCO in 1964.<sup>269</sup> Although that declaration demonstrated the value of *p'ansori* for Korean people (and the world), it has had the effect of isolating it from its audiences, changing the relationship of the audiences from

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<sup>269</sup> UNESCO recognizes the effect that its preservation methods have had on *p'ansori*: “Threatened by Korea’s rapid modernization, Pansori was designated a National Intangible Cultural Property in 1964. This measure spurred generous institutional support, which in turn fostered the revival of this tradition. Although Pansori remains one of the most prominent genres among traditional stage arts, it has lost much of its original spontaneous character. Ironically, this recent evolution is a direct result of the preservation process itself, for improvisation is tending to be stifled by the increasing number of written texts. Indeed, few singers nowadays can successfully improvise, and contemporary audiences are less receptive to the impromptu creativity and language of traditional Pansori.” <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00070> Accessed January 18, 2012.

one of “aggression” to “submission”—from a role of participation to passive alienation (Park 2000, 276).<sup>270</sup> Along these lines, Yeonok Jang observes:

The art of *p’ansori* seems to be losing its original function as a means of entertainment, as it used to be in traditional society. Contemporary *p’ansori* performances are usually organized and arranged by government agencies... whose objectives are to promote traditional culture both nationally and internationally. Contemporary *p’ansori* performances, therefore, have a more political function, serving as symbols of national heritage and/or identity, although they still provide entertainment. The genre is culturally valued but is isolated from the general public. With the exception of the elderly audiences in Cholla, contemporary *p’ansori* audiences are not familiar with the genre... The traditional *p’ansori* culture, in which performers and audiences interacted with one another, is rapidly disappearing.<sup>271</sup> (2001, 118)

Just as with *olonkho*, modern, formal stage-type venues and a lack of knowledge about appropriate audience participation is decreasing the intimacy of audience connections to the performance. With *p’ansori*, audiences have become increasingly silent and “polite”—more likely to clap after a performance than to shout *ch’uimsae* (responsive vocal interjections) during it. Performers increasingly complain that it is “not inspiring to perform for an audience that does not respond” (Jang 2001, 105). Sometimes the performer has been known to teach the audience how to shout *chi’uimsae*, although it is not easy to learn when it is appropriate and how to do it with the right words and tone of voice.

Park asks a poignant question which may well apply in its implications to other epics (and by application, to other artistic forms) being placed on the UNESCO

Representative Lists: “Will *p’ansori* remain forever encased as an antique reminder of the

<sup>270</sup> “In *p’ansori*, the audience’s presence as a notable influence as a participating supporter or critic initiates an intertextual negotiation—positive or negative—between the audience’s communal needs and the performers’ narrative preferences” (Park 2000, 273).

<sup>271</sup> Expressing a similar view, Park writes, “...viewed as a nostalgic past, *p’an* could no longer serve as an arena of unmediated and spontaneous connection between performer and audience, but, rather, only as an induced and ideologized past... In the context of cultural conservation, normality dictates reverence to the past in place of the pleasure of the present; thus *p’ansori* is distanced from the heart to ‘the authentic past,’ designated ‘national opera,’ the native ‘other’ to the hegemonic Western classical opera” (2000, 276).

past, or will it be allowed a dialectical process—to live, perish, or change? Is the duration of preservation finite, and what follows? Incredulous of its resuscitation at any time in the future, is the government performing taxidermy on *p'ansori*?" (2000, 279).

Another scholar of *p'ansori*, Keith Howard, proposes that revitalization should include openness to new lyric themes. He says, "State preservation increasingly fossilizes the form while at the same time the tradition is recycled and reinvented as it seeks to embrace new lyrics about colonialism, tyranny, and oppression" (2004, 125). Park's conclusion to the dilemma of the modern "passive" audience is this: "In the context of *p'ansori* reception, the process of learning starts with unlearning the sanitized manners of a polite spectator" (2000, 280). Both of these issues—the need for new lyrics that address relevant themes, and educating a new generation of listeners—are lessons that can be conceivably applied to olonkho revitalization.

#### Common challenges in revitalizing epics

Many conclusions reached by scholars studying epics such as *p'ansori*, *Manas*, *Gesar*, and *Bear Slayer* parallel my own thoughts on the challenges to olonkho revitalization. We see an acknowledgement of changing contexts, beginning with the meta-national fluxuations of State ideology and stretching to change in performance arenas. These "stages" began small, as intimate and entertainment-oriented family gatherings, but they grew to public, government-sponsored festival events calculated to foster pride in (or admiration of) a monolithic, often caricatured ethnic identity.

Audience reception has changed as well. It is decreasing across the board for all but the theatrical derivatives of epos. Audience verbal responses which at one time were

an unconscious and natural part of being engrossed in the story are now largely absent, discouraging the “singer of tales” and further contributing to shortened texts.

Written texts are burgeoning, along with their translations into other languages. They are the product of eager folklorists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and comparative literature scholars. But the growing corpus of texts, while preserving the frozen corpses of the once-living epics, are not generally read by the local population; they are instead studied at length, dissected and dismembered for their semiotic, patriotic, mythic, historic, and even cosmic significance. Then these freeze-dried, well-documented texts are memorized and reproduced in tiny incomprehensible bits for tourist and festival audiences to tuck into their capacious bags alongside other bits of memories, jumbled next to tin imitations of jaw harps and postcards of the Lena River.

The ray of hope one sees in each of these contexts, including olonkho, is that the spark of creativity still glows in the human heart. The potential for innovation is always present, although the response to it can be varied and the response matters much. If innovations are accepted and the new stories, the new approaches to old stories, and new epic derivatives are allowed to flourish, their transmission to a new generation is also likely to happen. Today’s sparkling layers of innovation in olonkho may become the conservative tradition of the next decade, or century, or millennium.

## CHAPTER 8

## REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PATHS INTO THE FUTURE

On foam and deep waters

A wise friend from Yakutia recently wrote me: “Не надо быть пророком, что предсказать гибель народа, лишённого своего родного языка” (*You don’t have to be a prophet to predict the demise of a people deprived of their mother tongue*).<sup>272</sup> Many Sakha people feel this way about their language and other ethnolinguistic cultural markers. In the most potent way possible, these unique expressions are the core of what it means to be Sakha. These carriers of identity push back against decades, even centuries, of marginalization. They create a space for breathing, for creating, and for celebrating the unique voices of Sakha people. For these reasons, I believe it is important for the Sakha epos olonkho to continue in some form into the future.

It is still unclear which olonkho forms will endure. The *agiotage* (craze or commotion) surrounding olonkho revitalization and in particular the enormous amounts of government money being poured into the process has had the effect of hiding the true situation. It provides a distinct impression of revitalization, making it hard to see through the foam to the deep waters. Alekseyev expressed it this way:

You see, folklore has this characteristic, including olonkho—it continues on because it can endure a latent form of existence... It can handle being underground. And when the situation changes, it is born again, as if from nothing. But the fact is, it was just underground, and the deeper it goes, the better, because it is there that its true nature is preserved. But on the surface sometimes all you can see is the “foam” — and the foam is—whoosh, blown away by the wind. For the “foam” they may put you in prison.... Or they made raise you up to the

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<sup>272</sup> Personal correspondence from Eduard Alekseyev, January 9, 2012.

heavens, make you a member of the Union of Composers. I think that ten (or something like that) olonkhosuts were made members of the Union of Composers when it was urgently needed for the war effort. Or they create a “Day of Olonkho”... or a “last olonkhosut”—last this—last that—last, last,... and government stipends and so forth. This is not so much “foam” as it is a wave, and waves always have foamy moments. But way down deep in the ocean, it is not affected by waves.<sup>273</sup>

These thoughts hearken back to his book *Folklore in the Context of Modern Culture*, in which he writes about the way folklore traditions can “come back to life after a long period of apparent extinction... occasionally under the influence of ethnomusicologists appearing ‘on the spot.’ Any folklore tradition ...[is comparable to a] top—keeping upright as long as it’s in motion” (1988, 235). This is an apt metaphor for the movement engendered by the intertwined dynamics of innovation and transmission, stable and malleable, oral and verbal. With this in mind, I propose a few thoughts on possible future directions for olonkho based on the data gathered in this research. I see them in terms of paths, likely to diverge from one another in the near future.

### Paths into the future

If the Diagnostic Decision Tree for music shift proves to be a robust predictor of music viability, then transmission and innovation will continue to be the primary factors determining the direction of shift. This leaves us with at least three possible future paths for consideration:

1) If there is vigorous transmission of traditionally performed olonkho to the next generation, but no innovation in plots, derivatives, or adaptations to the modern *sreda*, the result will be canonization of that which is transmitted, with the state of epic creativity “locked” into standardized performances, exhibitions, concerts and festivals to

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<sup>273</sup> Alekseyev and Larionova, 2010. [See DVD]

support national concepts of ethnic identity. Not just Yakutia, but the world, will lose a uniquely improvisational art.

2) If there is no transmission of the traditional solo tradition, but there is abundant innovation, then derivatives such as theatrical settings, books, movies, and computer games will thrive, overwhelming and drowning out the traditional version, which (without attention to transmission) will eventually die. It will be replaced by functional substitutes which satisfy the need for affirming Sakha ethnic identities, but the unique improvisatory performances of the master olonkhosuts will be lost.

3) If there is transmission of the traditional improvisatory art of olonkho with abundant innovation, both within the traditional form's boundaries and in creating new derivatives, then olonkho will flourish in many forms and a burgeoning, truly sustainable revitalization will take place.

In reflection on the tripartite *time–place–event* framework used to gather and organize my data on olonkho, it seems to me that in some form or another (at minimum, in mediated forms), olonkho's *time* is not up; I believe it will continue to exist into the distant future. The *places* (spaces) in which olonkho is performed and invoked have grown from small family gatherings around the fireplace over long winter nights to lavish stage settings and festival crowds. They've even grown beyond Russia—from regional and republic-wide Yakutian contexts, to Japanese audiences watching it with subtitles, to the international stage of the prestigious UNESCO Masterpiece awards. Its mediated presence has grown from the lone voice of Gavril Kolesov over radio to huge archives of audio and video recordings accessible through Sergei Vasiliev's Internet portal to anyone in the world with a computer and broadband Internet access.

The path that the *event* of olonkho performance will take is in the hands of the Sakha people, both individually and collectively. If either of these two important processes, *innovation* or *transmission*, are neglected or actively opposed by Sakha people, true revitalization of the traditional form will fail. Currently, there are strong efforts in the direction of general education about olonkho and transmission to those wanting to learn. This is having a tangible effect on the level of knowledge about olonkho, beginning with pre-school children and going all the way up through adults who attend the annual summer Ysyakh festival and enjoy the theatrical presentation there.

Vigorous transmission levels of the *improvisational*, oral art, however, is not yet visible, and other innovative forms such as new plots and derivatives are still few and far between. The vast weight of history and tradition provide plenty of stability for the olonkho tradition; it is olonkho's malleable facets which need nurturing, not the stable ones. It is surprising and interesting to note that in a similar way to the developments in Kyrgyzstan, some of the creative approaches in Yakutia to new olonkho-style stories are coming from Sakha Christians, a group some might expect to be stuffy, narrowly conservative, and even anti-culture in their views. But the biblically-based stories, while featuring new heroes, still reflect the worldview issues important to a good epic: good versus evil, unified spiritual-physical worlds, sacrifice for loved ones, purity of heart, and the larger than life hero-warrior one can depend on to "save us all."

### Recommendations

There are a number of practical ways in which the levels of innovation and transmission can be fostered for olonkho. I propose several, adding my own ideas to others that have been suggested to me in the process of my research.

First, we need to take good care of the master olonkhosuts still alive, while finding and supporting more. With millions of dollars each year going into olonkho revitalization projects such as books, conferences, “Houses of Olonkho,” festivals, and theatrical productions, there ought to be more available for the transmitters of the oral tradition. I do not hold the opinion that money can solve all problems, but if there are more than two people in the Republic of Sakha who have the improvisatory abilities of a master olonkhosut and if those people will benefit from financial support so they can devote their lives to passing on their art, that will be a good investment. After all, the government stipend for one olonkhosut is only about \$13,200 USD per year, barely a *kaplia v morye* (drop in the ocean) for an overall budget of millions, but adequate for a modest lifestyle in Yakutia. In addition to stipends, the government can provide a system of reimbursement for expenses, so that money spent on transmission activities are reimbursed and not borne by the olonkhosut.

The low number of acknowledged master olonkhosuts is an urgent problem, as it demonstrates fragility in the system. The two remaining acknowledged master olonkhosuts are elderly and not able to travel all over Yakutia energetically transmitting their art. There needs to be a larger cadre of master olonkhosuts, with vigorous efforts to find them and support them.

Second, Yakutia should create at least some instances of *performance* and *learning contexts* that better reflect the original performance spaces. As we saw from Chekhorduna's account of her childhood experiences, part of the magic of olonkho a century ago was the home atmosphere on those longer winter nights. The mesmerizing, flickering fire in the fireplace, the moaning wind, the dark cold winter night beyond the frosted windows and the late night hours, with loved ones and family gathered around, entranced by the magical stories. This context is more akin to the darkened conditions of a theater atmosphere and should be part of the multisensory aesthetic experience (Finnegan 2002, 227). In contrast, modern olonkho performance contexts are usually either washed in stage lights or displayed in broad summer daylight (during the summer Ysyakh festivals), possibly even with the thumping strains of semi-Russianized festival music stage close by, easily overwhelming the fragile soundscape being created by the lone olonkhosut.<sup>274</sup>

Learning (transmission) can also be brought more in line with traditional contexts. Yakutia could create a state-funded (or even market-funded) apprenticeship system, where those who wish to study the oral art of olonkho can apprentice themselves to a master olonkhosut. They can either follow their mentor around in their travels,<sup>275</sup> or apprentice through a studio-based system,<sup>276</sup> where they will spend many hours each week listening to olonkho, practicing their skills, and acquiring the formulaic mastery

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<sup>274</sup> I am grateful to my husband, William Harris, for this observation. His background in television and film makes him sensitive to these issues, which I believe to be of crucial importance.

<sup>275</sup> I am indebted to Eduard Alekseyev for this idea, and for his consistent reminders that the authentic, deeper layers of folklore are destroyed by the concert stage and *agiotage* of exhibition-focused revitalization efforts.

<sup>276</sup> I am happy to acknowledge Michał Domagała as the source of this idea. He believes that businesses in Yakutia which have high visibility and large budgets (such as the diamond and gas companies) should become patrons of these olonkho studios, funding them in return for PR underscoring their support of Sakha arts. This capitalizes on the ethnic pride and status for olonkho revitalization, leveraging it for good.

required to improvise within the genre. This system may benefit from capitalizing on 21<sup>st</sup> century Sakha values—a sense of ethnic pride and an appeal to a certain degree of elitism—by careful attention to admitting and producing only the best quality performers.

Yakutia already has such a system for classical musicians. The campus of the Higher School of Music outside Yakutsk is a boarding school for musically gifted young people who come from all over Yakutia. A select few audition for the limited spots available and study with the top musicians in Yakutia. The Sakha government pays for the education of the children obtaining those coveted spots, and in return, Yakutia has the prestige of a cadre of students who regularly win international music competitions all over the world.<sup>277</sup> An environment in which the students are surrounded by an artistic *sreda* is ideal for producing top specialists in their field.<sup>278</sup> Whether this *sreda* is modeled on a studio model or a *kochevnik* (nomadic) one, the important ingredient is large amounts of focused time spent in acquiring the art, and most importantly, this time must be spent “under the mouth,” i.e., in direct contact with the master of the living, oral art.

Third, Yakutia must rebuild its epic *sreda*, educating and attracting enthusiastic audiences. This is already a focus of Yakutia’s Plan of Action and they are making some progress, especially through theatrical presentations by the Theater of Olonkho and the Ysyakh festivals focused in part on olonkho. But there is still much that must be done,

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<sup>277</sup> I am grateful to the Republic of Sakha for providing this facility, as my own family benefitted greatly from it. Not only did my daughter receive her early music education there, winning her first piano competitions as a student there during the late 1990s, but the foundation she received eventually led to a doctoral-level music education funded by other institutions in Russia and the United States (see [www.katpiano.com](http://www.katpiano.com)). This would not have been possible without the government funding of the Higher School of Music. For a website featuring the widely-celebrated Ensemble of Violinists of the Higher School of Music, see <http://discover-classics.ru/Yakutia/>.

<sup>278</sup> The effect of an intensive artist milieu can have surprising results. When I was in close contact with the Higher School of Music in the late 1990s, one teacher, Valentina Larionova, told me that by the time the students were in fourth grade, half of them had developed perfect pitch.

and appreciative audiences for traditionally-performed solo olonkho are rare, almost non-existent. What can be done to foster the growth of appreciative audiences?

I agree with Dora Gerasimova, Valeri Burtsev, and others that one possible approach is to encourage increased innovation within the boundaries of the genre itself. New olonkho stories and plots which reflect the realities of modern Sakha life, values, and worldviews will draw audiences in a way that the old stories fail to do. Initiatives in this direction will also benefit from the above suggestions about multisensory and multidimensional performance contexts. If performance contexts are designed to reproduce the conditions of being “under the mouth,” in which the audiences are drawn into a different world, forgetting the difficulties of their lives and being immersed in the *mir olonkho* (world of olonkho), then audiences will grow, both in size and in focused appreciation for the stories.

#### For further study

Many questions remain unexplored by this research project. For example, a more in-depth comparative analysis with the revitalization efforts of *Manas* is likely to yield helpful insights. I hope to have the opportunity in the future to explore this phenomenon which parallels olonkho in so many ways. A more thorough study of the revitalization in other epic traditions such as *p’ansori* and the *Gesar* epic, although they are further removed from olonkho than the Central Asian Turkic epics, is also likely to provide insights. I intend, however, to focus much of my future research on related Siberian and Central Asian epic forms, seeking ways in which the principles learned through my study of olonkho can apply to revitalization efforts in other parts of the world.

Other questions which have only been briefly covered and which deserve further exploration are related to acquisition of improvisational oral-verbal arts in contexts where there is a high rate of literacy and an abundance of written texts. Is it possible for highly literate people to acquire the improvisational ability of musical-verbal formulaic language? Some of my respondents predict it is impossible and some of the classic texts like Lord's *Singer of Tales* would affirm that dire prediction. If that is the case, then most oral art may eventually die out completely, as literacy is a growing phenomenon world-wide. I am hopeful that there are still possibilities for transmission, even in the face of growing literacy. Those ways need to be discovered and encouraged.

The Diagnostic Decision Tree and the Graded Music Shift Scale need to be tested in a variety of contexts, both geographically and with various music-related genres. How broadly do these models apply? Do they apply even to non-musical art forms? What measures are being successfully undertaken in other contexts that can inform our understanding of sustainable futures for threatened genres such as olonkho?<sup>279</sup> Although these questions and others remain unexplored by this research, I hope the data and conclusions presented here will contribute to the growing body of knowledge related to epic studies. I hope it will encourage the revitalization of declining oral-verbal-musical genres, and enhance our understanding of sustainable initiatives in revitalization.

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<sup>279</sup> The program headed by Huip Schippers, *Sustainable Futures*, holds much promise for discovering the answers to these questions. The results for the initial stage of the project should be available in 2012/2013. See <http://www.sustainablefutures.com.au/> and <http://www.regional.gov.au/regional/ona/nasf.aspx> (accessed January 18, 2012). Research on olonkho will potentially provide a contribution to the ongoing discussions on sustainability issues generated by Schippers' collaborative project.

### Final reflections

As I reflect on this project and the unusual opportunity I have had over the last decade to observe olonkho move from marginalized to celebrated, from “forgotten” to recognition as a Masterpiece, I am at once elated and humbled by the responsibility and the privilege I have been given as a researcher. As I review my field journals, remembering those sleepless nights and mosquito-bitten days jouncing around the dusty, sweltering back roads of Yakutia, a comment I wrote on June 16, 2009 stands out: “Maria has gotten permission for us to videotape an interview and performance of Pyotr Reshetnikov, a privilege that I, to this day, can hardly comprehend.” At that time, Reshetnikov was considered the “last living olonkhosut.” The interview with him that day and his performance were truly privileges that I will never forget. One of the memorable things he told me that helped me to understand my place in olonkho revitalization was this:

The audience for olonkho is less now because they have forgotten how to listen to olonkho, as an oral creation, as an attractive, really, creation of humanity. There used to be lots of olonkhosuts, great olonkhosuts, because there was a community of listeners. In the past (as you asked), olonkhosuts were elevated, and if the olonkhosut was good, even great, one whose name was spread around the republic, people would make an effort to come, even from far away to hear.<sup>280</sup>

As I reflect on the effect of my presence that day, I am reminded that my “effort to come, even from far away to hear” was not unnoticed by Reshetnikov and other Sakha people, and that my coming has in its own way contributed to the revitalization process.

I am glad that these efforts which have consumed my life for several years are appreciated by Sakha people and by olonkhosuts in particular. But the benefit has been a mutual one, because I have been immeasurably enriched, forever changed really, by my

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<sup>280</sup> Interview with master olonkhosut Pyotr Reshetnikov in Cherkëkh, Yakutia, on June 16, 2009.

interactions with them, by their stories about overcoming marginalization and their commitment to the cause of olonkho revitalization. I will always be grateful that I had the privilege to “sit under the mouth.”

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## APPENDIX A

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#### Time

What are the periods of history onto which we can plot the process of change in olonkho performance? What were the “turning points” – the nodes of change – around which key directions for the future were enacted? What rates of change can be observed in these different periods of time? What metaphors can be used to describe these periods of time? Who were the power brokers of each period and how did the agency of the performers and audiences of olonkho interact with the power wielded by these gatekeepers?

#### Place

What were/are the performance contexts? For example: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual spaces, performance settings such as the stage, broadcast media, recordings, festivals, religious events, and/or ritual contexts. Who participates in the performance context? Is it always solo performances or are there ensembles? Is olonkho ever accompanied, and if so, by whom and with what instruments? What role do the various audiences play in the way olonkho is performed? How have the performance contexts changed over time?

#### Event

1) Who were (and are) the performers? Are they men and/or women? At what age did they begin to perform? When and how did they gain recognized mastery? What were their motivations for learning this art and how do they feel about performing? What

was/is their status, role, and significance in each space? How have the above realities changed over time?

2) Who were (and are) the audiences? Who requests the performances and what kind of performances do they wish or expect to hear? How do their expectations affect the performer and the content of the performance? For modern audiences, how do they perceive the changes in olonkho performance practice, including performance spaces (in the broad sense of the term)? What metaphors might describe these perceptions? What are their values and worldviews, and how do those aspects affect their reception of olonkho? What do they like and not like about the performances they hear? About the various derivative forms they observe? What kind of future do they visualize for olonkho in Yakutia, in Russia, and beyond? What are their ideas about how olonkho might be further revitalized? What do they think about the sustainability of the genre of olonkho into the future? How have the audiences changed over time?

3) What was/is the content being performed (including musical material, plots, narrative styles, poetic content, theatrical settings, expressions of the visual or plastic arts, and other aspects)? How is content affected by those who request the performance? How is content shaped by the performer? How does the content reflect, challenge, or disseminate features of Sakha culture like values, worldview, religious views, aesthetics, concepts of identity, and political ideologies? How does the content change relative to the modalities and contexts of performance? What is the possible impact (negative and/or positive) of preservation of historical content and performance styles in the new modalities and derivatives of olonkho performance? What is the role of orality, formulaic composition,

and improvisation in the content of various kinds of performance? What is the status, role, and significance of the olonkho content in each historical period?

## APPENDIX B

SAKHA RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS<sup>281</sup>

- Irina Vladimirovna Aksënova; member of *Olok Suola* (Path of Life) church, amateur musician, sings traditional styles.
- Eduard Yefimovich Alekseyev; ethnomusicologist, author of over 150 articles, books, and music editions on various ethnomusicology and musicology topics (Sakha music in particular), primary collaborator for this research, born in Yakutia and living near Boston at this writing.
- Nikolai Semënovich Alekseyev; olonkhosut, grandson of master olonkhosut Semyon Gregorievich Alekseyev (*Ustarabys*), hosted our research team during the festival in Berdigestyakh.
- Anna Petrovna Andreeva; daughter of Roman Petrovich Alekseyev (master olonkhosut).
- Valeri Gavrilovich Burtsev; pastor of Sakha evangelical church, *Olok Suola* (Path of Life).
- Ekaterina Petrovna Chekhorduna; scholar and author of many books and articles, focuses especially on writing curriculum to teach children about olonkho, father (Pyotr Afanacievich Chekhordun) was a master olonkhosut.
- Dora Afanasievna Gerasimova; member of *Olok Suola* (Path of Life) church; amateur musician.
- Valeri Semënovich Kononov; retired, drove many miles around Yakutia on our fieldwork during the summers of 2009 and 2010; husband of Maria Kononova; member of *Olok Suola* (Path of Life) church.
- Maria Ilinichna Kononova; prolific poetess and author of Christian poem using olonkho elements; primary collaborator on my fieldwork, organizing our logistics and making connections to many olonkhosuts and interview respondents; member of *Olok Suola* (Path of Life) church.

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<sup>281</sup> While these Sakha participants are the ones quoted in the text of this research, there were many other participants (Sakha, Russian, and expatriate), that participated in this research by providing resources, information, interviews, and other forms of invaluable support.

- Dmitri Ivanovich Krivoshapkin; khomus (jaw harp) player and olonkhosut, brother of Maria Fyodorovna Stepanova.
- Elena Vasilievna Kugdanova-Egorova; music teacher and performer of a variety of music styles.
- Anna Semënovna Larionova; scholar, author, and head of the folklore department at IGI, she was introduced to me when I translated for her session on olonkho at Harvard. She subsequently hosted me on my 2011 trip to Yakutia.
- Anastasia Mikhailovna Luginova; research specialist at the Olonkho Center, participated on the team writing the Masterpiece application for UNESCO.
- Boris Nikolaevich Mikhailov; researcher and scholar, promotes olonkho revitalization efforts, director of *Archy Diété* (House of Purification) in Yakutsk.
- Elena Nikolaevna Protodiakonova; works at the Olonkho Center, participated on the team writing the Masterpiece application for UNESCO.
- Pyotr Egorovich Reshetnikov; master olonkhosut from Cherkëkh, Tatta Ulus.
- Ekaterina Romanova; scholar of ritual studies, mythologist, head of ethnography department at IGI.
- Radion Grigorievich Savinov; museum curator in Borogontsi.
- Spiridon Spiridonovich Schischigin; world-class *khomus* (jaw harp) player, director of Secondary School No. 1 in Pokrovsk.
- Gavril Gavrilovich Shelkovnikov; grandson of Roman Petrovich Alekseyev (master olonkhosut).
- Liubov Gavrilovna Shelkovnikova; granddaughter of Roman Petrovich Alekseyev (master olonkhosut).
- Anastasia Ivanovna Shishigina; teacher of geography, folklore, specializes in teaching olonkho performance to children.
- Elizaveta Alekseevna Sidorova; co-chair of Yakutia's UNESCO committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage, also affiliated with the Olonkho Center in Yakutsk.
- Vera Solovyeva; coordinator of the Internet site <http://SakhaDiaspora.org>.
- Maria Fyodorovna Stepanova; retired teacher, helped to make connections and hosted us at the Berdigestyakh Olonkho Festival.

- Valentina Vasilievna Ustrushkova; creates elaborate wall hangings on olonkho themes, works which were featured in Paris at UNESCO.
- Pyotr Maksimovich Tikhonov; olonkho performer, director of secondary school in Tomtor.
- Sergei Yefimovich Vasiliev; Senior Lecturer and Deputy Director of the Olonkho Research Institute, North-Eastern Federal University. Coordinator of Informational System “Olonkho” and Internet Portal <http://olonkho.info>.
- Dekabrina Mikhailovna Vinokurova; scholar and author whose research on olonkho for IGI contributed to the Masterpiece application for UNESCO.
- Agafia Eremeevna Zakharova; Dean of the Folklore and Ethno-Culture department of the Arctic State Institute of Art and Culture; head of the Olonkho department at IGI; coordinated the research team writing the Masterpiece application for UNESCO.
- Yuri Innokentievich Zhegusov; sociologist and researcher in the ethnosociology department of IGI.

## APPENDIX C

## GLOSSARY OF RUSSIAN AND SAKHA WORDS

*dègèrèn* (дэгэрэн)—one of the two major traditional Sakha song styles, *dègèrèn* is based on a strictly organized metrical rhythm and is sung in an “ordinary” voice (i.e. without the exalted style and extensive ornamentation of *dièrètii*).

*dièrètii* (дьиэрэтии)—the other of the two major traditional Sakha song styles, *dièrètii* is unmetered, exalted, solemn, ceremonial, ornate, and drawn-out, with smoothly flowing phrases. It features abundant *kylyhakh* (ornamentation) and is improvisatory in form.

*kylyhakh* (кылыһах)—a unique form of ornamentation characteristic of the traditional “exalted” *dièrètii* style of Sakha singing. The plural in Sakha is *kylyhakhtar* but when quoted in Russian text, it is normally given the Russian plural form: *kylyhakhi*.

*nasleg* (наслег), *ulus* (улус)—These Sakha words denoting geopolitical administrative divisions roughly paralleling those of *county* and *district* (respectively) came back into use in the Russian language after the fall of the Soviet Union. There are 362 counties (*naslegs*) contained within 33 large districts (*uluses*) in Yakutia.<sup>282</sup> In all, these administrative divisions comprise a total of over 31 million square kilometers.

*nation* vs. *State*—In both Russian and Sakha semantic domains, when the context of conversation is one of discussing Yakutia or its people, “national” or “nation” almost always refers to distinctly Sakha conceptions of community rather than the actual geopolitically defined state of Russia. For that reason, this research uses the word *Russian*, *Soviet*, or *State* to refer to the larger geopolitical entity of which Yakutia is a part, and *nation* to refer to the smaller ethnic groups (like the Sakha people) within the larger system. *National* is used as an adjectival descriptor to refer to that which is perceived by the minority group as belonging to them or reflecting some feature of their own culture.

*olonkhosut* (олонхосут)—a specialist in performing the tales of the *olonkho* epos.<sup>283</sup>

*sreda* (среда) —This Russian term roughly corresponds to a combination of the sense of English words such as *environment*, *milieu* or *atmosphere*—denoting not only the

<sup>282</sup> For a map, see <http://www.yakutiatoday.com/region/map.shtml> and for the legislation creating these boundaries, see <http://nvk520.narod.ru/municipal/sakha30112004-172.html> (accessed February 20, 2012).

<sup>283</sup> The pronunciation in Sakha is *olonkhohut*, as Sakha language uses an “h” sound, but in Russian (the language of my interviews and resources), the “h” is changed to an “s” sound. Because Sakha words with this s/h substitution are commonly used by scholars with their Russian pronunciation, I have chosen to reflect that form in reporting this research.

physical surroundings and visible culture of a place and time, but more particularly, the attitudes and perceptions of people during that time. An *epicheskaya sreda* is an environment of appreciation for olonkho mixed with an understanding of its musical and textual language.

*syngaakh annygar* (сыҥаах анныгар)—Sakha phrase, literally “sitting under the mouth” has a connotative meaning “to listen or look intently, to try to absorb everything and every single word.”<sup>284</sup> It has been used to describe the experience of listening to olonkho.

*the center* —When it is used with the definite article in contexts referring to power and political control, this term refers to center-periphery relations and most specifically to Moscow as symbolizing the seat of authority for the federal government.

*toyuk* (тойук)—The most characteristic genre of the *dièrétii* song style (see *dièrétii*).

*ysyakh* (ысыах)—A uniquely Sakha ethnic festival, celebrated out of doors in a large field during the days of the summer solstice. *Ysyakh* is celebrated at the regional level and in smaller festivals associated with cities, towns, or even organizations. Each year, beginning in 2008, one regional festival has been designated “Ysyakh Olonkho” and highlights the genre of olonkho as its central theme.

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<sup>284</sup> From personal correspondence with Tatiana Argounova-Low, whose research found reference to this term in the writings of Aleksei Kulakovskii, famous Sakha intellectual and author of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, describing his fascination with olonkho in his youth.

## APPENDIX D

TRANSLATION OF FRAGMENT FROM *NYURGUN BOTUR*

[Used by permission from a project in process by the Northeastern Federal University]

Project Director: Alina Nakhodkina

**SONG 5**

The sound of skis  
 Babbled,  
 The sound of backs  
 Gurgled...  
 The clouds covered the sky,  
 A disaster had come,  
 Ilbis sang,  
  
 As soon as  
 Bokhsogolloi Botur oburgu  
 Who has never been tamed  
 In the Middle World,  
 Whose father is Arjaman-Jarjaman  
 Created as the governor  
 Of the rocky mountains  
 With eight peaks,  
 Who has the servant – a ferocious  
 whirlwind,  
 And nine hunting skis,

Secretly grasped  
 By his deep-lake-like-hand  
 Dear Aitalin Kuo  
 Having the eight-by-las long braid  
 And ran away,  
 The swift and fast  
 Black horse  
 Born standing  
 On the border of the clear white sky  
 Tried to wake up  
 His Toyon-master, his destined friend  
 For nine days and nights,  
 Then he jumped aside  
 Like a pebble  
 Cracks into pieces  
 And began to kick so fiercely  
 The top of the head  
 Of the sleeping man  
 That the sparks poured  
 From his face and eyes...  
  
 The great giant of the Middle  
 World

Woke up, - looked right and left,  
 Dear Aitalin Kuo  
 Having the eight-by-las long braid  
 Had disappeared,  
 No traces were left...  
 He swayed  
 And jumped up,  
 Looked closely  
 Here and there –  
 The foot-prints  
 Of eight deer  
 On the ground and rocks  
 Were directed  
 Right to the south...

When the great giant  
 Of the Middle World saw that  
 He uttered a wail,  
 Shouted,  
 Hit his hips,  
 Gritted his teeth  
 And cried...

### **NURGUN BOTUR**

What a nuisance!!!  
 Now even the offspring  
 Of the Arjaman-Jarjaman Tungus  
 Comes and offends us?!!  
 The wild hawks  
 Of the dense forest,  
 The animals

Of the eight-peaked rocky mountains  
 Lying in dens,  
 The creeping skunks,  
 You disturbed  
 The inflexible  
 And terrible youth,  
 Who sheds  
 Your fresh blood,  
 You made angry  
 Your obstinate friend...

I'll track you  
 By your hot scents  
 Left on the melting ground,  
 I'll find you  
 By your cold scents  
 Left on the frozen ground,  
 I'll catch you up  
 Immediately,  
 I'll put out  
 By my wet hands  
 Your veins,  
 I'll tame your hungry mouth,  
 I'll make you kneel,  
 Just wait, wait!!!  
 Don't be aggrieved of me,  
 Be aggrieved of yourself!-  
 Said he  
 And saddled his swift and fast  
 Black horse  
 Born standing  
 On the border of the clear white sky,

They ran  
 Piercing  
 The frozen ground  
 Up to their knees,  
 Kneading  
 The melting ground  
 Like a cottage cheese  
 Up to their hips,  
 Then like the black-billed wood grouse  
 Flies from the thawed patch,  
 They flew  
 Shouting and whirling  
 Toward the saddle of the sky...  
     He headed  
 Right for the south,  
 Whirling  
 Nine ferocious winds,  
 Making a storm  
 Throughout the eight-days long distance,  
 Rattling the spring thunder,  
 Catching the branchy lightning;  
 His ghost  
 Was seen from seven-days long distance,  
 His footsteps  
 Were heard  
 From six-days long distance,  
 Breathing  
 Huge whirling fire  
 Big as the bark barrel  
 He rose up  
 And flew

To the dazzling wide top  
 Of the hollow high sky,  
 Started  
 The eight-hilled journey,  
 Paved  
 The great white way  
 With nine bends,  
 Flew high above  
 The highest clouds.  
 As he ran by –  
 The frozen trees  
 Began to sway  
 Like Toyons,  
 Making drawn-out sounds,  
 As he passed by –  
 The melting trees  
 Began to shake  
 Like a madman,  
 His face  
 Was buzzing,  
 His ears  
 Were honking...  
     The eight-parts  
 Primordial Motherland  
 Has left far behind,  
 The rocky mountains  
 Have disappeared,  
 The great was the way,  
 The extreme was the journey...  
 The surface  
 Of the Nujulu Uot Ocean,

Above which  
 The white-feathered<sup>285</sup> never flew,  
 Which breathes  
 The vindictive fire  
 That burns everything and blushes,  
 That boils and crunches,  
 Has appeared,  
 The sound of its waves  
 Was heard  
 From nine-days long distance,  
 Its hot air  
 Was felt  
 From eight-days long distance,  
 It began to burn his face  
 From seven-days long distance...  
     As he looked  
 Toward the north  
 Whirling like a fire:  
 Inside the dense forest,  
 The death root –  
 From the tree-stump,  
 From under the hissing wind-fallen trees  
 Like the young-cow horn  
 The smoke was funneling  
 And pouring  
 Like stretched up artery...

    In a great surprise  
 He stopped  
 And examined,  
 When he looked in –

The voice of an old woman  
 Was heard...

### THE OLD WOMAN VOICE

    Old Man! Old Man!  
 You were created and destined  
 To foretell the life  
 In the Middle World, weren't you?!!  
 Your pen is feathered,  
 You have rock archives  
 From the creation  
 Of the Motherland,  
 You, one span-long beard,  
 Coin-sized shin,  
 Bad-habited,  
 Keen-eared,  
 Interesting story –  
 What do you see and know,  
 What do you foretell  
 The Old Man?!!  
     Don't you know, the bad-habited,  
 How is the life  
 In the Middle World?!!  
 What can I know?!!  
 What can I hear?!!  
 In three dark nights  
 Three times I dreamed –  
 The choking voice  
 Of the Ilbis Girl  
 Said to my two ears

---

<sup>285</sup> White-feathered - bird

That Bokhsogolloi Botur oburgu,  
 The best of the Tungus,  
 With shin-like forehead,  
 Who has never been tamed  
 In this Middle World,  
 Whose father is Arjaman-Jarjaman  
 With draught-paints  
 On his knees,  
 With tangalai-paints<sup>286</sup>  
 Under his knees,  
 With bright motley paints  
 Above his knees,  
 Who wears suede  
 Mouldy clothes  
 And has innumerable deer,  
 Has stolen  
 By his deep-lake-like-hands  
 Dear Aitalin Kuo  
 Having the eight-by-las long braid,  
 Whose father is Ainga Sier Toyon,  
 Whose mother is Aiy Noraljijn Khotun...  
 Old Man! Old Man!  
 Have you heard that? –  
 As the worried voice  
 Of the Old Woman  
 Said that,  
 The rock archives  
 Opened noisily,  
 The eagle-feathered  
 Magic pen

---

<sup>286</sup> Tangalai – a Yakut ornament

Started to write.  
 Then  
 The voice of the old man  
 Rang  
 Clearly and imperiously...

### THE OLD MAN

Old Woman! Old Woman!  
 Stop talking!  
 I'm just writing  
 On my rock archives  
 That Nurgun Botur the Impetuous  
 Who has the swift and fast  
 Black horse  
 Born standing  
 On the border of the clear white sky,  
 Spilled around  
 The Disastrous Under World  
 Like water in a bast basket...  
 I had been foretelling  
 For four years  
 That only he will rescue  
 The white-faced  
 Dear Tuarima Kuo  
 Who was destined  
 To make three Sakha,  
 Who was created  
 To give birth to four Sakha,  
 Whose father is Sakha Sarin Toyon,  
 Whose mother is Sabia Baai Khotun,

From the mouth of Ajarai...  
 Who can be  
 Better than him  
 In the death-dealing top  
 Of the Middle World?!!  
     Bokhsogolloi Botur oburgu  
 Who has never been tamed  
 In the Middle World  
 Whose father is Arjaman-Jarjaman  
 With innumerable deer  
 Became too conceited  
 That caused the disaster,  
 He failed  
 And spoiled it himself...  
 For the great guilt  
 Of stealing  
 His long bones  
 Will be ruined,  
 His short bones  
 Will be turned  
 Into ice...  
 The Ilbis Girl<sup>287</sup>  
 Cried her tears out  
 That the hero  
 Got on a hot scent,  
 Ohol Uola<sup>288</sup>  
 Lamented deeply  
 That the hero  
 Picked up a cold scent...

Arjaman-Jarjaman the Shaman,  
 Who has innumerable deer,  
 Was said to steal  
 The elixir of life  
 From successful and mighty Jehegey,<sup>289</sup>  
 Pour out bone marrow  
 Of animals and birds,  
 Sap the power-grass<sup>290</sup>  
 Of the great world,  
 Take the boulder  
 As large as a paunch of a fat cow  
 And hollow out it  
 Like an ice hole,  
 Fill the occipital bone  
 Of the shining sable  
 With that elixir...  
 He was likely  
 To rely on that elixir,  
 He dared to rob  
 The great giant  
 Of the Middle World...  
     If the great giant  
 Of the Middle World  
 Found that elixir –  
 He would knit the fractured bones  
 That rotted for nine years,  
 He would heal the pulled muscles  
 That rotted for six years,  
 He would save a life of that

<sup>287</sup> The Ilbis Girl – the Goddess of War.

<sup>288</sup> Ohol Uola – the Spirit of Discord.

<sup>289</sup> Jehegey – the God of Horse

<sup>290</sup> Power-grass – the one who has it gets the strength.

Who died three years ago, –  
 Bitter complaints of the old man  
 Were heard from under his feet...

\* \* \*

Having heard the bitter  
 complaints  
 Of the old man and the old woman,  
 The great giant of the Middle World  
 Climbed over  
 The rocky mountains with eight peaks,  
 Stopped at the gorge of nine rocks,  
 Turned his lucky horse round  
 To the side it never being mounted –  
 In an instant  
 The horse turned into  
 A birch with  
 Three high supple branches  
 And silver laburnum...

He himself  
 Turned from side to side,  
 Fell on his back  
 Very quickly –  
 He turned into  
 A fur-bearing animal  
 And began to sniff  
 Swinging its tail,  
 He turned into an ermine  
 Glaring with white fur, –  
 It climbed over

The gorge of nine rocks,  
 Passed dense dark forest,  
 Looked around  
 On the grove of dark forest,  
 Squatted down  
 On the top of the hill  
 With nine gorges.  
 Seven skewbald deer  
 With hair stood on end  
 Were butting each other  
 Producing a sharp noise  
 With their antlers...  
 On an eight-branched tree  
 There were hanged  
 Nine pairs of fur-lined wooden skis  
 Of Bokhsogolloi Botur oburgu  
 Who has no equal  
 On the Middle World,  
 The son of Arjaman-Jarjaman  
 Who has innumerable deer  
 The skis swayed from side to side  
 Sparks flying into the air...

The ermine  
 Ran up to the tree,  
 Gnawed at the straps  
 Of the wooden skis  
 Like the soft herb roots,  
 Then it found out a burrow  
 In one corner of the great high uraha<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Uraha – cone-shaped dwelling covered with  
 birch bark, cortex or deer leather.

And whisked into the stone hole –  
 On the boulder  
 As large as a paunch of a fat cow  
 There was the occipital bone  
 Of the shining sable  
 Filled with  
 The elixir of life...

Then he turned into himself  
 again,  
 Took the urinary bladder of a black fox,  
 Filled it with the elixir if life,  
 Bound it tight and  
 Put it on his pocket,  
 After that  
 The great giant  
 Of the Middle World,  
 Nurgun Botur the Impetuous oburgu,  
 Who has the swift and fast  
 Black horse  
 Born standing  
 On the border of the clear white sky,  
 Came down to the cellar  
 And saw his dear sister –  
 Aitalin Kuo  
 Having the eight-by-las long braid,  
 The golden sky lark  
 Of gracious Kun-Aiy kin,  
 Was chained to the pillar,  
 Melting into bitter tears  
 She languished in captivity,  
 He was beside himself with rage,

His furious blood boiled,  
 His frontal veins burst  
 In a fit of anger,  
 His heart was throbbing,  
 He began to bend  
 Like a knotty wood,  
 His strong muscles  
 Swelled and strained,  
 His left eye  
 Looked up his eyebrow  
 And it sparkled  
 As bright as Cholbon-Star.<sup>292</sup>  
 His right eye  
 Looked down his lips  
 And it blazed  
 Like a fiery star,  
 He had a victorious look,  
 His blood clotted,  
 He tarnished  
 As silver,  
 He rusted  
 As iron...

He kissed the upper lip  
 Of Aitalin Kuo  
 Having the eight-by-las long braid  
 Three times  
 As three khamiyah<sup>293</sup> of blood  
 Brimmed over,  
 He kissed her lower lip

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<sup>292</sup> Cholbon-Star – the way Yakuts name Venus.

<sup>293</sup> Khamiyah – a wood ladle.

Six times  
 As six khamiyah of blood  
 Leaked out,  
 Touching tenderly her skin  
 He rolled up her  
 Into a flock and  
 Put her into his left pocket.  
 He turned from side to side,  
 Fell on his back  
 Very quickly –  
 Turned into the ermine again  
 Glaring with white fur,  
 Darted out of the right side  
 Of the great high uraha...

As it came out  
 It witnessed –  
 The great giant  
 Of the Tungus<sup>294</sup>  
 Was sitting on his haunches  
 Stooping his back,  
 The back of his head  
 Looked like a mortar,  
 His large forehead  
 Looked like a knee,  
 Snatching up  
 The handle of  
 His long and heavy batas<sup>295</sup>  
 With his two hands by turns,  
 Stooping all over,

Stretching out his short neck,  
 Pulling his long face,  
 He was keeping alert  
 If his worst enemy  
 Would appear from somewhere  
 And kill him,  
 His right eye kept watch  
 Like Cholbon-Star in the night,  
 His left eye was asleep...  
 From time to time  
 The best man of the Tungus  
 Was giving a start:  
 “Soo, tatat!! What a nuisance?!!  
 Is it a cramp in my leg?!!  
 Does Nurgun Botur the Impetuous  
 oburgu,  
 Who has the swift and fast  
 Black horse  
 Born standing on the border of a clear  
 sky,  
 Make a noise,  
 Does he come here,  
 Does he stain my good name,  
 Does he spot my reputation?  
 The son of haughty and ferocious kin  
 Who never comes and goes  
 With peace  
 Will arrive soon,  
 Will track me down...  
 My lovely Aitalin Kuo  
 Having the eight-by-las long braid,

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<sup>294</sup> Tungus – Manchurian ethnic group in the Eastern Siberia.

<sup>295</sup> Batas – a spear.

I will never give her back  
Without a fight as well,  
I will not let her go in peace  
Until nobody screw my head off,” –  
He talked  
While he woke up,  
Gave a cry  
And took a short nap again...

    The ermine sidled up  
Glittering with its white fur,  
Stood looking with its shining eyes  
And began to bark at him...

## APPENDIX E

## FOUR KEY OLONKHO PLOTS IN SUMMARY

The Longsuffering Ėr Sogotokh (from the text published by V. L. Priklonskii)

1. Ėr Sogotokh was lowered from the seventh heaven. Description of the life of a warrior-hero. He is bold and swift, considers himself the very strongest warrior-hero.
2. The arrival on a roan-colored steed of the evil warrior demon Timira Uorana.
3. A duel between the good hero-warriors and the demon warriors for ten days.
4. The proposal of the warrior demon to chase him; Ėr Sogotokh chases Timira Uorana, who runs away.
5. Overcoming difficulties (lake of fire, evil old women demons living in a stone house).  
On the way the hero warrior is barely able to get across the lake of fire and he is helped by the female shaman spirit Aiyy Tiusiulgiu, and then destroys the one-armed, one-legged, one-eyed demon warriors. Then Er Sogotokh, having turned into a bull, attacks the old woman shaman Timir Bekiydeen.
6. The victory of Ėr Sogotokh over the old woman shaman and turning her into a bull.
7. The arrival of Ėr Sogotokh on the bull to the country of Khongoruun Toyon and the conflict between the relatives of the bride and groom, aroused by the aggressive behavior of Er Sogotokh. Ėr Sogotokh begins a battle with the brothers of the bride—Khoruodzhai Bergen and Khomustai Bergen. At the request of the bride, Ėr Sogotokh stops the battle.

8. The battle of Ėr Sogotokh and the sons of Khongoruun Toyon with the warriors of Aan Ajyrgi. Aan Ajyrgi is taken into captivity. According to the wise counsel of Syrkyk Syralymy they find the vulnerable spot of the warrior demon and kill him.
9. Syrdyk Syralyma marries Er Sogotokh. They return to the homeland of Ėr Sogotokh and become the progenitors of the Yakuts.<sup>296</sup>

### Kyys Debiliye

The primary heroine of this olonkho is a female warrior-hero; protector of the tribes. Kyys Debiliye is sent by the gods to the Middle World, where she leads the battle of the heavenly spirit warrior heroines against the aggressive acts of the women from the Lower World and her three followers, two of which were kidnapped in infancy from the family of the heavenly spirits and raised in enmity to their own tribe.

Kyys Debiliye, having conquered two of these followers, the descendants from the heavenly spirit tribes, purifies them from the sorceries and evil, brings them to the heavenly tribes, returning them to the motherland of the heavenly spirits and they settle in and live a peaceful and joyful life in the Middle World.<sup>297</sup>

### Tuiaaryma Kuo

A character in many olonkhos, Tuiaaryma Kuo is a woman of the heavenly spirit warrior heroines, the betrothed bride of the hero (or his sister). Tuiaaryma is the epic ideal of a woman, endowed with beauty, unbending moral purity, a true representative of

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<sup>296</sup> Translated from Russian: <http://tinyurl.com/er-sogotokh>. Accessed February 19, 2012.

Source: *The Yakut heroic epos "The Mighty Er Sogotokh."* In the series *Monuments of the folklore of the people of Siberia and the Far East*. Novosibirsk: Nauka (1996: 413).

<sup>297</sup> Source: Emelianov, N. V. *Plots of the early type of Yakut olonkho*. Moscow, 1983. Translated from Russian: <http://tinyurl.com/kyys-debiliie> (accessed February 19, 2012).

the gentler sex, she is found under the protection and the shelter of her whole tribe and its hero-warriors (cf. the story of *Aitalyyn Kuo*).<sup>298</sup>

### Nyurgun Botur

The protagonist of the olonkho that bears his name, he is the hero-warrior and protector of the tribe of the Aiyy (heavenly beings). By the request of the inhabitants of the Middle World, the high gods send Nyurgun Botur with his sister Aitaly Kuo down from the Upper World and place them into the Middle World. Nyurgun Botur protects his fellow tribesmen from the evil intentions of the enemy powers, returns a kidnapped woman to the Middle World, frees the captive heavenly warrior heroes, and rebuilds the family lives of those set free from tribulations. He becomes the progenitor of the Urankhai Sakha, uniting his destiny with the heroine-warrior who was victorious in combat with him. The heroic image of Nyurgun Botur inspired P. A. Oiyunskiy in the creation of his epos-olonkho *Nyurgun Botur the Swift* and in the dramatic poem *Tuiaaryma Kuo*.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Sources: Pukhov, I.V. *Yakut heroic epos olonkho*. Moscow, 1962; Ergis, G. U. *Sketches in Yakut folklore*. Moscow, 1974; Vasiliev G. M. *Living spring*. Yakutsk, 1973. Translated from Russian: <http://tinyurl.com/tuiaaryma-kuo>. Accessed February 19, 2012.

<sup>299</sup> Sources: *Examples of folk literature of the Yakuts*. Vol. 1, No. 1, St. Petersburg, 1907; *Nyurgun Botur the Swift*. (Text by K. G. Orosin; translation, commentary and introductory article by G. U. Ergis). Yakutsk, 1947; Ergis, G. U. *Sketches in Yakut folklore*. Moscow, 1974. Translated from the Russian: <http://tinyurl.com/nyurgun-botur-plot>. Accessed February 19, 2012.

## APPENDIX F

## ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF VINOKUROVA'S 2007 ARTICLE

Vinokurova, Dekabrina M. 2007. "Level of familiarity with olonkho for town and city-dwellers: Examples from the city of Yakutsk and the town of Berdigestyakh" [Uroven osvedomlennosti selchan i gorozhan ob olonkho: na primer g. Yakutska i s. Berdigestyakh]. In *Mother tongue issues in the contexts of the globalization and integration of modern society* [Проблемы родного языка в условиях глобализации и интеграции современного общества], 109-115. Yakutsk: GU ROHPO Ministerstvo nauki i proftekhobrazovaniia. Translation into English by permission of the author.<sup>300</sup>

In the opinion of specialists, the loss of variability (*variativnost*) and a unified creator/performer (*interiotivnost*)<sup>301</sup> for olonkho is caused by the disappearance of the "folkloric milieu" (*folklornaia sreda*). As with any other oral folk creation, olonkho arose in a pre-literate culture. Olonkho developed widely as a grassroots phenomenon, gathering and expressing spiritual values, fundamental conceptions of worldview as well as of the environment and societal experience of the people, in other words, it fulfilled one of the most important functions of intangible culture. At that time, the performer and the creator of olonkho were united in one person, who was without a doubt, a gifted and ingenious individual.

With the appearance of written language and literature, people began to collect olonkhos and turn them into literature, as well as studying and interpreting them. In time, they began to increasingly use pre-processed texts of olonkho. Little by little, professional artists and amateur performers learned to perform olonkho as a pre-

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<sup>300</sup> Personal correspondence with Dekabrina Vinokurova February 19, 2012.

<sup>301</sup> In this case, by *interiotivnost* is meant the unification of the performer and the creator of olonkho into one person; *variativnost* – the ability to create an original variant of olonkho during the moment of performance (Vinokurova).

memorized work. In this way, there was a process in which the performance of olonkho and its actual creation (authorship) became divided. This led to a loss of the original unified creator/performer and variability of olonkho.

The disjoining of the “performer” and “creator” roles of this oral work led to the loss of the fundamental function of olonkho, i.e. the transmission of information in the form of the variations and improvisations of the author-performers themselves as they embodied their artistic-aesthetic vision of the “here and now.”

In this way, olonkho, while losing its unified creator/performer and variability, gradually turned into an “exhibition” form of art.

At the present time the process of inner transformation of intangible culture is clearly visible; it is characterized by a degree of “exteriorization” of the culture of Sakha people along with a decrease in its traditional character. All of this is happening under the oblique influence of such external influences such as the social-economic development of society, concrete historical context, natural environment, and their related changes:

- the industrialization of the territory of the republic and the process of urbanization has changed the living conditions and way of life of indigenous people;
- it has also led to a massive influx of migrants from other cultures, ethnicities, and nations.
- the arrival of these migrants to the republic led to a change in the interrelationships between the “newcomers” and the indigenous populace with the benefit going to the former.
- Sakha people achieved a certain level of education, i.e. the culture of this ethnic group in general was susceptible to the process of increased unification, characteristic of

the industrial principle of the development of civilization, while unified creator/performer and variability were concentrated to a greater extent in pre-industrialized society;

- during the epoch of the rapid spread of a more or less unified world-wide culture of folk creativity, folklore gradually was transformed into a stylized exhibition art form ;

- factors relating to the natural environment and its modern ecological condition, without a doubt have left their mark on intangible as well as material culture and local traditions, interacting with their socio-historical context.

In the interests of discovering a level of subjective understanding of olonkho and the reasons behind the threat of its disappearance, a research project was undertaken in applied sociology. The subject of this research was the attitudes of the populace of the city of Yakutsk and the town of Berdigestyakh toward the verbal folk art of olonkho. The location for this research was determined on the basis of the cultural differences of the two communities. Because Yakutsk is the scientific, educational, political, and financial center of the republic, and in the village of Berdigestyakh there is a compact community of Sakha people who work in the area of animal husbandry and farming, they lead a traditional way of life and, until recent times, true olonkhosuts have lived there.

As a subject for research, these choices allowed us to subjectively examine and understand the opinions of city dwellers as well as town-folk, giving insight to the modern state of olonkho.

The methodological underpinnings of this research were informed by the theoretical views of Russian scholars of epics, folklorists, and Yakutian scholars, researchers, and specialists.

The hypothesis being proposed was that the impact of standardization processes of global culture is producing a disjoining between the *creator* and *performer* aspects of olonkho, facets which in the past were found in one individual. This has led to the loss of unified creator/performer and variability in olonkho, changing it into an “exhibition.”

The survey was carried out by 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the schools of both the city and the town. Also included in the research project were underclassmen of five departments of the Yakutsk State University, chosen for their specialties—in humanities, naturally, and in technical profiles. In the city of Yakutsk and the town of Berdigestyakh, respondents were divided along the lines of their professions: 30.5 % white-collar, 11.1 % blue-collar, 5.5 % mid-tier management, 2 % unemployed, 2 % retired, 0.8 % upper-tier management. In all, there were 505 respondents, 48.5% of which were men. The sampling population and instruments of research were chosen in accordance with the goals of the research.

It is worth noting that during the survey, many respondents, especially those who did not know what olonkho was, often declined responding to the questionnaire. The ethnic mix of the respondents was as follows: 82.4 % Sakha, 14.3 % Russian, and 3.4 % were representative of other nationalities.

The first task was to discern the level of familiarity about olonkho among the respondents, and how they had first heard about it. The first knowledge about olonkho that respondents reported was from parents and relatives (28.9 %); hearing on the radio (18.4%); hearing fragments of olonkho performance at the national festival Ysyakh (16.4%); read about it in a book (14.5%); in a lesson on national culture (7.3%); read about it in a newspaper (2.6%); from television (1.85); 7.3% incorrectly answered the

question and 2.8% ignored the question. From these figures we see that 22.8% of the respondents heard about olonkho from mass media sources. If one divides the sources of information about olonkho along axes of “public—intimate” then in this case the public means of information, i.e. outside of the family, were the first sources of knowledge about olonkho in 61% of the respondents.

Secondly, and just as important, was the task of determining the age at which respondents first learned about olonkho. The majority of them first heard information about olonkho during their first period of socialization—before school age (43.8%) and during grade school (44.4%); later years were reported by 9.2% of respondents. It appears from this data that olonkho, as an *interiotivnaia* traditional oral art, is beginning to evolve into an exhibition form of art.

Since it goes without saying that first-hand, direct experience of olonkho is not the same as information received about it, a question was asked about whether the respondent had heard an olonkho performance live. Those who had heard a fragment of olonkho performed at various public events and at Ysyakh festivals was 49.5%; in theatrical performances – 14.7%; those who purposefully went to hear true olonkhosuts were 5.7%; and those who heard olonkho in other contexts were 4.2%. Those who had never heard a live performance of olonkho were 22.8% of those asked, and 3.2% of respondents ignored the question.

It is worth examining in more detail the socio-age groupings of those who heard live performances of olonkho vs. those who hadn't. Men had more often heard live performances of true olonkhosuts than women. And if one examines these categories according to age, the younger the respondents, the more often they reported not hearing

live performance of olonkho. However young respondents, those in their late teens and early college-age students, had more often heard olonkho performances by professional actors and at large events and the Ysyakh festivals.

What is it that attracts modern listeners to olonkho? Those affirming that they are attracted by the performing mastery were 25%. Those reporting to be attracted by the originality and variability of the text were 15.6%. Those reporting being caught up in the general attitude of the audience and the psychological context of the performance were 13.7% of respondents. Of course, as in any other area, there were few connoisseurs and fans; only 3% of respondents admitted to being admirers (fans) of olonkho. People uninterested in the performance of olonkho were 14.5% of those interviewed.

This data coincides with the data gathered regarding the opinions of the subgroups according to ethnicity and level of education among the respondents. So even among the sub-group of the carriers of this culture – Sakha people – there was a relatively high percentage of people who had never heard olonkho (19.1%). The majority of Sakha respondents heard of olonkho at events and nation festivals of Ysyakh (52.9%) or through performing artists (17.3%).

From the above statistics, one can conclude that the majority of respondents heard olonkho through “second-rung” performers, i.e. those who perform olonkho as a pre-memorized work, and not as improvisational creators directly embodying their artistic-aesthetic vision.

It appears that if there is a disjoining between olonkho performance and creation that it gives rise to amateur performers. Those involved in the questionnaire were asked if anyone desiring to become an olonkho performer could succeed. The answers received

were the following: impossible to learn – requires a special talent (64%); if you have the desire you can learn (30.7%); other answers (0.8%); ignoring the question (4.6%).

From this data it is clear that the societal opinion is beginning to spread that anyone desiring to learn olonkho can do it (30.7%). Some of those asked had even tried to perform olonkho and said that they enjoyed it (6.5%). Those who had tried to perform but didn't do well were 8.5%, and those that had never tried were 81.2%. There were even those who often perform when requested to do so (0.2%).

Connected to this, it became interesting to discover if there were legends, stories, and/or recollections of people's memories of olonkhosuts, either living or having lived among them. So 38.8% of respondents affirmed that they knew about such tales. The majority, however, had never heard such things (55.8%), or ignored the question (5.3%).

Participants were asked to evaluate the current state of olonkho. A full 42.6% of respondents answered that olonkho is disappearing. Proposing that olonkho is turning into a hobby or form of arts for amateurs was 24.8% of respondents. Optimists who felt that olonkho is being rebirthed were 23.6% of respondents.

The reasons for the disappearance of olonkho, given by the pessimists, were: the small numbers of true olonkhosuts (31.5%); declining interest in olonkho (27.7%); lack of focused, systematic work toward supporting olonkho (10.5%); other, deeper reasons (3%); ignoring the question (27.1%); giving differing conclusions (0.2%).

Optimists putting their hope on enthusiasts propagating olonkho were 13.1%; on the education of children during their lessons in school (19.2%); those hoping for a rebirth of olonkho in a new artistic form, i.e. on its modernization (8.7%); in the

appearance of many performers (3.8%); other conclusions (0.4%). More than half of the optimists (54.9%) could not decide why they felt that way.

Since olonkho is changing into an exhibition type of art, the venues, forms, and artistic genres which were being more actively used, according to participants, were: television series (26.3%); theatrical arts (25.7%); musical works (13.5%); and visual arts (4.2%). There was, however, a category of participants who were convinced that olonkho was not “renewable” in its original form of folk creativity (20.8%).

Which function, then, does olonkho best fulfill, in the minds of modern listeners? Over half (51.9%) of the participants answered that olonkho provides an insight into the societal connections between generations about the surrounding world; olonkho as a powerful impulse for the development of artistic creativity (20%); olonkho as a peculiar collective form of psychological release (11.7%); helping people to overcome feelings of aloneness, isolation, marginalization—uniting people (11.7%).

Having sorted out functions, we explored how participants perceived what olonkho is. About half of the participants knew that olonkho was folklore (45.7%); many suggested that it was one of the most important elements in the culture of the Sakha people (40.8%); a few confused olonkho with *toyuk* (4.4%) and with *algys* (4%); few believed that it was an artistic amateur performance (1.4%); ignored the question (3.2%); and gave unclear answers (0.6%).

The population was least informed about social organizations involved in the promotion and propagation of olonkho. Only 6.5% of participants tried to name organizations, and most of those named scholarly government or educational institutions.

Concluding our analysis of the gathered data, we can conclude that olonkho is undergoing the process of disjoining performance and creation (authorship), thus:

- Public opinion is increasingly leaning toward seeing the renewal of olonkho as happening in other art forms, for example, musical and visual arts.
- Live performance of olonkho has been heard by in the majority of respondents during large events, in the theater, at the festival of Ysyakh; i.e. the number of performers is growing. On one hand, olonkho has become accessible to mass listening. On the other hand, the incidence of replication of pre-memorized texts of olonkho is growing.

All of the above allow us to affirm that the disjoining of performance and creation in this verbal art has led to the loss of the fundamental functions of olonkho, i.e. the transmission of information in the form of the improvisation of the author-creators embodying their own artistic-aesthetic vision of the “here and now” – clearly a loss of the variability of olonkho.

## APPENDIX G

OLONKHO DEPICTED IN THE VISUAL AND PLASTIC ARTS<sup>302</sup>

Knitted wall hangings on olonkho themes (Artist: V. V. Ustrushkova, Borogontsi, 2009).

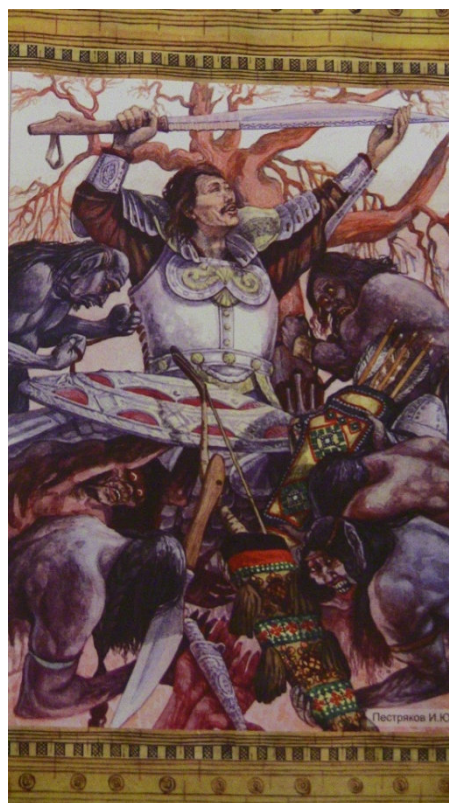


Detail of wall-hanging on olonkho theme, (Artist: V. V. Ustrushkova, Borogontsi, 2009).

<sup>302</sup> Except for the last two photos, the examples of olonkho themes in the art below were photographed during the summers of 2009 and 2010 at the open-air *Ysyakh* festivals on the theme of olonkho. All photographs by William Harris, used by permission.



Large-scale painting on the birth of a hero (Borogontsi 2009).



Large-scale painting in a series (Berdigestyakh 2010).



Chess pieces carved from wood depicting good vs. evil characters (Borogontsi, 2009).



Heroine from an olonkho in wall hanging made from horse hair (Borogontsi, 2009).



Olonkho hero on horse and olonkhosut, carved from bone (Borogontsi, 2009).



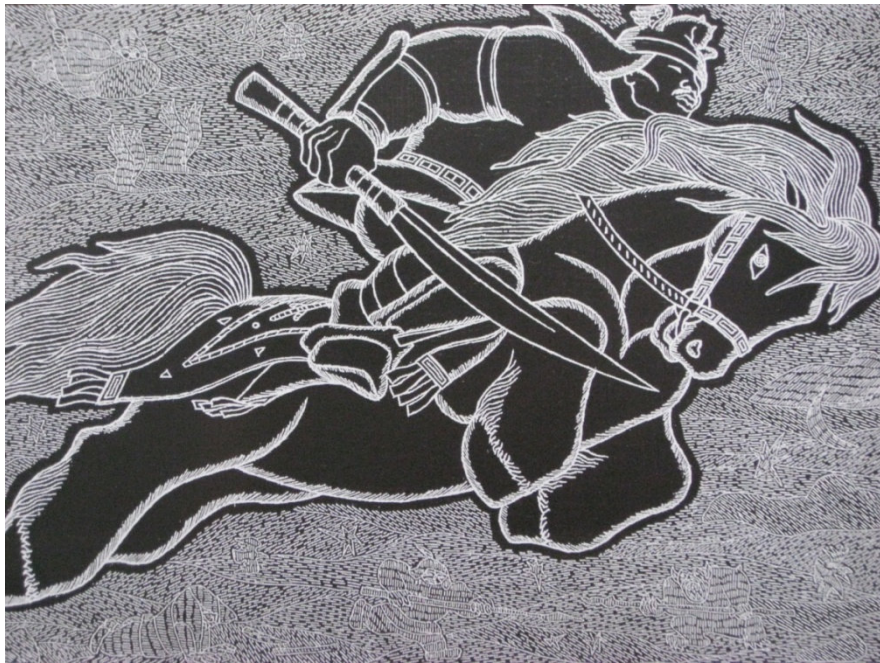
Childrens art on olonkho themes (Borogontsi, 2009).



Wooden carving with figure of olonkhosut in the center (Berdigystyakh, 2010)



Warrior-hero in ice “guarding” the entrance to the legislature building (Yakutsk, 2007).



This is an iconic image for olonkho in Yakutia.<sup>303</sup>

<sup>303</sup>From the book *Vladimir Karamzin: An Album*, compiled by Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova (2000).

## APPENDIX H

## CONTENTS OF ACCOMPANYING MEDIA MATERIALS DVD

Note: Full-length videos are indicated with online links for high definition viewing. Copies of the DVD are available for inter-library loan through the UGA Hugh Hodgson School of Music or from the author.

Chapter _page	Foot- note	Date	Description	Media
2_44	37	1996	Fig. 2.1—notated recitative	mp3
2_46	38a	2009	P. Reshetnikov performance (montage)	video
2_46	38b	2009	P. Reshetnikov performance (full)	<a href="https://vimeo.com/33506962">vimeo.com/33506962</a>
2_47	41	1996	Fig. 2.2—notated kylyhakh	mp3
2_51	49	1996	Fig. 2.3—notated dègèrèn	mp3
2_52	53	2010	I. Aksënova performs toyuk	<a href="https://youtu.be/4NPE-faJCUM">youtu.be/4NPE-faJCUM</a>
3_61	62	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
3_61	63	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
3_63	64	2009	E. Alekseyev interview	video
3_64	69	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	video
3_66	71	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	video
3_69	75	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
3_69	76	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
3_72	78	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview (full)	<a href="https://vimeo.com/33177383">vimeo.com/33177383</a>
3_72	79	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	video
3_73	80	2009	P. Reshetnikov Interview	video
3_73	81	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
3_74	84	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
3_75	85	2009	V. Kononov interview	video
3_77	86	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	video

3_78	87	2009	P. Tikhonov interview	video
3_79	88	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
3_81	90	2011	A. Zakharova interview	mp3
3_81	91	2011	A. Zakharova interview	mp3
3_82	94	2011	A. Zakharova interview	mp3
3_83	95	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
3_84	98	2009	M. Kononova interview	video
3_86	99	2011	E. Chekhorduna interview	mp3
3_86	100	2009	P. Reshetnikov Interview	video
3_88	102	2010	E. Alekseyev, A. Larionova interview	mp3
3_91	105	2009	R. Alekseyev relatives interview (full)	<a href="https://vimeo.com/34207733">vimeo.com/34207733</a>
3_91	106	2009	R. Alekseyev relatives interview	video
3_91	107	2009	R. Alekseyev relatives interview	video
3_92	108	2009	R. Alekseyev relatives interview	Video
3_94	113	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhigusov interview	mp3
3_95	115	2010	E. Kugdanova-Yegorova interview	Video
3_95	116	2010	E. Kugdanova-Yegorova interview	Video
3_95	117	2010	M. Stepanova interview	Video
3_96	118	2009	I. Aksënova interview	Video
3_97	119	2010	D. Gerasimova, M. Kononova interview	Video
3_97	120	2009	P. Tikhonov interview	Video
3_99	121	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhigusov interview	mp3
3_101	123	2010	N. Alekseyev interview	Video
3_102	125	2009	P. Reshetnikov Interview	Video
3_102	126	2009	P. Tikhonov interview	Video
3_103	129	2010	E. Alekseyev, A. Larionova interview	mp3
4_106	135	2009	M. Kononova interview	Video
4_107	136	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
4_109	138	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_110	140	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3

4_110	142	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_113	144	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_114	145	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_115	146	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_115	147	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_117	154	2011	E. Romanova interview	mp3
4_118	155	2011	E. Romanova interview	mp3
4_119	156	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_119	158	2010	D. Gerasimova interview	Video
4_120	159	2010	D. Gerasimova interview	Video
4_120	160	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	Video
4_120	161	2009	Ysyakh festival video (montage)	Video
4_121	163	2011	E. Chekhorduna interview	mp3
4_122	164	2011	E. Chekhorduna interview	mp3
4_123	165	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
4_125	168	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_126	169	2010	D. Gerasimova interview	Video
4_127	172	2009	E. Alekseyev interview	Video
4_127	173	2011	V. Burtsev interview	mp3
4_128	174	2010	V. Ustruchkova interview	Video
4_130	176	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_131	177	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_132	178	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_132	179	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	Video
4_133	180	2010	V. Solovyova interview	Video
4_134	181	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	Video
4_134	182	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	Video
4_135	183	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	Video
4_136	184	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_136	185	2011	A. Zakharova interview	mp3

4_137	186	2009	V. Kononov interview	Video
4_137	187	2009	V. Kononov interview	Video
4_138	189	2010	S. Vasiliev interview	Video
4_140	192	2010	S. Schischigin interview	mp3
4_140	193	2010	S. Schischigin interview	mp3
4_140	194	2009	V. Burtsev interview	Video
4_141	195	2011	B. Mikhailov interview	mp3
4_141	196	2011	D. Vinokurova, Y. Zhegusov interview	mp3
4_142	197	2010	R. Savinov interview	Video
4_143	198	2010	A. Shishigina interview	Video
5_158	225	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
5_161	228	2010	S. Vasiliev interview	Video
5_161	229	2010	S. Vasiliev interview	Video
5_162	230	2010	S. Vasiliev interview	Video
5_162	231	2010	S. Vasiliev interview (full)	<a href="https://vimeo.com/33848504">vimeo.com/33848504</a>
5_162	233	2011	E. Sidorova interview	mp3
5_166	236	2009	P. Reshetnikov interview	Video
5_166	237	2010	R. Savinov interview	Video
5_167	238	2010	E. Alekseyev, A. Larionova interview	mp3
5_170	243	2010	E. Alekseyev, A. Larionova interview	mp3
6_189	253	2009	P. Tikhonov interview	Video
8_221	273	2010	E. Alekseyev, A. Larionova interview	mp3