

## Olonkho in the Eduard Alekseyev Fieldwork Collection of Harvard University

By Ghilyana Dordzhieva and Liza Vick

**Abstract:** *The Eduard Alekseyev Fieldwork Collection focuses on the musical cultures of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in the Russian Federation. The Sakha language is considered endangered by UNESCO, just one indicator of the importance of archiving the olonkho repertoire and related genres. Eduard Alekseyev recorded audio and video of epic poetry and music in Yakutia, and those materials are preserved in the collection for research at the Archive of World Music, Harvard University. This article highlights significant content in the collection and describes folklore scholar and ethnomusicologist Alekseyev's work from the 1950s through the 1990s. Fieldwork bolstered his theoretical innovations in the study of tonal organization of early folk music systems, expanded upon by other scholars, and publicized music of Sakha (Yakut) musicians.*

The [Archive of World Music](#) at the Loeb Music Library, Harvard University (curated by Dr. Sarah Adams), is devoted to the acquisition of archival field recordings of music worldwide as well as to commercial sound and video recordings of ethnomusicological interest. The collection houses rare materials and provides access to scholars worldwide for materials that might otherwise be lost to posterity. Materials are kept in closed stacks and require reformatting for use so advance research appointments are advised. The scope of the collection is focused primarily on the Middle East, Asia (broadly understood), and Africa.

### 1. The Alekseyev Fieldwork Collection—its history and formation

The Eduard Alekseyev Fieldwork Collection of the Musical Culture of Yakutia was a crucial acquisition and its finding aid is available online: <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.Loeb.Faids:mus00023>. The collection complements archival holdings in Iranian, Turkish, and East Asian musics. Harvard possesses strong academic programs in Russian and Central Asian studies, housing the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and programs of study in Slavic Languages and Literature. Thus, the Alekseyev collection is situated in a nexus of area studies.

The Archive staff work to preserve and restore the materials by storing them in climate-controlled conditions and by digitizing them to prevent degradation of fragile original formats. Many of these digitized materials are available as streaming audio files in the finding aid and more will be available as processing is completed (with varying levels of public access). For more information about accessing the collection please view this video of an interview with Robin Harris: <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/video14.html>. AWM (Archive of World Music) shelf numbers appear throughout this article as listed in finding aid (AWM RL). Some of the items mentioned in this article are not yet available for researchers but will be in future collection updates (processing work is ongoing).

The Eduard Alekseyev Fieldwork Collection largely focuses on the musical cultures of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in the Russian Federation. Yakutia is the largest subnational entity in the world, and is a circumpolar region, half of which lies above the Arctic Circle. The Sakha (formerly “Yakut”) language is part of the northern Turkic linguistic family, and is considered a

“vulnerable” language, according to the UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger.<sup>1</sup>

The field recordings of Eduard Alekseyev<sup>2</sup> represent his work from 1957 through the 1990s. The majority of the recordings were gathered in a fieldwork setting, mainly from the central regions of Yakutia, but also, to a lesser degree, in southern Yakutia and in the territories along the Viliui and Kolyma rivers. The collection contains some of the first recorded examples of various genres



Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), in the Russian Federation\*

and forms. Thus, many of Alekseyev’s recordings have been used for decades as teaching examples in ethnomusicology and folklore courses in the Russian-speaking world. Along with well-known traditional genres, the Alekseyev collection represents diverse manifestations of more rare musical traditions of the Sakha. Not all of the material was recorded in field settings. Some recordings came from concerts and festival events, including special events in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Alekseyev’s fieldwork resulted in observations and findings that strongly contributed to his theoretical innovations. One of his primary contributions to the field of folklore was a theoretical framework for understanding human organization of musical elements, especially the underlying tonal organization of early folk music systems (Alekseyev 1976 and 1986). For example, his work on the “unfolding mode” has been noted by scholars such as Harris (2012) and Reshetnikova (1993) and expanded in Larionova’s work (2004, 2010). Copies of the earliest recordings of Sakha music obtained by other researchers were another source of material contributing to the formation of Alekseyev’s theories. These included phonograph recordings from 1902 by Waldemar Jochelson<sup>3</sup> and audio recordings created at the Moscow Conservatory in 1946 by Nina M. Bachinskaya and Klavdia G. Svitova.<sup>4</sup>

\* Map from <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RussiaSakha-Yakutia2007-07.svg> (accessed Nov. 27, 2013).

<sup>1</sup> Moseley, Christopher, ed. 2010. *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*. 3rd ed. Paris, UNESCO Publishing. Internet version: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap.html> (accessed Oct. 20, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Alekseyev (b. 1937) received his Kandidat (Ph.D.) and Doctor of Science degrees in Ethnomusicology from the Institute for Art Studies in Moscow. He conducted intensive musical fieldwork in different republics of the former Soviet Union for 40 years, and became particularly known for his expertise in the musical cultures of Siberia. From 1972-1992 he was Chairman of the All-Union Folklore Commission of the Union of Soviet Composers. He also served as Director of the Department of General Theory of Folklore at Moscow’s Institute for Art Studies. Dr. Alekseyev is the author of more than 100 publications.... He emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1997, and currently lives in Malden, Massachusetts, U.S.A. [Condensed version of a bio written by Ted Levin <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/author3.html> (accessed Oct. 24, 2013).]

<sup>3</sup> Waldemar Jochelson (1855-1937), a political exile in Kolyma, was invited to participate in the Jesup North Pacific expedition of the American Museum of Natural History (New York). In 1902 he recorded fragments of olonkho “Ogho-Tulaaiaakh” (Orphan Child) in the settlement of Rodchevo from the performance by Ivan Petrov. This is the very first phonographic recording of Sakha music. Four cylinders are stored at the St. Petersburg Phonogram Archives of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House), Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. (See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/the-historical-collections-1889-1955-of-st-petersburg-phonogram-archives/>, accessed Nov. 11, 2013) A copy was given to E. Alekseyev by Boris Dobrovolskiĭ [AWM RL 16281].

<sup>4</sup> **AWM RL 16276**: the original recordings, from the performances of Sakha singers Ustin Nokhsorov, Viktor Savvin, and Zakhar Vinokurov, are now preserved in the St. Petersburg Phonogram Archives. These materials,

Although the Alekseyev collection also contains important examples of Èven, Èvenk, and Yukaghir materials (smaller groups of indigenous peoples in Yakutia), as well as recordings from old Russian settlements, the collection remains primarily focused on Sakha music, with recordings of olonkho, the heroic epos of the Sakha, as one of the significant aspects of the collection.

Alekseyev's interest in olonkho and the song culture of the Sakha began in his early childhood, spent in Yakutsk and surrounding areas. In an interview with Robin Harris, he reminisced: "You remember my story about how my father brought me to see the Yakut theatre when I was small. At that time, I didn't understand all of what I was seeing, but I remember being stunned by the beautiful, colorful sound pictures. I suspect that among those traditional songs which were sung, there were probably songs from olonkho... I never got the chance to hear a full version of a real olonkho until my first fieldwork experience."<sup>5</sup>

Although Alekseyev's fieldwork didn't begin until 1958, his first recording of a song from an olonkho was made possible when Nikolai T. Alekseyev (b. 1924, Ust Aldan district) participated in the Evenings of Yakut Literature and Art in Moscow, held during December of 1957. That early recording<sup>6</sup> was made in the folklore laboratory of the Moscow Conservatory. Then, during his first expedition to the Amga district in 1958, he recorded olonkhosut Alekseï Agapov.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the more well-known genres recorded during that expedition, he also recorded several versions of the spring song "Sètèkè-sotoko."<sup>8</sup> A Sakha colleague raised in Amga, Olga Ivanova-Sidorkevich (1932–2003), was a significant help to Alekseyev during this expedition. She was also a singer, composer, and author of many beloved songs. In an interview with Harris, Alekseyev recalled how much he appreciated the colleagues, friends, and students who supported him and collaborated with him in his fieldwork.<sup>9</sup> The collection also contains some field recordings of these colleagues, friends, and students.<sup>10</sup>

Alekseyev worked with some of the most outstanding master-improviser olonkhosuts in Yakutia, performers such as Sergeï Zverev (Kyył Uola) from Suntar district, Prokopiï Yadrikhinskiï (Bèdzhèèlè) from Nam district, and Vasiliï Karataev from Viliui district. He enjoyed a special working relationship with Karataev (1926–1990), whose creativity was a model of outstanding ability in relation to the Sakha musical-poetic expressive system. Karataev was able to freely express the Sakha art of narrative song by employing finely-honed skills of vocal embodiment. He was recorded numerous times by Alekseyev, covering a period from the 1970s until the

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including seven fragments from the olonkhos *Ûring Uolan* and *Nyurgun Botur* plus multi-voice singing in *ohuokhai* (Sakha round dance), were published on an LP prepared by Alekseyev titled "Ustin Nokhsorov Sings: Restoration of 1946 Recordings" (M 30-39765-66, Melodia, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Interview can be viewed at <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/video12.html> (accessed Oct. 24, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> This recording (the song of the wounded warrior hero of the lower world in the olonkho "Kün Tollur") is archived in the St. Petersburg Phonogram Archive, but Alekseyev's transcription of this recording can be found in various books, beginning with *Problems of mode formation* (1976: 127-128).

<sup>7</sup> The recording session of Agapov's olonkho "Altan Sabarai bukhatyır" (Copper Visor Bogatyr) lasted around seven hours, but the technical constraints of that time resulted in recordings of only short fragments of forty songs [AWM RL 16286].

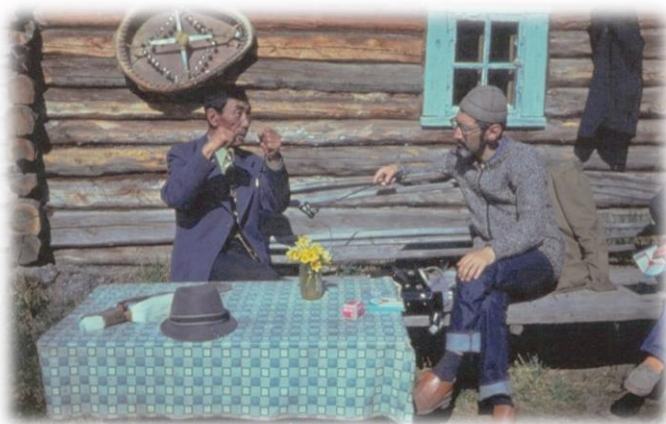
<sup>8</sup> See: AWM RL 16285, 16287, 16294.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/video13.html> (accessed Oct. 24, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> These include the first recording of Prokopiï Sleptsov (made by Zoya Vinokurova-Alekseyeva in 1975 in his home settlement of Druzhina, Abyi district) and recordings made by Nadezhda Nikolaeva in the Viliui region.

1990s. These recordings include fragments from the olonkhos “Èrbèkhteì Bèrgèn,” “Ogho Tulaaiaikh bukhatyir”<sup>11</sup> (recorded around a bonfire near Vilyusk), “Èr Sogotokh” (1981), and a video recording of an entire olonkho, “Uoluià Botur”<sup>12</sup> (recorded in Moscow at the Institute for Art Studies in 1990). This series of recordings provides an opportunity for researchers to observe the evolution of Karataev’s artistic abilities over time.<sup>13</sup>

Other examples of olonkho fragments recorded by Alekseyev include performances by olonkhosuts Prokopii Sleptsov from Abyi<sup>14</sup> and Kirill Nikiforov from Upper Viliui district.<sup>15</sup> The



**Eduard Alekseyev (R) with Prokopii Sleptsov, Abyi district**

collection also contains lesser-known performers of olonkho such as Mikhail Sorov from Churapcha district,<sup>16</sup> Ilià Kutanov from Niurba district,<sup>17</sup> Yeremei Yakovlev,<sup>18</sup> as well as Pètr Okhlopkov and Lavrentii Novogodin from Ust-Aldan district.<sup>19</sup> In addition to recording olonkhosuts in their natural contexts, Alekseyev recorded memorized concert versions of individual songs performed in theatrical settings of olonkho such as the first opera-olonkho “Nyurgun Botur the Impetuous” created by Mark Zhirkov and Genrikh Litinskiï (1947).

Along with his recordings of epic performances, Alekseyev also recorded some of his conversations with olonkhosuts, including among other topics, their discussions on such significant topics as the collective performance of olonkho. In fact, he was the first to record multipart singing in the epic singing style of *dièrètii*.<sup>20</sup> The collection also contains some rare examples of significant genres that are of great interest to researchers, such as the *oiuun yryata* (shaman songs), and *oiuun ütùktüü* (emulation of shamanic singing). In spite of the policies of the Soviet government to suppress such songs, Alekseyev produced an LP containing a performance of a ritual by Sergeï Zverev in 1969. As the producer of the recording, Alekseyev was able to employ a clever maneuver in his description of the work to get it past the censors.

<sup>11</sup> **AWM RL 16415**

<sup>12</sup> **AWM V 11628** and others

<sup>13</sup> **AWM RL 16252, AWM RL 16256, and AWM V 11596 (b)**

<sup>14</sup> **AWM RL 16289**

<sup>15</sup> **AWM V 11593**

<sup>16</sup> **AWM RL 16261**, recording by A. P. Reshetnikova.

<sup>17</sup> **AWM RL 16263**, recording by N. N. Nikolaeva.

<sup>18</sup> **AWM RL 16265**

<sup>19</sup> **AWM RL 16390**

<sup>20</sup> **AWM RL 16271** contains examples of Sakha multipart singing sung by various performers from different locations in Yakutia. **AWM RL 16357** records Yegor Evseyev (leader) and an ensemble of toyuksuts performing the toyuk “Min süreghim” (My Heart); **AWM RL 16352**, *Süöküchchèghè* (To My Friend Fiokla) demonstrates a two-part version of the toyuk first sung by the Yakut folk singer Sergeï Afanasievich Zverev–Kyyi Uola (1900–1973) and based on the words from the lyric poem of the celebrated Yakut poet Platon Oiuunskiï (Platon Alekseevich Sleptsov, 1893–1939). This version was recorded in the settlement of Elgiai (Suntar district) in March of 1966, performed by A. Kirillin and S. Ivanov, lead members of the Ensemble of Epic Singers established by S.A. Zverev.

Instead of the true title “The Sacred Rising” (*Sviaschenniĭ Podyom*), he called it “The Great Rising” (*Velikiĭ Podyom*) which, for the censors reading the label, looked like a standard official communist cliché.<sup>21</sup>

The Alekseyev collection features other unique materials documenting shamanic rituals.<sup>22</sup> A film called “Dreamtime” documented the rituals of 98-year-old Sakha shaman Nikon Vasiliev and 98-year-old Èvènk shamaness Matriona Kulbertinova. This film, a collaboration between Latvian



Latvian camera operator, Andris Slapinsh, at work on the documentary “Dreamtime” (1980)

camera operator Andris Slapinsh, ethnologist Elena Novik, and Alekseyev, is currently being restored, but audio files made during the filming are available in the collection.<sup>23</sup> Other unique materials of the collection include rare genres first recorded by Alekseyev, such as throat singing with rattling sounds (*khabargha yryata*),<sup>24</sup> the singing of a sleeping person (*tüül yryata*),<sup>25</sup> as well as the song of a person with a culturally-specific mental disorder (*ménèrik yryata*),<sup>26</sup> and groaning/sickness songs (*ènèlgèn yryata*).<sup>27</sup>

## 2. The Alekseyev Archive comes to Harvard

The path of the Alekseyev Collection to its home at Harvard was not an easy one, and involved the efforts of many people. Nadezhda Tolbonova, director of an organization<sup>28</sup> involved in the preservation of traditional culture, cared for the main body of recordings in Yakutsk for many years. Unfortunately, the technology available in Russia at that time was not adequate for digitizing some of the older recordings, so Alekseyev began to explore various possibilities for the collection’s restoration, including the Library of Congress.

<sup>21</sup> To confound the censors, one side of the LP contained a song to Lenin: “Uluu Èlièniini uruiduubun,” while the other portrayed the shamanic ritual “Ytyk dabaıyy” (*Sviaschenniĭ podyom*). *Podyom* (rising) in this case means rising to the upper world to bring an animal sacrifice to the spirits or gods.

<sup>22</sup> Examples of this include three recordings of Prokopii Slepsov: a) **AWM RL 16257**, in which he performs the ritual of expulsion of the *üör* (evil spirit) recorded on the evening of November 26, 1977 at Alekseyev’s home in Moscow; b) **AWM RL 16258**, a recording made in Moscow, a prayer for the Blossoming of Nature; c) **AWM RL 16259**, instrumental pieces played on the *khomus* (jaw harp), *düngür* (shaman’s drum), and a small woman’s drum, in a recording made in Slepsov’s home village of Druzhina, Abyi district. In addition, **AWM RL 16351** and **AWM RL 16296** document a ceremony of “white” shaman Vasilii Protopopov from Nam district.

<sup>23</sup> **AWM RL 16273**.

<sup>24</sup> **AWM RL 16289, AWM RL 16294, AWM RL 16349**

<sup>25</sup> **AWM RL 16346, AWM RL 16363**

<sup>26</sup> **AWM RL 16265, AWM RL 16346, AWM RL 16361**

<sup>27</sup> **AWM RL 16259**

<sup>28</sup> *Archy Diètè* (House of Purification)

Eventually he decided to entrust the collection to the Archive of World Music of Harvard University. A key factor in the final decision was his move from Russia to Boston and his warm working relationship with Virginia Danielson, ethnomusicologist and director of the Archive (at the time), who was very interested in the Yakutian materials.<sup>29</sup> Ghilyana Dordzhieva aided Alekseyev in developing and transcribing descriptions of the materials in the collection. Curatorial Assistant Donna Guerra, who processed the materials and created the finding aid, inserted these descriptions so that researchers could interact with the material online. Peter Laurence is currently fulfilling this role and Bruce Gordon serves as the sound engineer for digitization and restoration.



With sound engineer Bruce Gordon at Harvard (2010)

Vasili Illarionov and Sergei Vasilev, olonkho specialists from Yakutsk, visited Harvard in the spring of 2013 to provide consultation and helpful details for the collection's metadata. Many of Alekseyev's handwritten field notes and expedition journals have been lost over time, making the descriptions of the recordings an important, but painstaking task, which continues to this day.

The Eduard Alekseyev recordings were transferred to the Archive from 2008 to 2010. All materials are organized in two series: Series 1. Traditional Music of Sakha (Yakut) People; Series 2. Folk and Professional Performers from Former USSR and Abroad. Approximately one-quarter of materials are annotated; a time consuming process is required to organize, identify, and describe each recording but this information adds great value for researchers. The [Loeb Music Library](#) hosts the Archive, and also hosted events focusing on the Alekseyev collection. Several distinguished Yakut musicians visited in 2009 and scholar Anna Larionova gave a lecture (with Robin Harris translating). Then, on February 21, 2013, the library hosted a symposium entitled *The Yakut Epos Olonkho: Past—Present—Future*. Information about symposium speakers and related Harvard holdings may be found here: <http://guides.library.harvard.edu/yakutmusic>.

### 3. Looking ahead to the future

Prospective plans for the collection include digitizing the remainder of the audio tapes and digitizing video recordings. Advantages of online publications and finding aids for audio and video collections: annotations can be corrected, improved, and renewed, giving the collection a growing, dynamic aspect. In the 75<sup>th</sup> year of his life, Eduard Alekseyev is still engaged in the process of developing and annotating this collection. Opportunities for critique, and annotation, however, are not limited to the collection's originator; they are available to all who use the collection. The Alekseyev collection should encourage research of this unique repertory and preserve cultural artifacts for future generations of scholars and enthusiasts.

<sup>29</sup> In a Russian-language interview with Robin Harris in 2012, Eduard Alekseyev recounts the story of his decision to bring his collection to Harvard (see [www.eduard.alekseyev.org/video13.html](http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/video13.html), accessed Oct. 25, 2013).

### Authors

**Ghilyana Dordzhieva**, PhD, is an ethnomusicologist who has collaborated with the Archive of World Music at Harvard University since 2010. In 1999-2006 she was a faculty member both at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the St. Petersburg State University for the Art and Culture, teaching musical folklore of Russian and non-Russian minorities of the former Soviet Union. In addition to lecturing, she worked as a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Folklore and Ethnography. In 2001, she released her CD collection *Tsahan: Masterpieces of Kalmyk tradition music*. Dordzhieva is the author of numerous articles on Kalmyk and Western Mongolian (Oirat) music and folklore, and a contributor and annotator for the EVIADA-2008 project, Bloomington, IN. Since 2006 she has been living in Boston, working as a freelance researcher and librarian.

**Liza Vick** is the Music Reference and Research Services Librarian at the Loeb Music Library, Harvard University. She holds an MLS and an MM in Ethnomusicology from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a BM in Flute Performance from West Chester University. She is associate editor, world music, for the forthcoming *A Basic Music Library*, 4th edition and Book Review Editor for *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association*. Her ethnomusicological interests include Japanese *koto* and Cambodian classical dance and she works closely with the Archive of World Music at Harvard.

### Resources

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