

## The Performance Tradition of the Sakha Heroic Epic *Olonkho* and its Transformations in Modern Life

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**Abstract:** *This article describes primarily the Sakha epic storytelling/musical tradition (olonkho) and its performers (olonkhosuts), noting key scholars, aesthetics, and changes in epic milieu.*

The *Sakha* (people previously known as the *Yakut*) live primarily in northeastern Siberia on the continent of Asia. Sakha oral traditions are currently playing an important role in providing a foundation for the revitalization of many aspects of national<sup>1</sup> spirituality and culture. The epic of the Sakha—*olonkho*—plays a central role among those oral traditions.

The epic tradition of *olonkho* is the supreme archetype of Sakha national culture. Its vivid artistic form reflects the traditional lifestyle and worldview of the Sakha people, in particular their centuries-old dream of a peaceful life with other neighboring peoples. *Olonkho* also exemplifies the essence of the Sakha people, their kindness, humanity, and their proud and independent spirit, which throughout many centuries of difficulties managed to preserve their indigenous language and spiritual culture.

The plots of *olonkho* vividly and convincingly develop its themes: the protection of a peaceful and happy life from the enemies which threaten it, the fight of the good warrior-heroes (*aiyy aimagha*) against the powers of evil and darkness (*abaahy*), and the confirmation of their indomitable fate in which the good tribes and kin are gathered on the “primordial motherland.” Nikolai Yemelianov believes that the primary theme of all of these epic stories (collectively called *olonkho*) is connected to the idea of a peaceful, happy, and affluent life in the Middle World, the land of the Uraankhai Sakha tribe (Yemelianov 1980).

The heroic epic *olonkho* is the principal genre in the system of Sakha oral poetic traditions.



**Olonkhosut  
Roman Alekseyev  
(1900-1977)\***

These epics have a long verse form consisting of often 5–10,000 or sometimes even as many as 15–25,000 or more poetic lines. There are even longer epic texts, such as “Nyurgun Botur the Impetuous,” codified by Platon Oiunskii, which consists of 36,000 lines. The epic “Ala Tuigun,” describing three generations of warriors, was transcribed in 1960s from the performances of Roman Alekseyev (see left), an *olonkhosut* (*olonkho* master performer) from the Ust-Aldan region. This extensive epic was published in three volumes and contains approximately 50,000 poetic lines of text.

During the years in which the epic tradition flourished, the *olonkhosut*’s mastery was measured by the length of the *olonkho* performance. Usually the *olonkho* lasted around seven or eight hours, beginning at the onset of evening and continuing until late at night. According to tape recordings, this length of time allowed an *olonkhosut* to perform 7–8,000 lines of poetic verse. Seroshevskii, a political exile and famous ethnographer, wrote that Manchary from Verkhoyansk district told him in 1881 about an *olonkho* which could take an entire month to perform (1993: 590). The folklorists Innokentii Pukhov and Petr Dmitriev recorded legends claiming that *olonkhosuts* Petr Okhlopov-Chogoibokh and Ivan Tabakhyrov

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\* All photos in this article are from either William Harris or Eduard Alekseyev, and are used by permission.

<sup>1</sup> In the context of this paper, the terms *national* or *nation* refer to that which is distinctly Sakha, rather than the geopolitical nation-state of Russia. This follows the normal Russian language usage of these terms.

couldn't finish even the introduction of the olonkho in one night (Pukhov 1962: 60–61). Clearly, the oral version of a full olonkho is much longer than the written one. Unfortunately, there are no recordings of such an expanded olonkho that might provide us with the details regarding the full development of ideas and plots.

The term 'olonkho' denotes not only a specific genre of Sakha folklore but also separate epics, which are usually titled with the name of the main hero, such as "Nyurgun Botur the Impetuous," "Ēr Sogotokh," "Kulun Kulustuur," "Ürüng Uolan," "Müljü the Strong," and so forth. The responses from questionnaires given to olonkhosuts and other sources show that from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century over 300 various epics were preserved in the collective memories of olonkho performers. Among these epics, there are a considerable number which are olonkhos about women [*kyys*] warriors, such as "Kyys Nyurgun," "Kyys Tuigun," "Kyys Dëbilyë," "Kyys Kyydaan," and others—the plots of which undoubtedly reflect the ancient roots of this archaic genre. Olonkho is therefore an epic tale recounting the heroic deeds of ancient warriors, tribal ancestors, and defenders of the tribe. As a traditional oral poetic genre, olonkho consists of more or less homogeneous epic tales, with common ideologies and aesthetic systems, plot structures, and traditional archetypal characters.

The Sakha epic is known until today because of the art of the olonkhosuts—their first creators, performers, and caretakers. Many olonkhosuts are considered hereditary performers, as their mastery and talents are passed from one generation to another. Of course, most olonkhosuts are talented people who master the art of the olonkho performance from long exposure to an older generation of performers. It is a lengthy process, requiring the accumulation of skills for performing and developing an exceptional memory. More than anything, the art of olonkho performance requires the gift of singing and ability to enter with insight into the world of the olonkho.

The olonkhosut begins the introductory part of his performance with a smoothly recounted poetic recitative. In addition to the introduction, all the descriptive parts of the epic are recounted in this manner: the warrior's preparations for a campaign, his journey to the enemy, the combat of the warriors, and so forth. In contrast, the words spoken by the characters, including their speeches, dialogues, and prayers, are all sung. One of the first collectors and researchers of olonkho, Ivan Khudiakov, noted at the end of the 1860s that "olonkho is infused with song and represents a rudimentary form of national opera" (Khudiakov 1969: 366). The level of an olonkhosut's performance mastery is demonstrated by his individualistic style. In this regard, Vasilii Petrov noted, "The olonkhosut uses traditional artistic techniques. He creates images of olonkho heroes using a rich palette of mimicry, gesture, intonation, and singing" (Petrov 1978: 86). Those who have observed an olonkho performance by a talented olonkhosut will note that in order to communicate the content of the story in a more effective way, the olonkhosut accompanies his performance with gestures. Ergis underscored that in order to effectively convey the meaning of the text, "in the most dramatic episodes the olonkhosut often gesticulates, rising up and emphasizing the emotions of the characters through facial gestures" (2008: 188). Unfortunately, traditional performance techniques such as these cannot be observed in written texts or audio recordings. In the performance art of olonkho, the olonkhosut acts both as an actor—possessing the ability to be transformed into a character in the story, and as a singer—creating with his singing gift the lifelike images of the olonkho characters.

The Sakha epic has its full effect on the audience only if it has well-developed sonic images

and melodies. A lack of expressive performance can not only make the epic heroes dull and unattractive, but their ideals and even the plot of the epic as well. In his characterization of the olonkhosut's art, Pukhov said: "The vast majority of olonkhos are recited in rhythmic verse, similar to recitative, but without musical accompaniment. A good olonkhosut uses prose only for small parts of his performance" (Pukhov 1951: 151).

Due to its poetic structure, olonkho is performed in a quick tempo, maintaining a wide variety of vocal inflections. As a result, the length of the descriptive and narrative parts is significantly reduced. This can be clearly demonstrated by audio recordings. Thus, for example, the performance of olonkhosut Vasiliĭ Karataev follows traditional olonkho



**Olonkhosut Vasiliĭ Karataev**  
(1926-1990)

performance techniques. In addition to his use of a wide variety of expressive means, his performance is marked by a fast tempo. As musicologist Eduard Alekseyev noted, the olonkhosut produces up to 400 or more syllables per minute, and in epic recitative there can be close to 500 pulsating beats per minute (1996: 45).

Recitative is an essential factor in a live olonkho performance. With its help, olonkhosuts, like performers of many other national oral (epic) traditions (like the Èvenk *nimngakan*, Èven *nimkan*, and Dolgan olonkho), create for the listeners vivid images of

nature, brave warrior heroes, charming beauties, and ugly monsters.

The first scholar to depict the musical aspects of olonkho for an academic audience was Aleksandr Middendorf, who made the first recording of an olonkho—*Èrièdèl Bèrgèn*—during his expedition to northeastern Siberia in 1842–1845 (1898: 808). Since then, many scholars have studied and written about both the verbal and musical aspects of olonkho. A contemporary researcher of Sakha music culture, Galina Krivoshapko, notes in particular the importance of the vocal art of the olonkhosuts: "No matter how great the literary and poetic aspects of olonkho are, the images and personalities of its heroes are created by the performing mastery of the olonkhosut, thus the greatest emphasis is put on a knowledge of various melodies and voice strength" (Krivoshapko 1971: 223).

The transmission of images with the help of voice and melody has certainly long been a tradition among olonkho performers. Innokentiĭ Pukhov, while noting the general stability of each character's melody, points nevertheless to some variability depending on the situation in which the hero finds himself (1951: 23–24). Ergis expresses a similar point of view: "In a strong baritone they (the olonkhosuts) sing the battle song of an *Aiyy* (good) warrior, in a gruff bass they sing the boastful speeches of *abaahy*, in a high, plaintive voice they deliver the cry of a captured beauty, the passionate verses of the female demons (*abaahy*), the whispering report of the young man—Soruk Bollur, or the sniveling old woman—Simèkhsin Èmèèkhsin—the comic character of olonkho" (2008: 188). Noting the amount of variation possible in both personal and regional styles, Galina Krivoshapko observes, "The variability of melodies is brought about by the individual performing styles of the olonkhosut and their locally based artistic traditions" (1971: 123).

It is difficult to say exactly how many melodies an olonkhosut creates during the many years in which he performs. However, some of the research on olonkho attempts to address this question. Ivan Khudiakov believes that the motifs of the olonkho are in most cases homogeneous, citing that "connoisseurs say there are as many as twenty" (1969: 368). Musicologist Eduard Alekseyev suggests that "there are over a dozen common motives which wander from one olonkho to another, accompanying the personages they depict" (1976: 10).

Krivoshapko has found around 30 leitmotif–like melodies (1971: 124). These numbers are estimates; the most complete and exact number of melodies created by olonkhosuts could be determined only by examining the musical transcriptions of a sufficient number of audio recordings. This method of inquiry, however, would be a laborious process for musicologists. It must be emphasized once more that the variety of melodies present in any olonkho depends on the talent, experience, and musical abilities of olonkhosuts.

During the flowering of olonkho performance practice at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, an epic milieu<sup>2</sup> identified and supported generations of the most talented olonkhosuts. In addition, “epic schools” were formed around these olonkhosuts, identifiable by the specific traditions that characterized them. This feature of Sakha epic traditions was noted in late 19<sup>th</sup> century by the political exile Nikolaï Vitashevskii: “Regardless of the strength of their individual creative gift, professional olonkhosuts, like any folk bards, cannot avoid the influence of their environment” (1912: 455). The epic researcher Vladimir Propp challenged folklorists to always bear in mind the dialectical connection between the epic milieu and its epic performers. He considered the decline of an epic a natural phenomenon. “An epic tradition dies out not because people become less talented and cannot understand, appreciate, and develop the art they have created, it dies out because a new epoch requires new songs” (1958: 547). Indeed, the aesthetic needs of modern people are largely satisfied by other kinds of art and new artistic works which respond in both content and form to the context of our times.

Since the 1940s, society’s interest in the art of the olonkhosuts gradually faded out and the



Alekseyev (right), in the taiga home of olonkhosut Sergeï Zverev (center), with folklorist Pëtr Popov (left) in 1963.

formerly robust epic milieu slowly disappeared. The performance of olonkho in family circles became rare. Singers and olonkhosuts became more engaged in amateur performances, where individual songs, and sometimes short passages from various olonkhos were performed in concerts. Sometimes amateur groups and olonkhosuts combined forces to organize adaptations of olonkho plots and themes for the stage in village cultural centers and clubs. At that

time famous olonkhosuts and national singers Sergeï Zverev (Kyył Uola), Nikolaï Stepanov, Prokopiï Yadrikhinskiï, Ekaterina Ivanova,

Innokentiï Burnashev (Tong Suorun), and Ustin Nokhsorov took an active part in amateur performances, in competitions of folk singers and olonkhosuts organized by the Ministry of Culture. They also performed in regional and republic-wide folklore festivals for the peoples of Yakutia.

Today the living tradition of the olonkhosut is preserved by exceptionally talented performers whose mastery, nevertheless, does not measure up to the colorful masters of epic creativity that marked previous generations, olonkhosuts who were known and loved by the people. The actual tradition-bearers of this oral art are still appreciated by Sakha society, not only from the scientific point of view but also out of people’s keen interest in the roots of national culture.

<sup>2</sup> *Ėpicheskaia sreda* (epic milieu) is a concept used by epic scholars to denote a local cultural context in which there are appreciative audiences actively supporting and listening to epic performances.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers and enthusiasts were working closely with olonkhosuts, and although it was possibly not as actively as could be desired, it was at least on a continual basis. This can be demonstrated by the organization of national and international folklore conferences in 1977, 1986, and 1994 in Yakutsk by the Institute of Humanities of the Sakha Republic Academy of Sciences. Along with the House of Folk Culture, the Institute of Humanities also arranged for republic-wide festivals and competitions for olonkhosuts.

During the early years of folklore festivals and competitions, the older generation of olonkhosuts, widely known for their authentic performing mastery, played the lead role. Among them were, for example, Nikolaï Stepanov (Menge-Khangalass district), Prokopiï Yadrikhinskiï, Vasilii Popov (Nam district), Semën Alekseyev (Gorny district), Daria Tomskaya (Verkhoyansk district) and their younger colleagues Vasilii Karataev, Afanasiï Vasiliev (Viliuisk district), Mikhail Sorov (Taatta district), Semën Yegorov (Suntar district), and Nikolaï Tarasov (Gorny district). These olonkhosuts demonstrated an epic repertoire in which elements of both improvisation and tradition could be discerned, as well as epic formulae, *locis communis* (commonplace settings), and a variety of plots.

These performers were the last representatives of the traditional line of olonkhosuts, masters who had learned the art of olonkho performance from childhood and who often performed olonkho for a discerning audience of true olonkho connoisseurs.

Sakha folklorists enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with these olonkhosuts, and the epic repertoires of the older generation of olonkhosuts were put in written form. Today there are 126 olonkho texts which have been transcribed from dictation and are now preserved in the archives of the Institute of Humanities. In addition, the performances of deceased olonkhosuts such as Daria Tomskaya, Semën Alekseyev, Vasilii Karataev, and Afanasiï Vasiliev have been recorded for posterity on video, providing an invaluable resource for researchers of epic creative traditions.



**Olonkhosut Daria Tomskaya (1913-2008)**

In the 1990s, traditional olonkhosuts were replaced by singers who performed olonkho with



**Olonkhosut Afanasiï Soloviëv (1935-2012)**

the memory of the epic milieu of their childhood fresh in their minds—performers such as Afanasiï Soloviëv, Kirill Nikiforov, Nikolaï Shamaev, and Lidia Afanasieva. Their repertoires were created from childhood memories and written down for preservation. The epic repertoires of these olonkhosuts are not wide and diverse. They concentrate mainly on performing their own olonkho texts in the manner of older generations of olonkhosuts. As a rule, they have good voices and demonstrate a

mastery of epic performance, naturally drawing the audience's interest. According to their testimonies, they do not learn their texts by heart and can modify them depending on their mood and the audience's preferences.

There are also olonkho performers who emerged from among the ranks of amateur performers (Yegor Nikolayev, Semën Yegorov, Lavrentii Novogodin). On the radio and

television, performers recounted olonkho stories while being guided by written texts (Luka Savvinov, Pëtr Kharitonov, and others). A competition called “*Min olonkho doidutun oghotobun*” (I’m a child of the Land of Olonkho) has recently been held for schoolchildren who perform olonkho texts prepared by their teachers. In my opinion, it is better to not limit these epic performers with specific policies or regulations, but rather to encourage all initiatives which discover and develop people’s talent and ability in epic performance.

In 1999, on the initiative of folklorists at the Institute of Humanities, a republic-wide Olonkho Association was created, and the President of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolayev, became its first chairman. This organization carried out extensive work toward the preservation and popularization of the Sakha heroic epic. It also organized olonkho conferences for the Republic of Sakha, as well as federal (Russia-wide) and international-level conferences, and a series of publications titled “Sakha booturdara” (Sakha *bogatyrs*<sup>3</sup>) was launched. The Olonkho Association also collected and prepared a set of documents for an application to have olonkho included in UNESCO’s list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Due to the painstaking and laborious efforts of cultural and



Award-winning olonkhosut Pëtr Reshetnikov, at his home in Cherkëkh, Taatta district (2009)

social workers, folklorists, Sakha governmental leaders and the presidential administration, the Il Tumen State Assembly, and such large national corporations as “Komdragmet” and “Almaz Anabara,” olonkho was proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on November 25, 2005, at the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris. The President of the Sakha Republic decreed on November 29, 2005, that November 25 will henceforth be “Olonkho Day,” in which olonkho is celebrated as a world masterpiece, and that the years 2005-2015 would be celebrated as the “Decade of the Sakha epic Olonkho.” Living olonkhosuts at that time—Daria Tomskaya, Pëtr Reshetnikov, and later Afanasiï Soloviëv—were awarded monthly stipends. This presidential decree also established a republic-wide governmental program for the “Preservation, Study and Popularization of the Sakha Heroic Epic.”

The proclamation by UNESCO of the Sakha epic as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity challenges cultural and academic workers, folklorists, and a wide range of public organizations to address a number of issues related to the development and—more importantly—the safeguarding and popularization of olonkho for future generations.

### Author

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<sup>3</sup> A *bogatyrs* is the “hero figure” (often a “warrior hero”) in Russian epics (*byliny*). *Bogatyrs* has entered the English language from Russian through the field of epic studies.

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