

## Heroic Epic Olonkho-A Unique Phenomenon in the World Epic Culture

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**Abstract:** The paper presents the Yakut heroic epic olonkho, which received the status of the Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005 by the decision of UNESCO. Specialists evaluated it as a special genre of Yakut folklore, which origin is attributed to the formation of ethnic picture of the world in Central Asia and South Siberia. Hunnish sources of olonkho are identified; its ethnic community with the epics of Turkic-Mongolian peoples is emphasized, while its common human nature is shown. Yakut epic spiritual potential is a unique phenomenon in the space of world epics.

**Key words:** Olonkho • Olonkhosut-storyteller • Yakut epic • Ethnic History • Epic Monuments • Common Genesis • Good and Evil.

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### INTRODUCTION

Considering the problem of heroic epic of the nomads of Mongolia, S.Yu. Nekliudov, one of the major Russian experts in epic poetry, notes that heroic epic is “the most monumental genre of folk poetry” (Nekliudov1996: 16) [1]. This is evidenced by Yakut heroic epic olonkho. Even E.K. Pekarsky, the author of the fundamental Dictionary of the Yakut language, identified the conceptual content of “olonkho” as “heroic bylina (*\*bylina-a Russian epic*), epic song about the feats of heroes; a heroic poem based on metre rhythmic structure” (Pekarsky 1956:1818)[2]. Known turkologists S. E. Malov (Malov 1929: I-VI) [3] and A.N. Samoylovich (Samoylovich1936: 23) adhered to this same definition. But it was the Academician A.P. Okladnikov who characterized olonkho most vividly calling it “a grandiose epic”, “heroic poem” and referred olonkho to “traditional forms of heroic epic” (Okladnikov 1955: 257) [4].

Yakutia is considered the cradle of olonkho, the place where it originated, while the Yakut people are deemed to be the authors. Hence, Yakutia is sometimes called “Olonkholand”. The experts in epic have no doubts that olonkho-one of the most unique and brilliant epic creations, clothed in the captivating form of epic narrative and captured in human memory and immortalized in his mental activity-appeared in Yakutia. Olonkho became the

main heritage of the Yakut people. But in order to become recognised as such, our epic had walked a long, crooked, but heroic path.

The unique poetic content of olonkho and outstanding narrative skills of olonkhosuts reflect the events of the bygone days. Immersing in those events, we puzzle out the secret mainsprings of our history. The origins of this history, which is full of heroism and drama associated with morals of people’s movement through the centuries, are found in Central Asia and Southern Siberia (Okladnikov 1955: 2510) [4]. This history gave birth to fighters, martyrs and heroes of invisible moral world, to strong and noble, evil and cruel men. We do not always attach importance to the fact that it was the time of breakthrough heroic deeds and selfless actions, a time that historians have called the time of military democracy, a time of painful search for the way out of the global crisis of the primitive society [5]. One witty historian called this time in olonkho “the eve of statehood” which seems to accurately capture the essence and content of the historical realia (Trepalov 200: 24-26) [6].

Formation of states destroys the primitive world of nations and creates a new world order. Every nation goes its own way and pursues its own objective under many guises, but stubbornly retains a piece of its history which is the memory of its past, not always good, but useful in

terms of not only mundane experience but also of the universal one. This happens to be a manifestation of the history motion law ensuring the continuity of historical art.

Heroic epics usually constituted an artistic summary of historical events that were of great importance for the lives of the people and were associated with heroic feats. Like a wonderful fabric they were interspersed with stories about the early history of humans, people and tribe, morals and deeds of heroes and legends about gods and protectors of the tribe. In songs and stories each generation recollected and retold ancient legends, enriching them and changing them endlessly, without thinking about creator or creators of these poems and attributing their creation to fictional authors. That was a realm of epic art. As shown in the materials of world epic culture, epic works appear wherever and whenever there was a break in social life and in public conscience.

I.A. Khudiakov, a pioneer of Yakut study of epic, Russian folklore specialist, who was been in apolitical exile in 1867-1874, was quite accurate when he wrote that olonkhos “were the undeniable historical truth for the Yakut”. They are their principal genre of poetry, the main means of education, they are close to their beliefs and customs and, in a way, interpret the latter; they are the main source of explanations of all life phenomena (Khudiakov 1969: 372) [7].

The historical layer of epic of the Yakut’s ancestors is visible at each stage of the history of ethnic consolidation, particularly when the ancestors of the Yakut, being a part of the Turkic world, found themselves in the midst of a devastating social disaster that unfolded in the VI-VIII centuries B.C. But the most tragic thing was that the united Turkic world, which lasted two centuries, split into parts each of which chose their own way of autonomous existence, in terms of history. All this happened when Eastern Turkic khaganate irrevocably fell in 745 and the ancestors of the modern Yakut were pushed north into the mountain and taiga zone of Baikal and headwaters of the Lena River<sup>8</sup>. This break of fate, accompanied by large-scale translocations, military conflicts, military alliances being formed quickly only to fall asunder soon thereafter, stormy manifestations of military democracy, penetrated deep into the public’s consciousness and became the source of origin of epic narrative with

its character acquiring the characteristics of a hero-warrior and his activities, features of combat heroics very early.

Olonkho is the creation of the Yakut people, the most northern part of Turkic peoples who inhabited the ancient southern Siberia. Most experts consider the Yakut epic to be rooted in this region and these nations associated with the world of ancient all-Turkic poetic creations. However, we understand that olonkho is the Yakut tradition of the heroic epic and the unique historical features of this tradition were formed in the context of the Yakut ethnic history itself. Proving that olonkho has southern origins, A.P. Okladnikov wrote, “It does not mean that we should draw the inference that the Yakut epic has nothing proper and original. On the contrary, all the researchers recognized a pronounced originality of the Yakut epic, its distinctive and unique face in comparison with other known examples of epic works of other peoples of Asia [8].

None of the experts has counted how many olonkho there were throughout the whole existence of this genre and this is impossible to establish. Olonkho is a creation of an oral society; nobody registered olonkhos, so we can only speak about “countless numbers”. The paradox is that the information about the fact that the Yakut had olonkho heroic epic was for the first time ever revealed by the people of another, written culture, especially, by luminaries of Russian science and culture since the middle of the XIXth century. To date, the efforts of many enthusiasts helped to find out that the Yakut epic heritage consists of a fairly diverse and rich fund of scriptures containing ancient olonkhos. Today, the whole arsenal of Yakut epic heritage consists of about 200 full and shortened texts not counting those stored in personal archives and archives abroad. It is gratifying that there are texts dated back to the late XIX-early XX centuries among them and that those texts preserved the epic language of the time. In addition, there are dozens of publications of olonkho texts which have not survived into the present. In general, at disposal of the specialists in epic poetry there is a sufficiently representative source for solution of the problem of studying olonkho, its scientific and cultural importance.

The scientific study of the Yakut epic has a rather rich history. It began in the 40s of the XIX century with the academic expedition of A.F. Middendorf to Eastern Siberia. I.A. Khudiakov, E. K. Pekarsky, S.V. Yastremsky, V.N. Vasiliev, P.A. Oyunsky, G.V. Ksenofontov,

A.P. Okladnikov, I.V. Pukhov, G.U. Eris, N.V. Emelianov and others took a place of honour in the history of the Yakut study of epic. Their merit is that they developed a scientific view on the resolution of problems of investigating the origins of olonkho, finding the ways of its preservation and use for public ends [9].

It is believed that olonkho was created collectively by people. But even though this definition is basically correct, it somewhat negates a unique phenomenon which justifies the existence of the notion olonkho itself. This phenomenon is called storytelling and it is associated with the fact that olonkho as a genre consists of multiple independent works of fiction and with specific performance of a particular monument. For example, olonkho "Nyurgun Bootur Swift" is written by P. A. Oyunsky, "Ala Bulkun" is written by Timofey Vasilievich Zakharov-Cheebiy, «Kuruubay Khaannaakh Kulun Kullustuur» is written by Innokenty Gurievich Timofeev-Teploukhov, «Alaatyyr Ala Tuygun» is written by Roman Petrovich Alexeev etc. In other words, it is important to recall that the authors of those olonkhos were, at the same time, the performers, endowed with a special talent by nature itself and having the unique ability to improvise the most complex scenes from the life of society and nature. Classic olonkho was told by one teller who played all his characters and, thus, had to possess a sizeable amount of artistry and be capable of dramatic identification. He also had to possess special singing skills. And, of course, he was to be an unrivaled expert in the deepest nuances of the native language. Olonkho was told only before the audience, that's why an olonkhosut was a public person. All those qualities in their totality constitute the olonkhosut's personality. Lack of just one of the above-mentioned qualities would destroy the image of an olonkhosut and that of the olonkho as a holistic phenomenon.

Olonkhosut is a special creature of nature, its child. His storytelling creates a special feeling, it captivates the audience, hypnotizes it by the energy of speech, voice, artistry and, of course, by its plot. Families used to invite olonkhosuts to their yurts on winter. Usually he sat on a stool in front of the hearth with his back turned to the fire place, legs crossed. He sang and narrated, rhythmically swaying his body, eyes half closed, one ear is covered with the index finger or palm. It is the most typical pose for singing olonkhosut, according to the descriptions of olonkho performance." There have been many attempts to reproduce this "epic" situation, but only Alexey Yeliseevich Kulakovsky, an outstanding expert in epic culture of his nation has provided the closest

possible description of this performance. "Everyone listens to olonkho", he wrote "with bated breath. They are carried away, sitting in silence while the words and songs are flowing in endless and impetuous stream, drawing wonderful pictures, images and situations [10]. Each listener has forgot this worries, grief and gone to a magical, wonderful world of enchanting dreams. And the narrator himself is most excited like a true poet, his eyes are closed so he could finally abandon the "sinful" earth with its petty troubles and prose.

They listened to the olonkhosut from early evening till the "daybreak" sleep, i.e. 13-14 at a time. This is a medium-long olonkho of 8-10 thousand verses, but there are longer olonkhos. For example, olonkho "Erbekhtey Bergen" ("Erbekhtey the Sharpshooter") by D.M. Govorov has about 20 thousand verses, the main Yakut epic "Nyurgun Bootur Swift" by P.A. Oyunsky has more than 36 thousand verses, olonkho «Alaatyyr Ala Tuygun» by R. P. Alexeev consists of 49, 203 verses! According to the famous Polish figure ethnographer V.L. Seroshevsky who visited, living in the exile, Verkhoyansk district in Yakutsk region in the 80s of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the narrator Manchary knew olonkho that can be narrated for one month. Telling of olonkho of such enormous size required exceptional workings of the mind and memory. The latter was literally legendary.

One of the popular olonkho "Obstinate Kulun Kullustuur" by I.G. Timofeev-Teploukhov was recorded in 1906 by V.N. Vasiliev. 50 years later, in March 1959, an olonkho researcher G.U. Ergis made an interesting experiment: on a meeting of olonkhosuts, he held a special audition of olonkho interpreted by the olonkhosut himself, born in 1869, i.e. he was 90 years at that time G.U. Ergis was very surprised to discover that the olonkhosut repeated the text word for word, written in 1906! Here is what the researcher wrote about this case: "He amazed listeners with his memory and mastery of narration. He was narrating many parts of his olonkho as they had been recorded in 1906. To achieve greater rhythm in some parts he rearranged words, but the order of the expanded parts of the sentence, the sequence of the story proved to be stable even in the details. Due to senile weakness Innokenty Gurievich shortened speech-songs of olonkho characters. Such memory is peculiar to absolute majority of olonkhosuts, indicating the high hurdle of Yakut narrating art and epic culture in general.

Thinking about classic olonkhos and olonkhosuts due to the advent of written culture transformation of epic heritage generates an interesting problem of differences between "oral" and "written" form of existence of the epic.

I personally tend to think that the classical oral olonkho author's performance is completely disappearing, while the "written" form is the only written fixation the only of olonkho's text. Because the latter has not yet olonkho in the traditional sense and is a text representation, not illustrative of olonkho as a monument of the oral and intangible heritage.

Yakut olonkho occupies a special place in the space of world epics, but the richness of its spiritual potential, a universal essence of its content, makes it much more common with the epics of other nations. What unites our epic with other epics? The answer to this question can be reduced to the following points:

First, the main idea of olonkhos as well as of other epics is the descent of the son of a deity celestial on earth to combat the evil spread on it. This struggle generates such sacred notions as the mind and conscience, honor and justice, truth and falsehood.

Secondly, olonkho as well as in other epics, have the great idea of planetary unity and solidarity of the people of the median world, *i.e.* Mankind. The meaning of all acts of protagonists of epics is to unite their ethnic group, nation and maintain interethnic harmony, peaceful coexistence and cooperation among the nations. This is one of the core ideas of the epic. Greatness of olonkho protagonists is precisely in their nobility and generosity, their remarkable ability to find the best in the achievements of other nations, giving them a helping hand in difficult times.

Third, in olonkho as well as in other epics, there is the idea of humanism, generosity and tolerance. One of the main topics of the epic is the eternal struggle between good and evil with the triumph of humanism and philanthropy which are deeply intrinsic properties of human nature and are personified by the epics protagonists.

Fourth, olonkho, as well as other epics, are consistently developing the idea of protecting and strengthening their family, tribe and often of statehood. This is the eternal topic of the epic and life of our ancestors was entirely permeated by this noble and patriotic idea.

Fifthly, olonkho, as well as other epics, have the idea of hard, tireless work and search for knowledge for the sake of wealth and prosperity. The epic is dominated by the best, the wise men of that time, heroes of the epic reach success and with their help.

Sixth, olonkho, as well as other epics, reflect the idea of harmony with nature. Reverent attitude towards nature, natural and cultural sights, the ability to live with them in harmony is the cornerstone of traditional philosophy of life and environmental ethics, inherent to all the nations of the world. Today it is one of the most urgent problems of preservation and use of enduring values of traditional culture root systems.

In general olonkho as other world epics has enormous spiritual potential impact on society. Epic tradition is seamlessly and fully connected with the life and art, the history of the nation and the world, that's why it offers a unique collective spiritual image created by its people. But it is the presentation on the form of epic narration. It is at this level as we enter the world of inclusive epic space: ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, Greek "Iliad" and "Odyssey", German "Nibelungenlied", Finnish "Kalevala", Russian "Bylinas", "Tales of Hiawatha" by American Indians, great epics "Manas"; "Djanga", "Geseriady", etc by Turko-Mongol peoples. And our great epic "Nyurgun Bootur Swift" of "Olonkholand" is it able to represent our Yakutia and our nation to the entire world, isn't it? And this is the common universal mission of all the epics of the world which proclaims: "Life on Earth continues."

Consolidation of position of Yakut heroic epic in the space of world epics is promoted by the translation of olonkho texts into world languages. Until recently we had olonkho translations into Russian, the most outstanding of which is that of olonkho "Nyurgun Bootur Swift" by P.A. Oyunsky translated by V.V. Derzhavin and published in 1975 (excellent translator of Oriental epics) that maximally preserves the atmosphere of the original olonkho text and rendering its flavor; in 1985 olonkho "Obstinate Kulun Kullustuur" by I.G. Timofeev-Teplouhov was published in Russian language, olonkho "Muldyu Bege" by D.M. Govorov was published in 2010, in 2013 were published "Kyys Debiliye" by N.P. Burnashev (1993), "Mighty Er Sogotokh" by V.A. Karataev (1996), "Girl the warrior Kyys Debiliye" by P.P. Yadrikhisnky (2011), "Eles Bootur" (2002), etc.

As to olonkhos' translation into foreign languages, there are translations of individual texts of epic heritage, but they are of a little significance; olonkho "Diuluruyar Nyurgun Bootur" by K.G. Orosin was published in Turkish. English translation of "Diuluruyar Nyurgun Bootur" by P.A. Oyunsky, published by "Globa Books" was born in 2013. This edition will break the situation and

Yakut epic will be available for English-speaking part of the world and take its rightful niche in epic space of the world, will be one of the finest examples of epic world heritage. Olonkho by P.A. Oyunsky is also translated into Slovak (2012); olonkho "Eles Bootur" by P.V. Ogotoev is translated into English (2002), French (2013), German, Turkish and Korean [11].

If we look closely, recent scientific study of Olonkho, publication of texts of its individual monuments is marked by new achievements [12]. First of all, it has been increased its understanding as a kind of reflection of the history of human tribe since the peopling of the Earth, the Middle World. The storyline, describing the life and struggle of the ancient people on Earth, has been traced. The Human, with his multiple feats and exploits in the name of justice and truth of life, is in the heart of all events. The struggle of the protagonist which, using various figures of speech and energy of narration, is estimated as the incarnation of the human tribe destiny, the fate of the native people. He is endowed with high qualities of a hero, which puts him on the level of human values. They are exemplary, worth of distribution and together create a high standard of spiritual potential, inherent to Olonkho. It should be used in society. This is the main result of expert sinepic who restored the heritage of illiterate Yakut olonkhosuts who had created and handed down to us this outstanding epic creation, which was proclaimed by UNESCO the Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of mankind in 2005. It appears to us as "the phenomenon of folk art, which is characterized by certain aesthetic regularities and represents a peculiar art world" Olonkho is a unique phenomenon that becomes heritage of all the Mankind [13].

### CONCLUSION

Specialists evaluated it as a special genre of Yakut folklore, whose origin is attributed to the formation of ethnic picture of the world in Central Asia and South Siberia. Hunnish sources of olonkho are identified; his ethnic community with the epics of Turko-Mongol peoples is emphasized.

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