
THE YAKUT HEROIC EPIC

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Olonkho is the general genre term of heroic epic, which belongs to the Yakut people (self-designation – Sakha), the northernmost Turkic people, inhabiting the basin of one of the greatest rivers – the Lena river since 18th century. The Yakut people are known as the northernmost cattle-breeders in the world – they bred cattle and horses. They also knew blacksmithing well. They led a sedentary life. In the 18th century they entered Russia. At the present time the Yakut live in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), which is part of the Russian Federation. According to the census of 2010, their population was about 470,000 people.

Olonkho is the greatest epic genre of the Yakut folklore. It tells about heroic deeds of epical *booturs* (heroes), which they did to protect their motherland, friends, for the peaceful life on earth, happy future of their children and grandchildren. Usually the heroes fight with the evil heroes – *abaahy* tribes. In the specialists' opinion, *Olonkho* is also a genre of the oral lore.

The term *Olonkho* also stands for separate folk tales (stories), which are the wealth of epic heritage. The performers are called *olonkhosut*, they have special abilities of improvisation, phenomenal memory and different world-view. *Olonkhosut* is the master of the native language, it is his rich and colorful language which makes *Olonkho* the art. The energy of his language is so incredible, that it wakes a poet in each Yakut man.

One of the founders of the Yakut literature and *Olonkho* expert Alexey Kulakovsky described the atmosphere of perception created by the *olonkhosut* singing: "Imagine the Yakut family, listening to the storyteller (*olonkhosut*) during the long winter night. Everybody – old and young – is sitting around him like hungry children around their mother. Here comes the old man, who enjoys most having rest on his bed. Nothing, except his favorite story, could make him leave the warm

bed. Here comes the father of the family, the middle-aged man with a practical world-view, who is not interested in such fun as *ostuorua* (fairytales), who is tired after hard work and wants to have rest. Here sits their mother with her sewing, tired of work and everyday troubles. She wants to sleep too, she wakes up first and goes to bed at the last. She is the one who works the hardest. Here come the children, who sit still, here are the teenagers, who do not understand the language of poetry well, but enjoyed the plot and imagination of the story. Here is the guest, who has to wake up early and set out for a long way."

They listen to the story from the early evening till the "predawn sleep", which takes 13-14 hours. (Sometimes rich people asked *olonkhusut* to tell stories for three days and three nights with breaks for sleep and meals). Everybody listens breathlessly, fascinated with it, trying not to breathe a word. Despite the fact, that the Yakuts are rather apathetic people with cold temper, caused by the cold weather... "Everybody has forgotten about their problems, their grief and entered the magic and wonderful world of enchanting dreams... The story-teller, as the real poet, is fascinated most of all: his eyes are closed, so he could cast aside the sinful earth with its everyday troubles and prose; he sticks finger on the ear, so his singing could sound louder; his body moves in time to the singing. He forgets about sleep, rest, about everything in the world... The story-teller completely changes in the eyes of the listeners: he is not the man they used to know, he is some supernatural beautiful creature with a mysterious halo".

Kulakovsky explains why *olonkhusut* makes such an impression on listeners. He says: "They all have the same plot (*Olonkho*): the one from the good spirits – "the warrior of light" – fights with the one from the evil spirits – "the warrior of the dark" – for the beautiful girl and after all he overcomes obstacles and wins. The fantasy of the story is boundless: it leaves behind even the imagination of the *Arabian Nights*. But these benefits fade in front of the language of fairy-tales: this language is poetic, colorful and full of challenging comparisons and repetitions, pleasant to the Yakuts, it is figurative and contains a lot of words, which is peculiar only to fairy-tales and songs". I would add for myself: the language of *Olonkho* borders with the generally accepted principles of belles-lettres.

I have made such a long quotation only because its author so realistically described that unique impression, which *olonkhusut* makes on people: they become affected by his imagination and the power of his art. The professional performance of *Olonkho* always excites general

admiration, it makes *olonkhosut* a great man in the eyes of his listeners, people adore and respect him. Apparently, this may be due to the fact that *Olonkho* is performed by the one man from the beginning till the end, so this man acts all the roles and creates the theater of one man!

It is well-known that every *olonkhosut* has several *Olonkho* in his repertoire – from couple to dozens. For example, in the 1920's it was recorded that Petr Kolosov from the West Kangalassky *ulus* knew 46 *Olonkho*. It is a phenomenon, if we take into consideration different sizes. *Olonkho* of D.M. Govorov *Erbekhte* *Bergen* (*Erbekhte* the Keen) has about 20,000 verse lines, the main epic of the Yakut people *Nurgun Botur the Swift* has more than 36,000 verse lines, and *Olonkho* of R.P. Alexeev *Alaatyыр Ala Tuigun* contains 49,203 verse lines! There were cases when *olonkhosuts* competed with each other. According to the famous Polish leader, ethnographer V.L. Seroshevsky, who was exiled to the Yakut region in the 1880's, the story-teller Manchary, who lived in Verlhoyansky *ulus*, knew *Olonkho*, which was performed for the whole month.

None of the experts could count how many *Olonkho* were there during his lifetime, it was impossible to find out. We mean that there were countless numbers, each administrative district used to have several *olonkhosuts*, with their own *Olonkho*. We should bear in mind that the story-telling has been transferred from father to son for generations. Only during the Soviet period, it lost its popularity. One more thing that caused it was that: *Olonkho* was the masterpiece of non-literate people, so the belles-lettres changed the life environment of *Olonkho*, reduced the number of its followers. Moreover it caused the danger of its extinction! By the end of the 20th century there were only two practicing *olonkhosuts* in the huge territory of the Republic. Compare it with the situation in 1941 and 1946, when during the expedition the Language, Literature and History Research Institute had found 83 *olonkhosuts* and 396 *Olonkho* in 13 regions of the Republic.

During the last two decades due to democratization, people became interested in their own ethnic history and mentality, i.e. the people's psychology, way of thinking, traditional beliefs, customs etc. The national revival results in realization of the fact that the epic has potential power to revive the intellectual culture. The creators of *Olonkho* put in it their dreams of happy life on the earth. This bright idea matches the intentions of our time, it will bring us new thoughts, more substantive and mature. Moreover it will help us to live in peace with other people and... with ourselves. All the charm and benefits of *Olonkho* "work for" the Human.

The realization of this fact became the moment that saved the future of the epic heritage. Both the scientists and society took a second look at the use of fundamental benefits of the native epic. The preservation, development and use of *Olonkho* became common concern. First of all, we looked for the real story-tellers who somehow managed to save their art. Theorists of epic had found about a dozen *olonkhosuts*, who still could compose and perform the epic. There is a reason to say that we still have connection with our tradition. Our work goes on and perhaps we will find something else.

This work touches another problem – the problem of copying the preserved manuscripts of *Olonkho*. Usually folk researchers find such manuscripts in family archives. In most cases the owners of manuscripts present it to the researchers. So for two years the Olonkho Research Institute of the NEFU has found the manuscripts of such previously unknown *Olonkho* as *Khangalas Botur*, *Khabytta Bergen*, *Khorula Botur*, *Odun Chuuraa*. The records conform the rules of traditional *Olonkho*, although we can notice some modern influence, especially in its language.

The preservation of the epic heritage is connected with the studies of archival recordings. The archive of the Yakut National Centre of the Siberian Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences contains the early manuscripts of *Olonkho*, recorded in 1930-40's by the expedition participants. There are 150 full records of *Olonkho* and about 80 extracts and breviaries. It is an incredibly rich collection of the Yakut heroic epic masterpieces. Due to this collection our experts carry out scientific research of the Yakut epic heritage. It makes the ground for traditional works of epic theorists I.V. Pukhov–*The Yakut Heroic Epic Olonkho: The main images* (Moscow, 1962), N.V. Emelyanov–*The plots of the Yakut olonkho* (Moscow, 1980), *The plots of the early Yakut Olonkho* (Moscow, 1983) and *The plots of Olonkho about the ancestors* (Moscow, 1990). This collection is the basis for the publication of 12 volumes of epic *Sakha Boturs*. They are: *Alaatyyr Ala Tuigun* of R.N. Alexeev, *Toyon Nurgun* of S.N. Karataev, *Dyyrai Bergen* of U.G. Nokhsorov, *Uol Duolan the Warrior* of M.Z. Martynov, *Kyys Juuraya* of G.V. Duyakov, *Uluu Daaryn the Warrior* of M.T. Sharaborin-Kumaarov, etc.

We should note that these publications carry on the tradition, established in the beginning of the 20th century by E.K. Pekarsky's *The Samples of the Yakut national literature* in three volumes and eight editions (1907-1918) of S.V. Yastremsky's *The samples of the Yakut national literature* (1929) and other works, published in the 1930-40's. A special place among

the publications of the masterpieces of epic heritage belongs to the *Olonkho Nurgun Botur the Swift* – one of the best and most popular *Yakut Olonkho*. One of the variants of this epic recorded by K.G. Orosin was published in 1907 by E.K. Pekarsky, then it was republished in 1947 by G.U. Ergis; the other variant of P.A. Oiunsky was published in 1962 in the 4-6 volumes of his collected edition, and in 2003 the full text in the Yakut language was published. In 1975 this outstanding epic was translated into Russian by V.V. Derzhavin – the best translator of epic of the peoples of the East. This translation was an achievement, as it helped the Russian readers to get the whole view of such masterpiece of the Yakut epic heritage. He preserved the atmosphere of the *Olonkho* original text and its color. The Russian translation of *Olonkho Kulun Kullustur the Obstinate*, published in 1985, is of exceptional interest too (translators are A.A. Popov, I.V. Pukhov). There are other translations too. These help Russian readers to know and understand the masterpieces of the Yakut epic heritage, as the richest masterpiece of oral folk arts, which has origins in Turkic-Mongolian peoples.

It is sure enough that the publications save the epic masterpieces for the future generations. Moreover, these are the source of knowledge for epic studies. Actually the new generation of epic theorists (V.V. Illarionov, P.N. Dmitriev, V.M. Nikiforov, T.V. Illarionova, A.N. Dmitrieva and others) study the unique features of ideological and imaginative content and poetic system of oral arts. Generally, the scientific study of *Olonkho* as the special genre of the Yakut folklore has a lot of new achievements. First of all, the understanding of *Olonkho*, as the unique history about human beings from the creation of the universe and settlement of “the Middle World”, has widened. It is the main plot of *Olonkho*, which describes the life and fights of the first human being on the earth. The human being is in the centre of all that. He performs exploits for justice and truth of life. The fight of the main character is represented as the picture of the fate of human beings, the future of their nation. He has all features of a hero. These features are the example for everybody else and also make a high standard of spiritual potential of *Olonkho*. It should be used by the society. This is the main result of the epic theorists’ work, which revived the heritage of illiterate Yakut *olonkhosuts*, the authors of outstanding epic masterpieces of universal importance. Unfortunately, there were times when communist ideologues considered *Olonkho* to be useless and archaic.

Of course, there are more problems which are to be solved and

investigated. One of these problems is the problem of the time and place of the Yakut heroic epic creation. This is important because the epic is historically firm reality with its own connections and traditions, so it is the core of epic culture, the reflection of national mind, the data for the studies of history, material and spiritual life in space and time. It is clear that we do not have to specify the exact time, even if it is recorded in written source. The reason is that the epic could not be created in one moment, its roots are hidden in the national mind, in its oral folk arts. Moreover, *Olonkho* is the masterpiece of illiterate people. We only know that it has southern origin, i.e. it was created before the ancient Yakut people came to the Lena river. However, the experts cannot find out when exactly the ancestors of the Yakuts came there. It is like endless circle.

The folklore specialist G.U. Ergis tried to answer this question. He supposes that the Yakuts have brought only “the rudiment” of *Olonkho*, so *Olonkho* has developed as the epic genre, when they settled here. Another author, the epic theorist I.V Pukhov tried to “find out the approximate time of creation of *Olonkho*”. He said that the similarity between *Olonkho* and the epic of Turkic-Mongolian people had appeared through the direct contact between them. In his opinion, *Olonkho* has the connection with the ancient Turkic people, dating back to the end of the first millennium, i.e. in 8th-9th centuries. The specification of time is a step forward in finding the date of *Olonkho* creation. Nowadays history has up-to-date and comparatively full information about the origin of the Turkic-Mongolian people in South Siberia. This information can form a basis for the dating of the Yakut epic creation.

As for the separation of the Yakut *Olonkho* from Turkic-Mongolian epic, the author of this article supposes that it could have happened in the middle of the 8th century and is connected with the year 745 AD, when Turkic Khagante broke up and the Uyghurs defeated the Eastern Khaganate. The ancestors of the Yakut people came to the present territory of Yakutia and lost its ties with the past. So the Yakut epic developed independently.

As we can see, the problem of *Olonkho* origin is not solved yet. One thing that we are sure of is that *Olonkho* has southern origins and is connected with Turkic-Mongolian people. Only complex studies with the use of historic and comparative analysis can answer this question.

On November 25, 2005, UNESCO proclaimed Yakut heroic epic *Olonkho* a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. It

proves the highest cultural value of this monument of oral folk arts and contribution of Yakut people to the world culture. This historical decision of UNESCO supposes the publication of the Yakut epic in the official languages of the world organization. So the main Yakut epic *Nurgun Botur the Swift* has been translated into English. It was published in 2013. Other masterpieces are also being translated into French, German, Korean and Japanese. *Olonkho* is a unique epic heritage of Yakut people, finally, it becomes the heritage of Humanity. Then the world will see that the volume, main point and unique character of *Olonkho* is equal to the such widely-known epics as ancient Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*, Indian *Ramayana*, Greek *Iliad* and *Odysseus*, Germanic *The Song of the Nibelungs*, Finnish *Kalevala*, Indian *The song of Hiawatha*, Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, Kalmyk epic *Jangar*.