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**YAKUT EPIC
(OLONKHO)
AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE SOUTH**

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PREFACE

In 1955 the book house of the Academy of Sciences of USSR has published “The history of the Yakut ASSR” (volume 1), written by the famous archeologist and academician A.P. Okladnikov. The author presented the history of the Yakut (Sakha) people from the paleolith to the 17th century, when Lensky region entered the Russian Empire. The third part of the work is of special interest, this part is about the early history of Yakut people and includes three parts: “The origin of the Yakut people”, “The early history of the Yakut people”, “The Yakut people on the Middle Lena before the Russians”. These parts suggest that in past the Yakut people were somehow related with steppe peoples of the South Siberia and Central Asia, first of all with Turkic-Mongolian people. The author analyses the concept of the Yakut people of the South, steppe relics in their economy and weapons, the elements of the southern culture in clothes and language of the Yakut people. However, the most interesting moment is the analysis of the Yakut heroic epic – Olonkho, which reflects the connection of the ancestors of the Yakut with the south and its people. The chapter, which deals with this moment, is called “The Yakut epic (Olonkho) and its connection with the South”.

The description of Olonkho by A.P. Okladnikov is one of the first attempts of the scientific evaluation of this national treasure of the Yakut people. He describes from the historical point of view, i.e. he touches the issues of olonkho origin and its place in the ancient culture of the southern ancestors of the Yakut people, the age of the Yakut epic and its relation to the epics of their southern and northern neighbors. In his opinion, “olonkho has appeared under conditions of close cultural and historical links and constant interaction of the Yakut ancestors with the nearest kin, the ancestors of Sayano-Altaiian tribes, and with the ancient Mongols”, as for the “northern neighbors”, the author thought that one cannot say that the Yakut epic is directly connected with their works, but the Yakut epic obviously has the main southern features.

The evaluation of the content and genre structure of the Yakut heroic epic is of immediate interest too. A.P. Okladnikov said that olonkho is not a story, but a huge poem with countless extra scenes, various descriptions and details, a complex narration, a real epic drama, a prosaic text, which a lot of colorful poetic insets – songs. According to him, the Yakut epic is a real piece of art; its colorful language differs from the everyday language, it is connected with its main content – mythological praise of deeds of our legendary ancestors in the form epic. Olonkho represents the deeds of the warriors as the fight with evil spirits for the peace on the Earth. That is why they all end up with the national ritual feast – **Esekh** – in honor of the supreme deities-protectors and creators of the mankind. In general, Yakut olonkho is a grand epic of thousands of poems. In this regard A.P. Okladnikov reminds the fact that olonkhosuts (story-tellers) used to perform heroic poems for many days, some of them – for the whole month. The colossal volume and monumental content of olonkho is amazing. Moreover, this grand poem is created by illiterate story-teller, who thinks about the creation of the universe, about space phenomena and the place of the human being in the world. A.P. Okladnikov wrote: “The poet



imagines the Universe in reflection of national fantasy and he sees the picture of all its worlds”.

A.P. Okladnikov evaluates cultural and historical meaning of the Yakut heroic epic in such way: “The outstanding value of the Yakut epic – olonkho – is defined by its wealth and variety of plots, numerous bright everyday details and general artistic merits”. He considers olonkho as the part of intellectual culture of the Yakut ancestors. He said that its samples took “special place among epics of Turkic and Mongolian peoples, because they were the monuments that carry the features of archaic period when heroic epics had been created”. In our opinion, it is the unique character of the Yakut heroic epic.

As is seen from above, the observation of A.P. Okladnikov concerning the Yakut heroic people is very significant development for the Yakut scientific epic studies. Its main advantage is that the Yakut epic is studied in the course of history and development of epic heritage of Turkic and Mongolian peoples of Siberia and Central Asia. His studies, issues on epic interpretation in particular, are still significant for us. However, we should keep in mind that his work was written in the middle of the 20th century when Marx and Lenin’s studies about social-economical formations prevailed. In this regard, it cannot go unnoticed that he tries to explain the origin of the epic within the primitive communal system. As a result, he did not give clear answers the questions about the time and ethnic origin of the Yakut epic, i.e. the questions that are still important to epic theorists and society. In is no coincidence that in 1962 the famous epic theorist I.V. Pukhov wrote: “the question about origin of the Yakut epic and its connections with epics of other Turkic-Mongolian peoples is the aim of the special research”. However, the work of A.P. Okladnikov is of great importance in grounding of scientific views on the Yakut heroic epic, in formation of the correct understanding of its historic and cultural significance as a part of spiritual culture of the Yakut people. Unfortunately, this work is still accessible only for Russian readers.

In November 25, 2005 UNESCO proclaimed the Yakut heroic epic the Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. It was very equitable decision that officially exalted the universal meaning of the Yakut heroic epic and its outstanding place in world’s epic heritage. This decision has brought the Yakut epic into line with such famous epics as ancient Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, Greek “Iliad” and “Odysseus”, Germanic “The song of the Nibelungs”, Finnish “Kalevala”, Russian “Bylina”, American Indians “The song of Hiawatha”. Unfortunately, the Yakut olonkho is still not a world-wide public domain. Several translations of olonkho into other languages does not change the situation. The world still does not have full view of the Yakut epic.

The Olonkho Research Institute of the M.K. Ammosov’s North-Eastern Federal University is about to change the current situation and makes the translation of olonkho one of its priority tasks. The main Yakut epic “Nurgun Botur the Swift” is being translated into English, French, German, Turkish, Korean, Japanese and other languages. At the same time the Institute is translating the research works on the Yakut epic, this will help the foreign reader to understand its historical peculiarities, its content and form, its language and style. In this respect, the research of A.P. Okladnikov can be very useful. We hope that the English reader will appreciate it.

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YAKUT EPIC (OLONKHO) AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE SOUTH

Naturally, the intellectual culture of the ancient Sakha people must have been related to their material culture. It becomes evident if one gains even passing knowledge of such elements of the ancient Yakut culture as their language and epic, which may add to the general idea of what the cultural level of the ancient ancestors of the Sakha people was, before they settled in the middle reaches of the Lena River.

Let's begin with the epic.

The epic is known for being very important to understand history, culture and the past of a certain ethnic group.

Olonkho possesses an outstanding value, with its rich variety of plots, abundance of vivid everyday life details, and general artistic features.

Fancifully, Olonkho combines fantastic imagination and magnificent images from the ancient myths with realistic pictures of life.

Logical, yet sophisticated and complex, with various included episodes, olonkho plots develop into grandiose epics, dozens of thousands lines long. Yakut olonkho-tellers perform their heroic poems for several evenings. Manchaary, the famous Verkhoyansk area olonkho-teller, said he knew an olonkho to be told for a month. A monumental poem, written from the words of old Govorov, the famous contemporary olonkho-teller, alone made a book of 25 printer's sheets.¹

This richness of the Yakut epic is explained by the original historical situation which the Sakha people existed in for several centuries.

The heroic epic, being cultural heritage of the very distant past, was best preserved by Asian peoples, who had neither a written language nor close connections with the advanced centres of the East with rich literary traditions.

Thus, these peoples lived under long-term and stable conditions, which gave rise to traditional forms of the heroic epic and promoted its further development. Moreover, there was no written language or literature to corrupt the epic tradition, influence it, change its contents, and substitute epic works by more refined and sophisticated literary works.

Due to these circumstances, Yakut people have preserved a voluminous store of epic works, valuable both in terms of artistic merits and as a source of historical information.

¹ D.M. Govorov. *Myulju Bogo. Yakutsky geroichesky epos olonkho* (Myulju Bogo. Yakut heroic epic olonkho). Moscow, 1938.



From the historical point of view, most researches focus on Olonkho genesis and its place in the ancient culture of Yakut ancient ancestors, how deep are the roots of the Yakut epic and how it relates to the epic tradition of southern and northern neighbours of the Yakut people.

As for the local elements, Olonkho does have some indisputably local, northern elements. First of all, they are local toponyms - the rivers Olenyok, Sitta, Kamchatka; various landscape features; peculiar economy and everyday life elements.

For example, one of olonkhos provides an extremely realistic description of a country where certain events take place:

«Northbound of the house,
Like ninety
Crowded grand old men,
There stood like protruding capes
Tall larch-trees.
Eastbound of the house,
Like still hale old women,
Gathered in a crowd,
Starting a dance,
There stood pine-trees.
To go further,
On the left side of the house,
Like noble wives
In smart dresses,
Hand in hand,
Row after row,
There could be seen
Thick-leaved birch-trees.
A winged creature
Of the high sky —
A white crane,
Without rest
Seven days and nights,
Cleaving the air with wings
Would not reach the edge
Of those vast steppes —
Dry and elevated
There lay they.
A black raven,
A child of the frosty sky,
Three days and night
Has never crossed
From the edge to the edge,
With gaps and gullies
The taiga thickets.



But even in the depth of the forest,
Multi-branchy,
Soft grass
Found its way.
Here and there on the run
Red sand,
On the settled
Green silt
Nine-branchy
Horsetail grass
Grew high.
As if lain with
Creamy horses skins,
Light-foggy glades
Were seen,
There were motley flowers.
As if covered with
Bay horses skins,
Transverse capes
Protruded
With a dark hem
Of a larch-tree forest.
The trees were decorated
With looming branches,
Thin stems
Interlaced
In a rich ornament.
There ran a dark-water river
*With abrupt banks.*¹

Any olonkho-teller was able to describe something without leaving his tent - *uraha*. Even enormously vast steppes, which he was singing about, might have been, in fact, a merely hyperbolic reflection of broad *alaas* valleys and steppe-like landscapes at the Lena River in the mirror of the poetic imagination.

A careful study of Olonkho also reveals certain similarities with folklore of the indigenous peoples of the North: in the form, the performing style and the contents, some motifs or plots.

«An oral literature» of the ancient Northern paleo-Asiatic tribes, with authors like the Yakut epic, also boasts rather voluminous epic works and story-tellers able to continue «the same story for a whole night and even a row of nights like Scheherazade.»

¹ Archive of the Yakut branch, USSR Academy of Sciences, Fund of Folklore, Legends and Myths Recording: «The Lena Songs» (hereinafter referred to as «The Lena Songs»).



Their works are not only «rich in grandiose images and sophisticated adventures, but also rise to the heroic epic».¹

Among the mythological images of the paleo-Asiatic folklore, there are those close to olonkho images, for example, the world tree standing in the middle of the ocean like the Yakut *Aal-Luuk* Tree, or the Bird Gates to the Country of Bird Joy. There, the solid sky edge falls on the ground and rebounds so fast that birds cannot fly through, and the sky trap pinches the rear ones. Yakut people had the same idea of the land inhabited by man, they believed that the sky and the earth edges chatter against each other like jaws of a raging stallion.

When listening to Chukchi tales, «the audience form a chorus inspiring the teller by their silent sympathy and encouraging him in the most dramatic moments by prescribed exclamations like «ukh», «true», «right», and «indeed».²

As involved is the Yakut olonkho-tellers' audience. People echo their admired performer by short exclamations «noh'.

The academic literature has described events of collective performance of Olonkho, including with four olonkho-tellers taking turns.

Chukchi epic heroes often have the same characteristics as the Yakut *bogatyrs*; they are usually as courageous warriors.

However, in general, those works represent two different cultural and ethnic world-views.

On the one hand, there is depicted the original world of sea creature hunters and spiritually related tundra reindeer herders; on the other - we see semi-settled cattle breeders, linked in their past to more southern countries and more developed cattle breeding cultures of Central Asia.

And this difference is manifested not only in certain everyday life details of the real ethnographic and natural background where the events depicted take place, but rather in common images, motifs and plot details, such as the world tree image, mentioned above.

The Yakut people see it as the sacred tree connecting all three worlds of the universe. The life-giving liquid of abundance drips from its branches. The milk-white lake, a symbol of the world ocean, lies at its foot. When the tree opens up, there comes the beneficial Goddess, the owner of the universe, who blesses the main hero. The tree is a light image of the heavenly grace, happiness, and abundance.

The Chukchi world tree is absolutely different. It stands in the middle of the cold ocean. There is a black hollow in the middle of the trunk. It is inhabited by a wicked spirit. The tree branches are sown with sharp thorns and boughs. With every tide, the tree lies down and sinks into the deep. When it rises, it becomes white with fish.

¹ V.G. Bogoraz. *Narodnaya literatura paeloaziatov* (Traditional Literature of Paleo-Asiatic Peoples). «Eastern Literature». Collection of Works, vol. 1. Edition «World Literature», 1919, p. 54.

² Ibid, p. 53



Neither can we relate the Yakut epic directly to works by the nearest northern neighbours of the Yakut people - former Tungus, who forgot their own language, still preserving their old life style and reindeer herding, sometimes referred to as «Northern Yakuts» in the lower reaches of the Lena River and west of it.

This *khosun* epic of the North consists of simple historical legends about ancient warriors - *khosuns* - and their wars with *khosuns* from neighbouring tribes.

In fact, these tribes are almost the same, except for minor details, for example, particular kinds of tattoo. Their epic depicts a detailed everyday life of common hunters and forest-tundra reindeer herders. Expressively, yet not exaggerating, it describes their interrelations, tells about events, which definitely took place in the past. The events are somewhat embellished and mixed with mythological stories of the ancient times and the universal motifs, but their realistic nucleus remains.

It is rather oral chronicles than a piece of creative epic work, unlike the Yakut heroic poems. The characters, too, are not a fruit of people's imagination but, most likely, real warriors of the past.

In contrast, the Yakut *Olonkho* shows obvious traces of the main southern layer, traced in the other spheres of the Sakha culture.

However, it does not mean that the Yakut epic lacks individuality. On the contrary, all researchers note strongly pronounced originality of the Yakut epic, its unparalleled character, in comparison with other known ethnic works by the rest Asian peoples.

Like any other epic, and it is only natural, the Yakut epic reflects the original face of the ethnic group which has created it, peculiarities of its cultural development and historical fate.

Nevertheless, in *Olonkho*, we can trace the features which refer to the world of the steppe tribes and peoples, most close to the Yakut people in terms of culture.

By its name, the Yakut heroic epic is directly related to the Buryat-Mongol epic - *ontkho*.¹

By its contents and form, the Yakut epic has common features with the epic tradition other related groups - southern Siberian tribes and Central Asian countries.²

Usually, *Olonkho* starts with a traditional introduction – prologue, which serves the stage and scenery for an epic drama being performed, as well as the background for happening events.

Like in the common theatrical scenery, a listener visualizes the blooming earth, its mountains and waters, numerous animals inhabiting this wonderful epic landscape. In the middle of the wide area, there is a tall oak-tree or a

¹ E.K. Pekarsky. Yakut Language Dictionary, p. 3121.

² E.K. Pekarsky. Yakutskaya skazka (Yakut tale) // «S.F.Oldenburger. 50th anniversary of academic and social activity, 1882-1932». Leningrad, 1934, p. 924.



branchy birch-tree. At its foot there is a deep lake, with horse and cattle herds wandering around it. Flocks of birds lay rows of colourful eggs. Quadrupled animals, which “have found a refuge to propagate”, fuss and bustle around.

But this is neither a usual view, nor a romantically embellished, hyperbolized picture of a real beautiful corner on the Earth.

In his mind, the poet creates a magnificent image of the universe, reflecting in the mirror of the people’s fantasy, an imaginary picture of all the worlds.

The action begins “in our blessed world, surrounded by lying mountains – to prevent it from shifting; reinforced by rising mountains – to prevent it from dangling; edged with rocky mountains – to prevent it from swaying; where the top is the earth, water in the middle, covered with turf.

“A frozen sea is around, a warm sea in the east, the Arat sea below, push it – it will not sway, tread on it – it will not sag, trample it down – it will not reel,” – that is how the poet defines the Middle World space, our mother earth.

To paint its idealized image, he uses bright colours.

“What vastness, what width of this shining land. What stretch, what immensity of this country.

“From the eastern slopes come down threads, enringing this beautiful land, from the western slopes climb down its magnificent meadows, from the northern slopes step down its luxuriant fields, from the southern slopes slip down its green silky valleys, the gaps lie like tin plates, the lakes are white with no shadows upon them, covered with milky skin, with cottage-cheese shores, with marshes of cream, the black boulders – it is butter with fermented milk, the forest lakes –butter, the mountains – bowels fat, the rocks – abdominal fat, there is horsetail grass reaching a large horse’s head, the green sedge reading a big horse’s swinging forelock; the mountain sedge reaches a splendid horse’s temple, the luxuriant grass – to a glorious horse’s knees; the white willows are like silver plaits, the talina – like silver twisted threads; the birch-trees stand smart, surrounded by willows, the rods are lined with dwarf birch-trees.

“There is never winter, but summer all the year round in this country. There are no nights, but the light time all the day in this land.

“The sun never sets there, the crescent never dies out, broad-chest cockerels never fly away, ringing-voice cuckoos never stop singing, turtle-doves never go silent, white-sided ducks never fly and curlews never go.¹

In the middle of the universe, in the centre of the Middle World, there stands high the colossal Tree of Life, created for the happiness of everyone living on the earth.

Lovingly, the poet depicts its clear shape:

¹ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), p. 56.



“At the top of the cape,
Tall and protruding,
Making friends
With black whirlwinds —
Spirits of the sacrificed cattle,
There grew alone a branchy
Sacred tree of happiness —
With roots elevated,
With the bark peeling off easily,
With clear-cut branches
And the top slightly tilted.
There hung,
Like vessels for kumis
With bottoms up
Its silver cones.
On the eastern hill,
From the cone ends,
Like a white ptarmigan
There came down on earth
Foamy moisture.
Like hair bunches
From tail and mane
Of horses,
Tied together in a knot,
There hung
Silky
Green branches of conifer,
Always, the foam
Dipped in drops
The size of a male ptarmigan.
From its branch
Pointing to the west
This stream
Oozed down
To the sacred land,
Down to three fathoms
It dug the mother land,
Making a clean
Milky lake.
Feeding on this tree’s juice,,
Bathing in its life-giving stream,
The weak became strong,
The small grew stout,
The sick became healthy.
That was the aim
Of that king tree,



Blessed and created
For the benefit
*Of all living beings.*¹

This wonderful tree visually unites all three worlds of the universe. Its roots go down to the hell, then, scared off by the cold and dirt of the ice world, they curve back to become a post for hanging the dishware with cream for the master and mistress of the cattle. The top of that mighty tree reaches the skies. Passing the sky where the master of the stumbling people and the restive cattle lives, it reaches the luminous land of Urun Aiy Toyon to become his horse-tethering post.

At the tethering post, the gods gather for feasts, they drink for seven days and nights, passing vessels and exchanging cups. Like an island of birch-trees, the gods build a fence at the scared tree top. And they say that there is evidence of that Olympic feast: the drops babble and purl, falling on the ground to become the milky kale, never covered with a skin. . .

However, like Homer, olonkho-tellers pay little attention to what is going in the Upper World and the Under World afterwards. They focus on the Middle World and its inhabitants. Olonkho depicts the Middle World as a heavenly land of the Golden Age, when:

“The eastern hill
Served home to the Mother Goddess,
The western – to the one granting blessings,
The southern – to the eagle Spirit;
And happiness itself
Inhabited the northern hill.
At the steppe edges
Young mares
Neighed loud.
At the southern valleys
Young stallions
Crowded with ringing neigh.
On the eastern valleys
Mature mares
With stained nostrils and
With entangled mane
Gathered in herds, neighing tenderly.
Among the western valleys
Sent by the Aiyhyt Queen
Outstanding bulls
With yard-long horns
Wandered, howling boomingly.
And at the southern fields –
Young cows

¹ The Lena songs, pp. 28-29.



With smart tails,
With spotted foreheads,
Born by the blessing
Of nine Choi-Bagarakh,
Gave birth
With inviting mooing.
It seemed that
By that abundant,
Countless wealth
The valleys were full,
The meadows became full,
There was no empty land,
*No steppes unused.*¹

In this wonderful land, as Sakha olonkho-tellers sing, there was always summer, the cuckoo, a bird of love and happiness, never stopped singing, blue-gray doves never stopped mourning; cockerels and buzzards never flew away, and eagles never stopped squawking.

There was neither sin, illness, nor death itself in that country.

“That cherished place,
When original people
Did not know neither grave sins,
No grievous crimes...
Always saw
The lights of the Sun-Deity,
Of the Thunder-Deity,
The thunder would grumble,
The lightnings would flash.
That was the purifying celestial fire,
And at those times
People never knew
Sickness, diseases or maladies.
Neither they knew of the death.
The cough and infection failed to reach them,
In the backyard
The calves did not die of starvation,
In the horse barn
The foals did not die of anthrax”.²

The Sakha legend authors depict the childhood of the universe, the Golden Age, when the world had just appeared of the darkness and fog.

The same introductory picture, with all the magnificent images, can be found in other epics of the Siberian peoples.

^{1, 2}The Lena Songs, pp. 28-29.



In Altai legends we see the same image of a prosperous country, silky-blue Altai with yellow dawns, where cuckoos never stop singing, the forest is always green, and at the foot of sixty mountains there are seventy lakes and a copper-yellow tree with dark clouds whirling around its branches, resembling huge bird nests.

This image is common for Buryat *uligers* (epic legends), as well. Like in Yakut epic, there is always grace-filled summer, the kingdom of prosperity and happiness, lambs and kids do not die. Over the valleys luxuriant with flowers there rises the world tree - a mighty larch-tree, there lies a cold ocean.

This cosmic image of the universe is even brighter in introductions to Mongol-Oirat legends. They begin with as magnificent panorama of a wonderful country, where «there rises the five-headed sacred Khangai, formed at once without any dropping rocks, there rise Altai mountains, formed together without any passages» There lie thirty-three great vast mountains which a warrior can not come round”.¹

In this “happy and beautiful motherland”, the country of eternal summer, there curl ten great healing lakes, seas and ponds, there flow one hundred great rivers, the birds always greet the sun, “hoopoes and cuckoos sing, whirling in flocks”, the grass is always green, “the juniper and sandal shrubs stand tight, the fruit and sandal trees swing and sway”. This fairy country sees the life in full swing, “powerful wild animals roar, antelopes of seventy colours graze, following each other”. Tigers and bears run and play.

As abundant are domestic animals. A herd of bronze-cream horses, having grown and multiplied on the shores of eight healing seas, has covered the yellow valleys. The Mongol singer depicts this incredible abundance with the same passion of a true cattle breeder, like Yakut olonkho-tellers: “The horses have grown up, waving their manes, they graze on the surface of the golden land, pasture, cutting the grass with their sharp teeth. Stallions and mares walk side by side; foals, yearlings and two-year olds, wander among their fellows, neighing. The horses neigh, the sound is ringing and merry like swan voices, they talk to each other in voices of wild horses”.

The shadowy slopes of the white Khangai saw countless herds of camels, black bulls roaring in the gaps. Along with them “shell-white sheep grew, filling thirteen mountain passes of Altai... so many years had passed since they lost count, uncertainly many had passed, when people forgot their number”.

The miraculous Khangai in Mongol legends, with all its numerous population, corresponds to the universe of the Yakut epic. There are matches to the milky lake with reviving water of the Yakut Olonkho, all those “white full seas”, babbling streams and rivers with cool water, healing from all diseases.

¹ B.Ya. Vladimirtsov. *Mongolo-ortaisky geroichesky epos* (Mongol-Ortai Heroic epic). Moscow, 1926, p. 56.



The only thing missing is the sacred centre of the inverse, the magnificent world tree, but it is substituted by the sandal tree woods and pompous Buddhist temples.

However, the description of the splendid country in heroic Yakut poems, lie in legends of the related peoples, is solely a decorative background for further narration the activity of the main character, the poem's hero.

He is the best of men, the first of the *Urankhai* Sakha. At the same time, he is a lonely person with no parents and unknown origin.

“He knew neither respectable father-lord, no respectable mother-lady”, the poem says.

“Had I fallen from the skies, I would be covered in hoarfrost – he reflects – had I climbed up from the Under World, I would be covered in soil”.

“The genius of land, feeder and creator lady. You, nine handsome lads, decorating the grass. You, eight girls, singing hymns, decorating the land with your outfits, - thus he addresses the spirits of his area. Who am I by blood, whose womb did I come from? What deity created me? What is my fate? The White Creator God, living at the milky lake with milk-white shores, is he my father?”

But neither the spirits of his area can answer his questions.

The secret did not come out until one day when suddenly the thunder rumbled, the heavy rain started, and white tattered clouds, “as if headed and legged”, gathered rapidly from the four edges of the sky. The sky cracked open and there arrived three lads with white batons on three milky-white horses – “the God's stirrup holders”.

They announced that they arrived as “entrusted heralds”, “special messengers”. The White God, your grandfather and his wife “the sun – her eye, a kumis leather bottle – her bosoms, the fair respectable Lady, your grandmother, have sent us to convey their will”, they said”.¹

The hero is supposed to get from the ancestor of the nine blacksmiths an armor of seven layers of rigid iron, a valley-stretch-long rattling bow, feathery burning arrows and two-hundred-stone-heavy mace. In exchange, he must bring to the blacksmith a daughter of Arsan Dolai, the mighty lord of the Under World, that being the first of his heroic deeds. But this is just a beginning, or rather a side story.

His main mission is revealed by deities having created him: the White Lord (Urun Aiy Toyon) and his wife (Kubei Khotun).

The same white lads tell him on behalf of the deities that at the very edge of the earth, “where the sky is so wide that it looms like crane's feathers, and the Under World outcrops like a bow”, there lives the Copper Divine Lord with nine sons and eight daughters, the White Ukeiden being the best of them.

“This woman is the commission of the eight deities, Your grandfather

¹ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), pp. 14-15.



the Master of Doom, pointed at her, your grandmother said: this is your destiny, go there and give birth to children, coming late in your life; breed up the cattle, late in your life; in summer, put four happy poles with branches; in winter dig in eight main logs; ignite the sacred fire, build a smart house”.¹

That was the vision of the hero’s destiny and life from the top.

The hero is created by the deities and is their creature – the one who is chosen to implement the divine will: to become the founder of mankind and abundant cattle.

As a matter of fact, the olonkho-teller sees him as the first man on the earth, like Adam in the Bible; yet the biblical hero dates back to a later age, when there is already an idea of the mankind as a whole, uniting all the peoples, whereas Er Sogotokh – Elley of the Yakut epic – belongs to the age when a notion of “man” or “real man” is limited to own kin and tribe.

A similar image of a single ancestor is typical of the legends of other steppe peoples of Asia. The Altai people have “the orphan Yuskuzek” or Kulakchin, who describes himself as follows: “I do not know my father, I do not a mother having breast-fed me. I grew up an orphan, wandering alone from one camp to another, my horse is crimson-red, and my name is Kulakchin”.²

Buryat Alamji Mergen appeared on the earth “not inhabited by people, with no horse legs treading on it”. The legend does not mention either his father or mother, apparently, they did not exist at all: “He was born at the foot of a great black mountain at the black sea, they say, - “I was born a human being, a son of a human being, a man by the will of Esege Malan”, - he said after being born”.³

It is significant that he is not a khan, a prince or feudal. It is also remarkable that the main epic hero is depicted as a fighter against the evil and violence for the triumph of the good. His deeds of valour are aimed against troubles and monsters, threatening him and his people. He does not strive for laying his hands on somebody’s property or authority over people; on contrary, he wishes them happiness and joy.

Olonkho heroes do not dream about invading other countries or enslaving people, or capturing their property. Even the hostile diabolic warriors and masters of the Under World have no other desires but to snatch a woman from the Middle World or to harm and destroy the kin of human beings.

“This very middle grey-spotted world,
With waters evaporating and vanishing,

¹ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), pp. 21-22.

² *Altayskie skazki* (Altai tales). Novosibirsk, 1937, p. 165. – *Oirotskie narodnye skazki: Temir-Sanaa, Keler-Kush, Kulak-chin, Kara-Maas* (Oirat folk tales: Temir-Sanaa, Keler-Kush, Kulak-chin, Kara-Maas). Novosibirsk, 1940, p. 165.

³ Alamji-Mergen Buryat epic. Moscow – Leningrad. 1936.



With trees falling and depopulating,
And its happy people and cattle,
Its huge wealth,
Its vast expanses,
Its jubilant happiness
Are being destroyed by him — the master
Of the Under World of twenty-seven tribes, —
The Old Arjang Dolan Ogonnor
With his wife Ala Buurai, the one
With a wooden chunk on her legs —
They, living at the very bottom
Of the three underground countries Nuken Yoden,
Deliberately sending
The wizards of the deep country,
The villains of that nook,
The frauds of the Under World,
The tribes of eight-legged ajarais,
Bloodthirsty one-eyed monsters,
They spilled the happiness of the Middle World.
They threw over cradles of newborn children,
They ruined the corrals of the cattle.
The country we see -
Is it to be possessed by abaahy evil spirits?
Or whatsoever?
Who is going to save our tribe,
The miserable people of the Sun” —
These are the lines from “Nurgun Botur the Swift” olonkho.¹

As for the warrior from the sunny white country, before going to the Middle World, he is addressed as follows:

“Always remember
That (you) should never kill and abuse,
Make people of the Aiyy tribe,
The people of the sunny land
Cry and sob,
Moan and suffer.
Otherwise, all people
And Aiyy deities will take offense.
Remember this forever.
But if a day comes when
Picked chieftains of evil abaahy,
Voracious gluttons of southern tribes,
Chosen monsters

¹ Heroic epic of the Yakut people, Vol. I. *Nurgun Botur Stremitelny* (Nurgun Botur the Swift). Text by K.T. Orosin, editor, translation and comments by G.U. Ergis. Yakutsk, 1947, pp. 67-69.



Abuse and oppress
People of the Aiyy tribe,
The people of the sunny land,
You must protect and defend them.
Be their guard like a thick forest.¹

When the struggle with evil forces of the Under World is over, the warrior and his wife are advised by the celestial counsellors as follows:

“The requital and punishment are done,
The mortal battles are over,
May the evil doom go away.
Leave in peace
To build fences for increasing herds of cattle,
To make cradles for children to be born,
To multiply your offspring,
That is the reason you are sent to the Middle World,
To become the ancestors of the mankind”.²

Therefore, the image of the Middle World good warrior in the Yakut epic, like in similar epics of other peoples, reflects the traces of the pre-feudal era, as well as dreams and strivings of common people about the eventual triumph of the social justice and truth on the earth.

We should also note coinciding names of heroes in epic poems. Yakut Er Sogotokh corresponds to Kyrgyz Er Manas, Altai Er Samyr and others. Even more common are the general terms being components of legendary warriors' names: “*bergen*” or “*mergen*”, (archer) “*boko*”, “*kan*” or “*khan*”, “*botur*” or “*bator*”, common for all the Turkic and Mongol peoples of Siberia and Central Asia.

However, the similarity of characters in the Yakut epic and main characters of Mongol and Turkic legends is found not in the central character, only. This similarity is evident for other epic characters, both among the warrior's friends and enemies.

Beside the supreme deities, protecting the hero, other important characters in Olonkho are white shamanesses, a warrior's or his wife's sisters. Dressed in white garments, decorated with silver bells and circles, the shamanesses sing:

“We are purified by eight flaming rays of light,
We have grown up with pure white hair,
When we, in the image of mature mares
With spotted nostrils,
With clotted hair,
Were standing on knees,

^{1,2} Heroic epic of the Yakut people, Vol. I. *Nurgun Botur Stremitelny* (Nurgun Botur the Swift). Text by K.T. Orosin, editor, translation and comments by G.U. Ergis. Yakutsk, 1947, p. 357



They brought eight sacred bowls,
Full with kumis and butter.
Holding these bowls, they rounded us
From the sunny side
And made us shamanesses, handing over
The blessed power of words
On the eight ways of light”.

“Oh, mother-queen, - they address Aiyhyit Goddess:
Do not turn away from us, putting us down for shamanesses of the
dark

With clots of blood in their hands.
Here we stand in front of you,
Blessed shamanesses of the light
*With pure thoughts, with purified bones”.*¹

White shamanesses or a warrior’s sister save the hero from deadly danger, they ask for him from deities, bless his peaceful and happy life, and encourage him for new deeds of valour.

The same role in Buryat *uligers* is performed by a warrior’s sister, who is born with him by miracle; in Mongol-Oirat legends – by celestial virgins - *Dagins*.²

Along with them there stands a hero’s best friend on the earth. In *Sung Jaahyn* legend the hero’s friend is his elder brother, suddenly showing up, Angiya warrior.³ In other stories, it is another warrior, having been defeated by the main hero and deliberately becoming his companion, like Eksekuleh Bukustei warrior in *Khan Jargystai* legend.⁴

In Mongol-Oirat epic, this supporting character becomes a main character’s friend and a sworn brother after a severe combat, where he is defeated, like Zambulin in *Daini Urgul*, or Khajir Khara in *Bum Erdeni*.⁵

In Altai epic, this character is represented by Anchi Mergen, who voluntarily becomes a friend and companion for Kokin Erkei, thus becoming involved in his heroic deeds.

As for hostile epic characters opposing a main hero, in Yakut Olonkho, besides usual diabolic warriors inhabiting the Under World, we sometimes see “mongus” – some unknown, yet ferocious monster.

In *Geser*, one of the main enemies is also a twenty-headed *mongus*. The main divine character of this epic managed to kill him only with the cunning of his wise wife Aralgo-Goa. Disgusting monguses turn out to be principal enemies of warriors in Mongol-Oirat heroic epics, as well.

¹ Saaryn-baai-toyon Olonkho. Archive of the Yakut branch, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, pp. 51-52.

² *Obrazy narodnoi slovestnosti* (Images of the folklore, Volume I. Buryat folklore, Volume 3. SPb, 1918, pp. XXIX, XXVIII. – B.Ya. Vladimirtsov. *Mongolo-oiratsky geroichesky epos* (Mongol-Oirat Heroic Epic), p. 48 and others.

³ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional

⁴ I.A. Khudyakov. *Verkhoyansky sbornik* (Verkhoyansk Collection), p. 215.

⁵ B.Ya. Vladimirtsov. *Mongolo-ortaisky geroichesky epos* (Mongol-Ortai Heroic epic). Moscow, 1926, p. 46.



In Buryat legends we find similar multi-headed, hostile to human beings monsters - *mangatakhai*, whose aim is to devour people, “to defile” the sky.¹

But in Mongol-Oirat legends, there is one character even more atrocious than monguses – their mother, ominous shamaness Kerikei Zaidan, who lives at the source of many rivers, at the foot of Ongon mountain, playing a crooked drum, having a hat, used for putting spells.

In Yakut legend *Er Sogotokh*, the hero, having destroyed eight-legged demon warrior Nurgun, at the edge of the world sea-ocean also faces an ugly old woman with three humps, who is leading a white dog with a mangy muzzle and holding an iron cradle under her arm. “The thick fog is my strains, snow and rain – my scream, the black smoke – my song”, she sings. Like Geser, Er Sogotokh is unable to defeat her in a fair fight; he defeats her with cunning and craft, not power.

Arsan Dolai is a master of the dark land – the Under World, from where diabolic warriors climb out into the Middle World. He is depicted as a monster with a mouth on his crown, eyes on his temples, and his only desire is to see the Middle World ruled by the death and devastation.²

In Altai tradition, we find a corresponding deity of the Under World – Erlik, in Mongol – Erlen Khan, whose name is unknown to the Sakha people. Yet surprisingly, one of the Khalkha-Mongol legends mentions a terrible fifteen-headed mongus Aan Dolai, whose name resembles the name of the Yakut lord of the Under World – Arsan Dolai.

While the Upper World population in Olonkho is presented by deities and their family members and the Under World’s – by Arsan Dolai and his tribe, including diabolic warriors and eight-legged monsters, the Middle World is inhabited by a human being, living in the happy country, owning numerous cattle, a big family and servants. His daughter usually becomes a hero’s wife. This master of the earthy land is depicted as an incredibly rich honoured old man, “an eagle, with a big bearded face”. By his side stands a white-headed, like snow, stout old woman in a coat made from excellent sables and a lynx-hat, holding a motley spoon for fortune-telling.

His people “live in big villages at ten rivers, his neighbours have settled densely at seven rivers”.

In some olonkhos this old man is called the Copper Divine Lord, in others – Sabiya Baai Toyon, there are other names, too; but most often he is referred to as Baai Khara Khan Toyon. In Turkic epic of Minusinsk area we also see Karakan, the Black Khan, depicted as a rich lord, living at a warm or black sea. In one of those legends, the Black Khan is visited by the bronze Archer Kuruldei Bergen, who asks to marry his daughter, and eventually, after a series of adventures, he gets her, which is similar to how

¹ B.Ya. Vladimirtsov. *Mongolo-ortaisky geroichesky epos* (Mongol-Ortai Heroic epic). Moscow, 1926, p. 46.

² I.A. Khudyakov. *Verkhoyansky sbornik* (Verkhoyansk Collection), pp. 134, 166, 218; E/K/Pekarsky. Yakut language dictionary, pp. 150, 751.



a hero in the Yakut Olonkho marries a daughter of Sabiya Baai Toyon or Baai Khara Khan Toyon.

In Altai epic, this rich man, a hero's son-in-law, is known as Kara Khan or Karaty Khan, while Kazakhs call him Kara Bai.

By Altai teller's description, Kara Khan or Kharaty Khan is also rich, but more powerful than Yakut Baai Khara Khan Toyon. He lives at a blue sea with one hundred gulfs, at a magnificent mountain with one hundred waterfalls, entire Altai can not hold his cattle, people live tight, his happiness is like a river, similarly to Yakut Baai Khara Khan Toyon.¹

The next legendary character, standing somewhat separately among the olonkho heroes, is a blacksmith. Like in the real life, a blacksmith had a secret power comparable to one of a shaman; olonkho describes him with particular respect, lined with fear, and his mighty figure is equal to those of the most outstanding epic characters.

“The sound of his forge hammer - the olonkho tells – is heard within ninety-day trip, his house is a brownish clay hammock with nine holes. Inside the hammock, flaming with fire and smoke, there are huge noisy bellows, like white mares, the anvils made of firm stone form the Under World, the hammer – a marine wave. His servants are ninety coal-black young stokers, seventy tall black locksmiths, and he himself is known as: “the ancestor of nine blacksmiths”, “Dodarba Death Blacksmith”.²

The fearsome Blue Blacksmith Koko Darkhan in *Jangar* is depicted as powerfully. He lives in a yurt made from untooled boulders with bright-red bellows inside. The bellows are moved by twenty-five people, and ne hundred blacksmiths assist Koko Darkhan. No one is allowed to enter his dwelling without a permission: “One hundred guards, stronger than the strongest, stand at his black bellows and roar: “Punished will be the one who enters without a permission».³

In the Buryat epic mighty blacksmiths-darkhans also deal with making weapons for deities-tengriys themselves; and only a pressing request of a hero can make them manufacture a weapon for him.

A warrior's horse is one of the most involved participants of the epic narration; his role in Olonkho is as important as in other peoples' epics: it is a loyal aide and friend of a hero, perhaps, the most reliable one of all his comrades and fellows.

Thus, the Yakut Olonkho's hero is surrounded by these characters, also present in epics of other cattle-breeding peoples of Siberia.

The similarity between Yakut Olonkho legends with those of other cattle-breeding peoples of Siberia and Central Asia is as obvious in terms of plots. Two examples will do to prove that.

¹ *Bronzovy strelok i chistoe srebro* (The Bronze Archer and pure silver). Heroic poem of Minusinsk Turks, Volume 2. Translated and commented by N.F. Katanov, SPb., 1885. – Heroic poems by Minusinsk Tatars. Ethnographic collection, Volume IV, 1858, p. 122.

² S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), p. 15.

³ *Jangar*. Kalmyk folk epic. Translated by S. Lipkin, Moscow., 1940, p. 323.



When setting off to his deeds of valour, the Yakut warrior hurries to the mistress spirit of the motherland and his elder sister, living inside an “eight-branched sacred oak-tree”. The tree cracks open, and from there comes out a grand woman dressed in a fur-coat made from silvery sables, a hat made from lynx pelts. The Goddess blesses the warrior and offers his breast to suck her milk.¹

The legends of other Turkic and Mongol peoples lack this full and precise description; still, there is a common idea that the hero is assisted by the sacred world tree. One of the Altai legends tells that Kara Maas warrior, an Altai Orpheus, plays a wooden reed-pipe with eighty-two holes in front of a one-hundred-year-old cedar, wide as sixty grasps of both hands. Carried away by Kara Maas song, “moon-winged birds stop feeding their nestlings, wild animals forgot to check their babies”, dried out branches burst with green silky leaves, the fruitless land bloomed with countless flowers, mountains summits bent towards the singer, the sea calmed down and the sun itself froze still in the sky.

Influenced by the magic song, the cedar “opened its chest wide, and a beautiful girl appeared from inside.”

It was Kumush Tana, Altyn Mergen’s daughter, predestined to him.²

The next ordeal in the warrior’s fate is the case when, falling victim to a treachery, he falls into an abyss trap and remains there, destined to die, or dies.

In a Yakut legend “The White Lad” (Үрүҥ-Уолан), the hero is rescued from the abyss trap with the help of a golden hair of Urun Aiyy Toyon deity. The hero’s sister, the White Ukeiden Kuo, having learnt about his mishap, via her two sisters, asks her father Aiyy Toyon to give one of the three golden hairs growing on his crown.

Aiyy Toyon has no intentions to part with his golden hair, but the sisters manage to get his permission to take the thinnest and shortest of his hairs with persistence and cunning; then, they pull out the longest and the thickest, this making their divine father, the Lord of the Skies, angry and disappointed.³

Having weaved a rope from this hair, luminous in the darkness, the White Yukeiden throws it in the gloomy abyss and saves the White Lad from dying.

Similarly, in Altai legends, Kan Tulku heroine transforms into “a thin hair” and saves a warrior; in other stories he is saved by his horse, which is asked by his sister, beautiful Torko Chachak. The horse hauls down the seventy-fathom hole one hair from its tail and lifts its master from the hole.

Similar examples are found in Buryat and Khalkha-Mongol epic

¹ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), p. 22.

² *Oirotskie narodnye skazki* (Oirat folk tales), p. 240.

³ I.A. Khudyakov. *Verkhoyansky sbornik* (Verkhoyansk Collection), p. 150-151.



tradition.¹ As for other direct matches, they are as follows: a warrior's ordeal at a black or boiling sea; a hero's struggle with children or grandchildren of the Under World's lord; an offer from an evil warrior to divide a beauty who is a subject of the struggle, so that her lower part goes to him, and the upper part – to the warrior of the light.

They also include such characteristic details as the ability of a hero to turn skins, when he transforms into a bald old man Yodei in Yakut *olonkho* and Tas Tarakai in Altai legends; a avenger baby being a deadly enemy; killing of a bird carrying the enemy's soul. Smaller, still specific details include: a bridge from where enemies are pushed down to the sea; "the water of death"; an oath taken in front of the moon and the sun in Altai legends and an ancient Esekh worshiping the moon and the sun in Yakut *olonkho*; appearance of messengers from the skies delivering the will of deities; a threat to break the enemy's horse-tethering post; a ritual of Altai and Yakut warriors to raise a spear with a killed enemy's heart and intestines towards the sky; a tidy shot when an arrow goes through a saddlebow (Yakut legends about Tygyn, Altai stories about Kochkorbai); a description of a hero's bow or horse.

Finally, as Yakut *Olonkho* end in a great celebration, a ritual feast – Esekh – worshiping heavenly deities and creators of the mankind, the steppe legends also have the same ending, depicting a merry holiday on a prosperous heavenly land.²

Like in other Mongol and Turkic legends, Yakut *Olonkho* has a particular structure – the action takes place in two, not one, lines: the first describing deeds of the hero himself; the second – those of his son.³

Similarly to legends of Turkic and Mongol peoples, Yakut *Olonkho* shows a regular alternation of the characters' rhythmic speech, verses, with a prosaic story in the descriptive part. Like in Buryat *uligers*, each *olonkho* character has their own musical melody, typical for a certain group of characters.⁴

Diabolic warriors and their company have a typical dramatically fluctuating melody pattern, with passionate and raging tempo. Positive characters sing in a more even and monotonous manner. Female characters possess a soft lyric tune. Singing of good spirits and white shamanesses conveys the solemn calmness of *algyys* – a song worshiping light heavenly deities of the Yakut

¹ *Balagansky sbornik. Skazki, poveriya i nekotorye obryady u severnykh buryat* (Balagan Collection. Tales, beliefs and some rituals in northern Buryats). Edited by G.N. Potanin. Tomsk, 1903, pp. 173-174.

² *Oirotskie narodnye skazki* (Oirot folk tales), pp. 182-183. – N.M. Ulgashev. Altai Buchai. *Oirotsky narodny epos* (Oirot traditional epic). Novosibirsk, 1941. pp. 149. 323. – A.S. Orlov. *Kazakhsky geroichesky epos* (Kazakh Heroic Epic), Moscow-Leningrad, 1945, p. 71.

³ *Ibid.*, p. XX. – A.S. Orlov. *Kazakhsky geroichesky epos* (Kazakh Heroic Epic), Moscow-Leningrad, 1945, p. 20. – *Obrazy narodnoi slovestnosti* (Images of the folklore, Volume I. Buryat folklore, Volume 3. SPb, 1918, p. XVI.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XX. – A.S. Orlov. *Kazakhsky geroichesky epos* (Kazakh Heroic Epic), Moscow-Leningrad, 1945, p. 20. – *Obrazy narodnoi slovestnosti* (Images of the folklore, Volume I. Buryat folklore, Volume 3. SPb, 1918, p. XVI.



pantheon. As for the epic speech, the alliterative structure of the Yakut epic is typical of Buryat, Oirat, Khalkha-Mongol and Altai traditions, as well.

Like legends of these peoples, especially Mongol-Oirat, the Yakut epic examples are the high-style oral literature; they represent “truly literary works, not written on paper or parchment to be preserved, but kept in the memory of professional performers”.¹

Like in the Mongol-Oirat tradition, Yakut people “along with the everyday speech, possess a specific language with a different grammar and vocabulary, used on solemn occasions, when a person wants to speak beautifully, poetically, or in a grand style to impress the audience. This very language is used in the oral tradition: to a certain extent – in songs, tales, proverbs and sayings; and it is dominant in epics”.²

The language of Olonkho is “poetic, colourful and rich in bright similes, repetitions, imagery and abundance of the words to be found in tales (Olonkho) and songs, only”.³ It is filled with archaic terms and expressions, not always understandable to modern Sakha people.

The language of Olonkho is characterized by poetic metaphors and hyperboles, which are also found in the steppe epic in the same forms. Yakut story-tellers do not spare colours for depicting the hero, his house, herds, weapons and household utensils; they impress with their abundance, rare and expensive materials, and most of all – the sizes.

The greatness of the hero himself is most manifested in hyperbolized description of his swift run. The swift run of Er Sogotokh, as the olonkho tells, made the sea rough and turbulent, there started a storm and a blizzard, hails the size of a three-grass-heights cow fell, strong trees bent and broke, the lion started roaring, the Under World itself dropped its tongue to its chest, and the sky cast a glance with its wide white of the both eyes.

When Sung Jaasyn Warrior was travelling, his horse’s hooves sound like the spring thunder, trees break into chips, the dry dust whirls up, taking one’s breath away, and everything around is covered in complete darkness. This is a description of Basymnyy warrior, Er Sogotokh’s son: “His swift ride made the seas rough and turbulent, the stable Under World started swingning like a floating moss Iceland; the wide sky was covered in the thick smoke”.

The warrior’s ride in Altai stories is described in a similar way. When Kogutei Warrior rides his bull, his powerful cry makes the sky and ground tremble, mountains move, the blue sea with one hundred gulfs becomes rough, the black mountain with one hundred waterfalls shudder from the foot to the top. His bull’s run makes trees break, the dust rises from the ground to the sky and falls back, and the day turns into the night.⁴

¹ B.Ya. Vladimirtsov. *Mongolo-ortaisky geroichesky epos* (Mongol-Ortai Heroic epic). Moscow, 1926, p. 35-36

² Ibid, pp. 35-36.

³ A.E. Kulakovskiy. The Yakut ALanguage. Collection of research papers of “Sakha Keskiile” Society. I, Yakutsk, 1925, p. 70.

⁴ Altai epic. Kogutei. Moscow-Leningrad, 1935, pp. 79, 186, 187.



Olonkho-tellers are especially extravagant in the use of hyperboles and similes when describing the heroes' struggle with evil forces. Their arrows go through mountains; they throw their enemies against the ground so that their bodies penetrate the soil down to seven fathoms. The struggle of great warriors is equal to the global catastrophe; it stuns the population of the Middle World and the two other worlds of the universe. During the final combat between Basymnyy Warrior and the eight-legged Demon's son, the rivals clash like a thunder. "The sea tilted and spilled out under the weight of their legs. The Dragon Fish of the Death, with scales pointed backwards, started running so that it tore its belly. Those inhabiting the heights flew even higher, those inhabiting the underground, went even deeper. Three generations gathered in the sky and watched the combat, looming over: Look! What fighters! Eight generations gathered in the Under World, looking up: What people they are!"¹

A warriors' fight in Altai legends is very similar: the combat makes Altai shiver and tremble, the seas spill over, thunder rises to the blue sea, the dark night falls. The entire population of the Under and Upper Worlds is seized in horror. "Erlik Biy of the Under World became deaf, three Kurbustans in the sky lost nerves".²

Such hyperbolized description of the warrior's combat, with the same forms, is typical of Mongol tribes, too, starting from Buryat *uligers* to Mongol-Oirat legends.

Similes and metaphors in the Yakut epic are very original. Yet there are amazing concordances with the steppe people epics. When describing heroes of the Yakut epic poems, olonkho-tellers emphasize their enormous appetite, saying that they swallow meat in an instant, spitting out big bones from the mouth and letting small bones out of the nose. As vivid is comparison of eyes with lakes and ice-holes in lakes; or a traditional description of a female beauty, who is so beautiful that her skin is seen through the dress, the bones through the skin, and the marrow through the bones.³

Such hyperbolized descriptions are typical of the steppe peoples epic. In Kazakh legend about Er Sain, the heroine's beauty is described as follows: "When she swallows food, the food is seen in her throat. When she looks at the sun, the sun light reflects from her face".⁴

In Buryat legends, Erkhe Tokholo Mergen studies a daughter of Narin Sharaga King and also "sees the body through the clothes, sees the bones through the body, sees her marrow through the bones" - such a beauty she is.

¹ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), p. 53.

² N.M. Ulagashev. Altai-Buchai, pp. 302-322.

³ S.V. Yastremsky. *Obrazy narodnoi literatury yakutov* (Images of the Yakut traditional literature), pp. 37, 54, 66. — I.A. Khudyakov. Verkhoyansky sbornik (Verkhoyansk Collection), p. 145, 190. — N.M. Ulagashev. Altai Buchai. *Oirotsky narodnyy epos* (Oirot traditional epic). Novosibirsk, 1941. pp. 213, 215, 294, 382. — Yakut folklore, p. 133. Archive of the Yakut Academic Fund, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, № 6. — Annosky sbornik (Anosky Collection). Collection of Altai tales with comments by G.K. Potanin. Omsk, 1915, p. 39.

⁴ A.S. Orlov. *Kazakhsky geroichesky epos* (Kazakh heroic epic), p. 55



In this respect, it is particularly interesting, what place the Yakut epic occupies in the oral tradition of other peoples of Siberia and Central Asia. The legends of the latter tribes, as we know, are divided into a number of groups corresponding to certain stages in the history of the epic development, connected with the history of the society and ideology development.

Initially, there appears an original story of an innocent animal-like ancestor of a tribe, being chased, some totem, the suffering deity-animal. Paleo-Asiatic tribes in North-Eastern Siberia possess its most primordial form; however, its traces are easily found in Altai folklore or Western Buryats (a beaver-baby, miraculously born and chased by evil people; Buryat ancestors – the children of the divine bull – Ikhirit and Bulagat).

This main plot gets complicated and is sometimes accompanied by other additional stories from the primeval cosmogonic views, including the world tree and the three worlds of the universe, the dualistic myth about struggle of the two – the sky and the Under World, the good and the evil, personified in animal images and linked to the ancient dual-gender structure, about female goddesses.

This heritage of the primordial times then transfers to the age of a new social structure, from the matriarchy to the patriarchy.

Emergence of a new social order and the paternal kin is reflected in the fact that female deities and founders are substituted by male deities; images of animals are replaced by human beings; and the dualistic myth about the struggle between the two fundamentals acquires anew content. There appear myths about the struggle of the good, represented by a male warrior, with the evil, represented by a terrifying female monster. They remain in tales about fighting of warriors with monstrous old women (Kerinkei Zandan shaman in Mongol-Oirat epic, Nurgun the Mighty's mother in Yakut *Er Sogotokh* olonkho).

The new stage, when the patriarchy establishes in full, with eventually appearing more progressive, class-based relations, along with the initial heterogeneous mythological ideas and plots, brings about the true heroic epic.

Its main content is the mythological genealogy, or the history of legendary ancestors and founders, so the main aim is worshiping of their deeds of valour. This worshiping takes the form of a heroic epic, primarily describing the war with the evil forces and other tribes.

This is the very nature of Yakut legends and epic works of peoples related to them.

When worshiping their hero, the mythological founder, the Yakut rapsode widely uses traditional folklore devices, the full range of mythological idea. Usually, he starts his story with showing the hero on the background of the mother universe of those remote times the world had just appeared. It is quite natural, since the hero, for the teller, is really the first man on earth, sort of Adam in the primeval heaven – Eden. However, a lot of other people are depicted alongside, including Sabiya Baai Toyon or Baai Khara Khan Toyon.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the hero is not the first man. As it



was mentioned above, the singer's view on the rest on mankind differs from the one of contemporary writers.

The singer believes that only he and his relatives are "real" people, people in the true meaning of this word. He was unable to have a wider view covering the neighbouring tribes as "the people" or "mankind", as they were isolated in the primitive society.

When narrating about events and activities in his hero's life, the poet continues to use existing samples and plot schemes. Like before, the hero fights zoomorphic monsters, with their mother – a shamaness or ominous old woman – being the main and most dangerous of them. It is easy to recognize a dishonoured and prostrate deity of the matriarchy – Eskimo Sednu or Khosyadam in Ket people. The hero himself bears some archaic features. Even if he is not born as an animal, anyway, first he experiences the fate of a chased baby seal in a Chukchi legend, like Geser or Alamji Mergen. As characteristic is an oddly close connection with his sister or sisters, not his own wife, who often turns to be a traitress.

In fact, it is only natural, given the fact that in the primitive society a wife was always considered a stranger, and before that, a sister often became a brother's wife.

As Palaeolithic in age is the subject-matter with a turnskin-wife, leaving her husband as soon as she gets her original animal or bird skin.

Nevertheless, in general, it is something completely new in structure and character: it is no longer a short story, but an extended poem with countless included episodes, various everyday descriptions and details, a complex narration, a true epic drama with the prosaic text decorated by verses-songs. It is a true work of fiction, possessing the elevated colourful language, so different from the everyday speech.

It is obvious that such works could appear under the developed patriarchy, only, with certain traits of new social relations, different from the old primitive ones.

There is only one step to the next stage, when instead of numerous independent characters of separate poems we see a single main hero, other traditional characters and subject-matters grouping around him.

There forms a certain epic cycle, amazing in its colossal volume and strict harmony of its components, like in *Manas*, *Jangar*, or *Geseriade*.

Concurrently, the poems authors develop much wider political and geographic perspective; they go far beyond the narrow limits of their own kin or tribe.

The epic also shows certain, yet peculiar, signs of historicity; the action takes place on the real territories of a certain country and neighbouring area, rather than an abstract environment; it mentions real peoples, tribes, and some historical events, to a certain extent.

However, the Yakut epic does not reach this stage. It lacks any evidence of the semi-historical legends cycle, though it had long passed the first mythological stage.

Therefore, we may conclude that the Yakut Olonkho originated in



the south, far from the Middle Lena, at the time when its creators had no any social grounds for forming later cyclic epics of the *Manas* or *Jangara* type; however, ancestors of the Yakut people and related tribes left well behind the ancient matriarchy order and entered the developed patriarchy stage. Olonkho was forming under close cultural and historical connections and constant interaction between the Yakut ancestors and their closest relations, the ancestors of the present Sayan-Altai tribes, as well as ancient Mongols.

At the following historical stage, when ancestors of the Sakha people found themselves in the middle reaches of the Lena River, they preserved their ancient folklore almost in full, as for a long time they became isolated from other steppe peoples, as well as more developed cultures: in the east – Indian and Tibetan; in the west – the rich and colourful culture of agricultural peoples of Central Asia. Meanwhile, the epic of related peoples experienced great changes under the influence of Buddhism, became secondary to written literature, or declined at all, like Khalkha-Mongol legends, eventually transforming into schematic sketches of more popular plots.

This conclusion is supported by the relation of olonkho legends to closest folklore forms - historical legends.

Nowadays, the legends and stories about the Sakha people ancestors – Elley and Omogoi, or ancestors of certain kinships – exist independently from Olonkho, they do not mix or cross with them. The historical legends, obviously, were developing and transforming in course of time. Whereas Olonkho, having separated into a special imaginary world, has experienced rather little change of plots, subject-matters and characters. It has not congealed entirely, but neither does it show any great shifts or considerable changes.

That is why, perhaps, the Yakut Olonkho tradition occupies a special place among the epic of Turkic and Mongol people, being monuments preserving traces of that archaic period, which the heroic epic of these peoples dates back to.

This explains the similarity of Olonkho with the most ancient features of the epic tradition in steppe tribes of southern Siberia, Middle and Central Asia, and also serves an evidence of the southern origin of the Yakut people.





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