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**Visions of Olonkho: Representation of Sakha Epic Poetry From the 19th
Century to Today**

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Abstract

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The genre of heroic epic poetry known as *olonkho* stands at the forefront of Sakha cultural revival. Its importance has roots in early Soviet nationality policies encouraging ethnic expression and the importance of literary culture in Soviet society. UNESCO's recognition of *olonkho* as a "masterpiece of intangible heritage" in 2005 prompted the government of the Sakha Republic to create institutions and policies to promote and preserve it. These institutions engage in debates with performers on the authenticity of contemporary expressions of the epic and how to best ensure that *olonkho* remains relevant in the lives of Sakha. *Olonkho* is being integrated into the education of Sakha children as well as being translated for distribution on a global scale. As *olonkho* solidifies as a signifier for Sakha culture, state sponsorship of the epic indicates support of the expression of Sakha identity in way that resembles early Soviet policies. Current trends indicate that interest in *olonkho* is growing. Plans for epic-themed projects including the Sakha culture park Olonkholand demonstrate the continuing desire of the Sakha government to invest in the expression of Sakha culture with *olonkho* at the center.

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Introduction

Inside the hewn wooden cabin the storyteller begins his song. His mannerisms become jerky, he takes on a completely new voice. He becomes a demon of the lower world. His voice vibrates and his wails are punctuated with staccato bursts. The demon entreats the great hero Niurgun Bootur to cease fighting after ninety days of cruel battle in which neither of them has been able to defeat the other. Rather than raging on into eternity and destroying all of the worlds inhabited by demons, gods, and men, the demon proposes a solution. They could slice the great beauty Tuiarima Kuo in half at the waist and share her. The demon generously offers the beautiful upper half with her embracing arms to the hero, if he himself could only keep the lower half with its strong, smooth legs and what lies between them. The demon wails his dark proposal in a voice that rises, falls, and trembles. Suddenly the demon fades and the storyteller briefly returns to smooth and monotone voice of the narrator to introduce the hero with his reply.

The demon's song is only a snippet of an epic poem recounting the deeds of the great hero Niurgun Bootur the Swift [*Niurgun Bootur Stremitel'nii*]. Among the Sakha of the Russian Far East, the fantastic and romantic genre of epic poetry describing mythical heroes, the beginnings of the great Sakha clans, and the magic of gods and shamans is called *olonkho*. These epics were sung as part of an oral tradition, typically by one only one performer. An *olonkho* singer—known as an *olonkhosut*— would recite a single epic tale over the course of several nights. He acted out all the many parts of the story: demons, heroes, gods, female shamans [*udaganki*], and even horses each with a unique voice so that

the audience could differentiate between the many characters. *Olonkho* are known for their length, with Platon Oiunskii's rendition of Niurgun Bootur the Swift, perhaps the most famous of the Sakha epics, consisting of 36,000 lines of poetry and taking five or more nights to perform (Pukhov 1975, 240). Before the twentieth century, *olonkhosuts* would travel from homestead [*alas*]¹ to homestead reciting their epics, which would be unique to the performer due to the role of improvisation in epic performance. Among both the *olonkho* scholars and performers that I spoke to, it was generally agreed that the Sakha national epic comes from "the cosmos". This implies that *olonkho* is more than a creative masterpiece on the part of the Sakha, but rather that it emanates from a spiritual source. *Olonkhosuts* does not sit down and think up their epic, rather it comes to them in images which they then describe. These visions were then passed down in the form of epic poetry from *olonkhosut* to *olonkhosut*. The fact that *olonkho* is viewed by some as a spiritual gift adds to the discourse of *olonkho* as a connection to an ancient and pre-Christian past. It is "evidence" of a time when Sakha interacted with and gained knowledge from demons and spirits.

¹ *Alas*: "an open area with a lake in the middle surrounded by a forest. Its formation is explained by melted permafrost which forms a lake. Due to the wetlands, the vegetation surrounding these lakes is rich and provides good grazing lands for cattle. An *alas* was a perfect settlement for a family or clusters of families and their cattle" (Argounova-Low 2012, 17)



Illustration 1: *Olonkho* performer Valentin Isakov and the author inside the *balagan* at SRI Olonkho

The performance given by the *olonkhusut* Valentin Gavrilovich Isakov of the demon's proposal to saw Tuiarima Kuo in half in many ways deviates from and yet replicates pre-Soviet *olonkho* performances. Great lengths were made to recreate a traditional hewn wooden cabin [*balagan*] by furnishing it with wooden benches, chairs, tables with three legs which much like the legs of Sakha items like *chorons*² mimic the legs of horses, and a model of a Sakha stove in the corner. The walls of the *balagan* are lined with benches to provide more seating for listeners. Many aspects of the structure create dissonance with the attempt at the creation of an "epic environment". During the performance of the demon's song, an iPhone lay glowing on one of the *balagan*'s

² *Choron*: three-legged drinking vessel used for the ceremonial and sometimes casual consumption of fermented mare's milk [*kumiis*]

benches. Someone had plugged it into one of the many electrical outlets installed in the wooden building. When you peer through the missing fourth wall you find yourself in an ordinary office setting. People are working at computers, tapping away on their phones, and the hum of printers runs in background as the *olonkhusut* sings his demon song. The *balagan* is located in the relatively new Scientific Research Institute of Olonkho (SRI Olonkho) in the very back of a small wing of the Main Building of North-Eastern Federal University. Rather than the performance taking place for a few select people in a far-flung village or *alas*, the *olonkhusut* sang his demon song in Yakutsk, the capital city of the Sakha Republic(Yakutia) in Russia's Far East. The scholars working in the *SRI Olonkho* constructed the *balagan* inside one of their office spaces to recreate something commonly referred to as an "epic environment", that is an environment reminiscent of that in which epic performers would have sung their epics before the coming of the Russians.

The *balagan* has a special significance at SRI Olonkho and is not only a performance space. It was used as conference room for a meeting between an *olonkho* writer, which is a completely new concept, the director of the Institute, an expert on the pedagogy of *olonkho*, and a folklorist. The discussion revolved around the *writing* of a new epic. It was a meeting about the future of *olonkho* in an environment create to mimic and idealized version of its past. One of my key tasks in this work is to describe the efforts of institutions such as SRI Olonkho to preserve an ancient tradition in today's world. I believe that the placement of the *balagan* within an office setting is in many ways representative of the attempt of the Institute to carve out a space for *olonkho* in the lives of modern Sakha. It also represents the efforts made by the academic community surrounding

olonkho, which includes SRI Olonkho as well as the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North, to protect the authenticity of epic performance. The approximation of the “epic environment” were *olonkho* once flourished may provide a sense of authentic space without the corrupting influences of modern technologies.

I arrived in Yakutsk in July 2016 to conduct research on *olonkho*’s recent history, remediation, and role in Sakha national identity. Many of my interviews with those connected to *olonkho* during my time in Yakutsk took place in the *balagan*. I even found myself there when I had planned to be working elsewhere. I had intended to interview Isakov and hear him perform selections of an *olonkho* at my mother-in-law’s apartment where I lived for the duration of my fieldwork. However, when a neighbor suddenly began a noisy construction project just as we were beginning the interview, the *balagan* was immediately suggested as a place to relocate. It seemed fitting that when the complications of living in a crowded bustling city intruded on the silence and state of attentiveness necessary for *olonkho* performance, we retreated to the recreation of the “epic environment”. However, the construction of the wooden cabin represents only one of the strategies taken by those promoting the epic to either alter the environment to be more conducive to epic performance, or to alter epic performance to allow them to fit better into the busy rhythms of modern life.

The Sakha of today are a slightly less than half a million in number and the enormous republic that bears their name occupies almost 1.2 million square miles of Russia’s Far Eastern Federal District. According to the 2010 census of the Russian

Federation, the Sakha make up roughly half of the population of the Sakha Republic. The other half is comprised of Russians (38%), Ukrainians (2%), Evenks (2%), Evens (1.5%) and other groups. Of the 958,000 people who live in the Sakha Republic, almost one third (270,000) live in the capital city of Yakutsk. The Sakha republic also has the distinction of being home to the “pole of cold” in the northern hemisphere and its capital city is known as the “coldest city on earth” with winter temperatures of -50 degrees or colder. *Olonkho* was generally associated with the winter calendar and provided entertainment for Sakha in the long, freezing, northern nights.

The Sakha are a Turkic people and the prevailing theory of Soviet and later Russian historians such as Oladnikov holds that they migrated to the land currently known as the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) from somewhere near lake Baikal (Bychkova-Jordan 2002, 37). When this migration occurred is still disputed. This migration theory is supported in a Sakha legend³ describing how the great founder of the Sakha people Ellei Bootur came down the river from the south. This origin theory contributes to the view of *olonkho* as a valuable document of Sakha history. The epics that make up *olonkho* often describe the lush and ancient southern home of the Sakha before they traveled north. Once they had arrived in the North the Sakha encountered Tungusic nomadic reindeer herding peoples such as the Evens and the Yukagir. Evidence of this encounter can be found in later *olonkho*

³ In his 1970 book, *Yakutia Before its Incorporation into the Russian State*, A.P. Okladnikov insists that the legends about the founders of the great Sakha tribes remained separate from *olonkho*. Sakha folklorist, Varvara Kapitanova also states specifically in the case of *Ellei Bootur*, that his tale is a merely a legend and not an *olonkho*. The legend however has great prominence in the Sakha folkloric canon and, in the summer of 2016, the Olonkho Theater performed the legend of Ellei Bootur as the final event of the festival, “UNESCO Masterpieces in the Land of Olonkho”.

as well in the form of the appearance of Tungusic warrior heroes riding reindeer rather than horses (Oiunskii 1975, 415). The Sakha find themselves in a unique position in the ethnic landscape of Russia's far east. They lack the cultural and political dominance enjoyed by the ethnic Russians but neither do they identify with the indigenous identity of the so called "small peoples of the north" such as the aforementioned Evens and the Yukagir. Piers Vitebsky of the Scott Polar Research Institute and Cambridge University has described the Sakha as standing, "in between these small minorities and the majority Russian people" (Argounova-Low 2012, i). In the Soviet era, the Sakha, like the Tatars, Buryats, and other large ethnic groups were made the titular nationality of their own Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic but were still subordinate to the Russian Union Republic. This is in contrast to even larger groups such as the Georgians, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs who had Union Republics of their own, and smaller groups such as the Evens and Yukagirs who had less autonomy and political power.



Illustration 2: The placement of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) within the Russian Federation. (image adapted from public domain).

Since the 1980s, in the era of *glasnost* and Gorbachev, Sakha interest in their own cultural heritage has been growing (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 104). Soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, people including theater director and former minister of culture Andrei Borisov began to form societies for the promotion of Sakha culture (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 105). According to the 2010 Russian census, the Sakha population is slowly increasing and interest in encouraging more Sakha to speak their native language and take part in cultural traditions continues to gain momentum. There is great interest in the advertisement of Sakha cultural achievement on the global stage. The Sakha government and academic institutions have been vocal and proud about their language and folkloric heritage of their nation, *olonkho* foremost among them. Yakutsk, the capital city of the

Sakha Republic, has hosted all six of the Children of Asia Games⁴ and used them to showcase Sakha culture. The presentation of the olympic torch in a central city square in Yakutsk accompanied by a ceremony in which a middle-school aged boy dressed in national costume sang a selection from an *olonkho*. Translations of *olonkho* into English are being created and promoted. In the summer of 2016, Yakutsk hosted the festival “Masterpieces of UNESCO in the land of *Olonkho*” in which people from all over the world gathered to share their own “masterpieces of intangible, cultural heritage” which, in past have included Sicilian puppetry, Mongolian musical performance, Georgian dance and many other intangible heritage traditions. Before the opening of the new Yakutsk airport in 2012, the phrase “Welcome to the Land of *Olonkho*” emblazoned on the outer walls of the terminal was the first greeting received by newcomers to the Sakha Republic. It is clear that many Sakha have an interest in sharing *olonkho* with the world.

Since the 2005 UNESCO recognition of *olonkho* as “intangible, cultural, heritage” interest in the epic has grown. The drive to integrate the national the national epic into classroom education and acquaint children with this vital part of Sakha culture from a very young age is growing as well. A new generation of folklorists are studying the regional peculiarities of *olonkho* and conducting textual and musicological analyses. Many Sakha are coming up with alternative ways to tell the stories found in *olonkho* and more and more *olonkho* based theatrical productions are being created and performed all over the Sakha republic. Some Sakha are writing completely new epics and having them performed by

⁴ A series of sports competitions for children from Asian countries. It is held every four years under the patronage of the International Olympic Committee

established *olonkhosuts*. These alternative performances and new epic themed compositions are examples of how *olonkho* is being remediated and altered to suit the lives of the Sakha today.

In their 1999 book, *Remediation: understanding new media*, David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe remediation as the logic by which new media refashion older media forms. I use the term remediation to describe the transformation of the oral tradition of *olonkho* into plays, printed poetic texts, audio recordings, etc. The remediation of *olonkho* themed materials has of course given rise to many questions and controversies. Since the entextualization [writing down] of *olonkho* in the early twentieth century, *olonkhosuts* who wrote and studied from texts represent a break in the ancient oral tradition of *olonkho* but nonetheless they comprise the current class of *olonkho* performers today. To what extent a performer or composer of *olonkho* can or should utilize texts and not compromise the authenticity of the epic is a subject of debate among Sakha scholars.

Sakha scholars and performers are also trying to determine how *olonkho*, which takes hours to perform, can remain relevant in a society where short attention spans and busy schedules can often preclude spending several evenings listening to an *olonkho*. The role of theatricalized performances within the *olonkho* tradition remains a contentious issue. There is also the formidable task of deciding how best *olonkho* can be used to represent the cultural achievements of the Sakha on the international stage. At their heart, these controversies are centered on questions of authenticity vs popular appeal. Those who believe in preserving *olonkho* in its pre-Russian form (or as close to it as they can) are

sometimes at odds with those who take a more populist approach to *olonkho* and want it to be available in whatever form will attract an audience.

Much of my work here in this thesis centers on the origin of these debates and how they have developed from the late 19th century to the present day. My first chapter discusses the assimilation of *olonkho* into the conception of Sakha ethnic and national identity as well as addressed the first instances of the epic's remediation to adapt to the coming of Soviet power. The second chapter discusses *olonkho*'s recognition by UNESCO as a "masterpiece of intangible heritage" and the subsequent creation of the institutions and organizations that are the key actors in the debates surrounding the authenticity of the epic. The third chapter focuses on the authenticity controversy itself, the efforts made by institutions to police expressions of epic heritage, and the clashes that have resulted between folklorists and performers. My final chapter looks at current measures being taken by scholars, performers, and government actors to make sure that *olonkho* will remain relevant in the future. I also discuss the integration of epic heritage into the education of Sakha children and the development of large *olonkho* themed government funded projects.

In his 1996 article, "The Politics of Discursive Authority in Research on the 'Invention of Tradition'", Charles Briggs discusses how white anthropologists and folklorists can often marginalize indigenous groups that are attempting to revive or replicate cultural traditions. By entering debates about "authenticity" and "folklore vs fakelore" these cultural outsiders can cause material damage to campaigns to preserve indigenous lands and traditions. By now, this idea is relatively uncontroversial. How then can the debate between authenticity and freedom of expression of tradition be framed when

the folklorists are not cultural outsiders sitting in their universities a world away, but rather Sakha academics and scholars working and living in their own republic? To them, what is stake is not only a pet theory, a conference presentation, or a journal article, but rather a genuine desire to ensure that their own cultural heritage is recorded and discussed in the “right” way.

In this thesis, I attempt to describe how these controversies are manifesting themselves in the Sakha Republic. I analyze the role of the Soviet, Russian, and Sakha government policy in shaping the debate surrounding authenticity and remediation and the priorities of those engaged in it. I explore how *olonkho* came to be such a potent signifier for Sakha national identity and the epic’s role in the current revival of Sakha cultural heritage. I document the state of Sakha epic heritage today in an environment characterized by both growing interest and hot debate. Finally, I wish to discuss the varied hopes and visions for *olonkho*’s future held by the institutions and individuals dedicated to the Sakha national epic.

Chapter 1: *Olonkho*'s Recent History and its Incorporation into the Sakha National Literary Tradition

Olonkho is considered an ancient and integral part of Sakha history and has proven to be resilient, managing to weather the political and social upheaval of the twentieth century. In this chapter I will briefly discuss the history of the assimilation of the Sakha into the Russian Empire, the development of a politically and culturally active Sakha intelligentsia, and the arrival of Soviet power. Soviet nationality and literacy policy determined the unique place at the pinnacle of Sakha cultural achievement held by *olonkho*. The same state that issued laws and policies protecting national heritage later promoted cultural policies of Russification which threatened the expressions of indigenous identity. I discuss which forces and ideological beliefs about folklore allowed the Sakha epic tradition to survive albeit in altered form. Finally, I intend to expose the roots of the debates and controversies which surround *olonkho* today.

Russians first arrived in Sakha territory in the 1630s (Bychkova-Jordan 2002, 38). In the early days of Russian eastward expansion, the trappers and traders who traveled east of the Urals were in search of furs and had no real plans of permanent settlement. However, they were soon followed by “cossacks, mercenaries, and soldiers” sent by the tsar who imposed fur tributes on the indigenous peoples they encountered under threat of violence (Slezkine 1994, 13). These armed groups of Russians began to build a more permanent presence in Sakha lands in the form of wooden towers and forts. In addition to being an invaluable source of furs, Yakutia was also a convenient place to exile the Russian

Empire's undesirables due its distant location on the eastern fringes of the Russian Empire. The forces of westernization came to bear on Siberian peoples, including the Sakha, with Peter the Great's drive to modernize Russia in the early 18th century (Slezkine 1994, 47). Missionaries flooded Siberia and began to convert whomever they found. The extent to which Christian pressures impacted the performance of *olonkho* is unknown. Fortunately, perhaps, the flip side of Peter the Great's passion for modernity, was his fascination with the "primitive" and "backward". This fascination may have prevented the stamping out of indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions in Siberia. It was also the reason that Peter sent German experts to the East to study "geography, natural history, medicine, [...] peoples and their philologies, old monuments and antiquities and 'everything noteworthy'" (Slezkine 1994, 54). Similar foreign specialists such as Isbrandt Ides, Phillip Starlenburg, Gerard Miller, Johann Fisher, and N. Bötling and exiles of the Russian Empire such as Eduard Pekarskii and Vaclav Seroshevskii would be the first to record dictionaries of the Sakha language and to write about *olonkho* (Bychkova-Jordan 2002, 34; Ksenofontov 1992, 23; Argounova-Low 2012, 17). Sakha folklorist Varvara Oboiukova has referred to this collection of early sources as a "treasure trove" of information about *olonkho* and other forms of folklore before the centuries of Russian and then Soviet influence. They have also taught modern scholars much about Sakha language use and cultural traditions (interview with author July 12, 2016). It is from these accounts that we have information about the wandering *olonkhosut* going from homestead to homestead or village to village singing their epics.

Despite the dominance of Russian imperial power, the Sakha territory was a center of political development. In 1770, the Sakha demonstrated a desire for self-government when a Sakha clan leader submitted a petition to Empress Catherine II which would allow the Sakha to govern themselves and collect taxes as well as allow the Russian empire to establish schools (Argounova-Low 2012, 12). This petition was the first of several rejected attempts. Yakutsk was home to the short-lived “Steppe Duma” where native peoples could deliberate “tax collection, education, and legislative matters” (Argounova-Low 2012, 12).

Even before the 1917 October Revolution and the arrival of Soviet power and its drive toward literacy, the Sakha had developed its own intelligentsia which later played a huge role in the preservation of *olonkho* via entextualization and the development of Sakha literature. In 1916, during a conference to define the literary language of the Sakha, *olonkho* was suggested as its basis (Argounova-Low 2012, 56). The Sakha intellectuals, hoping for greater autonomy were generally pleased with Tsar Nicholas II’s abdication in February of 1917 but were skeptical of the Bolsheviks who seized power that October (Argounova-Low 2012,34-35). Many of these skeptics actively fought against the Bolshevik seizure of power. Finally, after years of bloody war, much of it taking place in Yakutia, the Bolsheviks firmly established their power and the lands inhabited by the Sakha were renamed the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic(ASSR) (Bychkova-Jordan 2002, 192).

At first, the arrival of Soviet governance also meant the arrival of Lenin’s ideas about combating Great-Russian chauvinism and promoting expression of national identity. The rationale behind such a plan was this: national identity arose as a result of capitalist

oppression and thus was one of the stages that must be passed through in order to achieve communism. It was therefore the responsibility of the Soviet State to shepherd all its peoples through this phase as “painlessly” and quickly as possible (Martin 2001, 8). A policy of national affirmation for non-Russian peoples had the added benefit of endearing those groups that had suffered under the Russian Empire’s policies of Russian supremacy to the Soviet State. The Soviet Union’s “affirmative action” policies of promoting the native language and culture of national minorities to the extent to which it did not conflict with the larger goals of the state, were conducive to the development of *olonkho* in the early Soviet period. The most important of these policies in terms of the encouragement of the development of Sakha national identity fell under the umbrella of *korenizatsiia*. *Korenizatsiia* can be translated as “indigenization” and refers to the government support of indigenous nation-building projects in the titular republics belonging to the many nationalities inhabiting the Soviet Union (Martin 2001, 10-13). *Korenizatsiia* was part of Lenin’s rhetoric of the decolonization of Russian imperial power, as was intended to unite the multi-ethnic Soviet State. *Korenizatsiia* also aided the Soviet State in spreading its power through its promotion of literacy through native language education.

It must be emphasized that his promotion of national identity did not give ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union free rein to express this identity in any way they wished. Non-Russian peoples were encouraged to wear national costumes, play national music, and write using national forms but were still expected to express a message that echoed the communist goals of the Bolsheviks. Stalin would refer to this phenomenon as “national in form, socialist in content” (Frolova-Walker 1998, 331). Expressions of

national identity that were at odds with Marxist-Leninist ideology were punished as the crime of “bourgeois nationalism”, a crime which later became a convenient accusation with which to denounce any non-Russian who was at odds with the Soviet State.

The Sakha literary intelligentsia, at least those who fell into line with the Soviet regime, continued to write during this early Soviet period and the man who many consider to be the father of Sakha literature, author and playwright Platon Oiunskii (1893-1939), himself a Bolshevik party member since 1918, even wrote the play “The Red Shaman” in an attempt to reconcile the goals of communism with Sakha culture (Abramov 2015, 17). Oiunskii had aspirations of performing *olonkho* and studied under an *olonkhosut*. He is said to have written down what was to become the definitive version of *Niurgun Bootur the Swift* from memory in no more than two and a half years, finishing in 1932 (Oiunskii 1975, 420). In his version of *Nyurgun Bootur the Swift*, Oiunskii nods to some of the great upholders of the oral tradition who were still performing at the time and with whom he personally worked such as *olonkhosuts* Tabakharev, and “old Argunov” (Oiunskii 1975, 9; Cruikshank and Argounova-Low 2000, 108). He also wrote a play based on Nyurgun Bootur’s exploits entitled “Tuiarima Kuo,” (Vasily Illarionov’s interview with author July 11, 2016). While Oiunskii’s version of *Niurgun Bootur the Swift* is perhaps the most well known of all *olonkho* texts, it was not the first to be entextualized. In 1886, Russian exile Eduard Pekarskii’s and Sakha man R. Aleksandrov each wrote down respectively, “The Shamanesses Uolumar and Aigyr” [*Shamanki Uolumar i Aigyr*] and “Bergen the Undying” [*Bessmertnyi Bergen*] (Illarionov 2006, 45).

The fact that *olonkho* was one of the components of pre-revolutionary Sakha culture and yet was treasured by many intellectuals largely sympathetic to the communist cause is important. This indicates that *olonkho* was viewed as an integral part of Sakha literature and not a bourgeois or primitive vestige of a world before Soviet power. However, the early Soviet period was not entirely positive for *olonkho* and those connected to it. One reason was the dispute between Soviet writers about whether or not folklore and “ethnic” literary forms could comprise proper proletarian literature. Many proletarian purists believed that new forms of art should be created to carry the message of Marxist-Leninism and that all older forms should be abandoned in their entirety. Marina Frolova-Walker describes this phenomenon in the musical sphere, “ For the first few years of the Bolshevik state, musical nationalism in its nineteenth-century form was certainly out of favor. Indeed, the cosmopolitanism and avant-gardism of the immediate pre-revolutionary years had already largely ousted nationalism,” (Frolova-Walker 1998, 333) In the Sakha Republic, Oiunskii’s “The Red Shaman” was the topic of such a controversy because some avant-garde proletarian artists believed that it was impossible for a shaman to carry a revolutionary message even in a fictional play (Argounova-Low 2012, 50).

It was during this time, in the early Soviet period, after the coming of the Soviet Union and its policies of *korenizatsiia* but before the onset of Stalin’s repressions, that *olonkho* was encoded into Sakha literary tradition and an emerging ethnic nationalism. There were two forces at work which helped to tie *olonkho* to nationalist ideas. The first of these was the potency of a literary language to unite groups into nations. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses at length how increased literacy

and the development of printed materials are vital to nationalist projects. As mentioned above, this process was recognized by and hurried along by Soviet nationality policies which mandated native language literacy education and organizations such as writers unions. *Olonkho* was important to this step in the development of Sakha national identity. It was among the first works to be written down and included in the new body of Sakha native language literature as well as one of the first works to be adapted to appear in the Sakha's first ventures into the world of theater and opera. In this way, Sakha oral heritage was able to merge with the "pillars of imported Soviet culture" (Frolova-Walker 1998, 131). *Olonkho* was ubiquitous in the development of the body of Sakha cultural achievement intended to catapult them forward from their designated state of "backwardness"⁵ in the Soviet Union and to instill a sense of national pride.

The second force tying *olonkho* to Sakha national identity was the idea that connected folklore to an intrinsic "national" spirit. Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs characterize German romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder's ideas about tradition thus:

constitutive of vernacular literature and national identity. Poetic collective, affecting, infused with the national spirit, tradition, as Herder saw it, is nevertheless always under duress in the modern world, requiring the intervention of intellectuals to preserve it for the health of the nation," [Bauman and Briggs 2003, 163]

⁵ According to the People's Commissariat of Education, the characteristics of culturally backward nationalities were: "1. an extremely low level of literacy-both the entire population and especially the active adult group
2. an insignificant percentage of children in schools overall, and especially in native language schools
3. the absence of a written script with a single developed literary language
4. the presence of everyday social vestiges - the oppression of women, religious fanaticism, nomadism, racial hostility, clan vengeance and so forth
5. a complete lack or enormous dearth of national cadres in all aspects of soviet construction. (Martin 2001, 374)

Many Sakha in the early twentieth century as many still do today, believe that *olonkho* encapsulates intrinsic positive elements of Sakhaness and sought to use them for the benefit of the Sakha people. There are obviously several key differences between the development of Sakha national identity in the early Soviet period and the development of German national identity in the nineteenth century that can help explain why it is exactly that *olonkho* became the most important form of “vernacular literature” in Sakha national identity which includes non-epic folktales, blessings [*algis*], and tongue twisters.

Unlike the German intelligentsia, the Sakha intelligentsia was not looking “backward” into the achievements of “the *volk*” to find the seeds of Sakhaness that had been lost to the intellectuals. Rather than looking back to find a lost nationalist truth, they were seeking a way to bring the best of Sakha nationalist truth with them into the Soviet future. It is unlikely that the gulf between the Sakha intelligentsia and the “common folk” was nearly as wide as that between the German romantics and their *volk*. Although they were educated at universities throughout the Russian Empire, key Sakha intellectuals such as Platon Oiunskii, historian Gavril Ksenofontov, and writer Aleksei Kulakovskii were all born in villages, not in the capital Yakutsk, albeit into wealthy families (Argounova-Low 2012, 31). Kulakovskii and Oiunskii in particular were born in the Taatta region which is known for its rich folk culture and is considered by some to be a “heartland” of Sakha culture. They were incorporating the traditions that they had grown up with into the Sakha literary canon. It is also worth noting that the divide between an educated native language literate intellectual class and an illiterate “peasantry” had existed for only decades in Sakha territory as opposed to centuries in Germany. The newness of this separation of people by

education paired with the Soviet push toward universal literacy and education likely prevented the valorization of the “simple folk” at least at this time, and contributed to the selection of *olonkho*, which was complex and required great skill to perform well, as the crowning cultural achievement of the Sakha, rather than simpler folk tales, blessings [*algis*], circle dances [*osuokhai*], or the playing of the jaw harp [*khomus*].

Rather than developing in the swirling cauldron of nationalism and colonialism in the nineteenth century, the development of Sakha national identity was directed from above, by the Soviet State. National identity was explored, assessed, and assigned by Soviet ethnographers and then bounded by Soviet geographers (Cruikshank and Argounova-Low 2000, 102). Many Sakha writers rose to the challenge of creating a body of national literature to accompany their status as a “nation” within the Soviet Union. However, the use of poetry as part of the engine which drives a nation along the timeline of history towards its destiny came with a caveat for all nationalities in the Soviet Union (Anderson 2006, 26). Those groups designated as “nations” by Soviet ethnographers were not free to pursue their own destinies, rather they were all bound together in the pursuit of building communism. The development of their national identity, literature, art, etc, were encouraged in such a way as to support that goal, with the hope that once Russian chauvinism had been obliterated and socialism had been achieved that these national distinctions would eventually fade away. As so succinctly put by Marina Frolova-Walker, “[...] the rhetorical strategies of romantic nationalism were retained, but yoked to new purposes” (Frolova-Walker 1998, 132). The Sakha were not free to blaze a trail toward the realization of Sakha greatness, rather the development of their national identity was

intended to stymie Great-Russian chauvinism and unite the Sakha with all other nations in service to the Soviet State.

The terms under which Sakha ethnic nationalism was nurtured had a profound impact on which cultural forms were chosen to represent the Sakha. Those forms which could be made to fit the bill of “national in form, socialist in content” such as national costumes, the playing of the jaw harp [*khomus*], and of course *olonkho* were encouraged and supported. Those which went against Soviet mores and goals such as shamanistic traditions were repressed. *Olonkho*, with its complexity, propensity for remediation into text, theater, etc, and lack (for the most part) of material that would be terribly objectionable to the Soviet State found itself in favorable position to become part of the backbone of the new Sakha literary tradition and a *korenizatsiia* friendly cultural traditional to be celebrated in the multi-ethnic Soviet State.

As Stalin, ascended to power however, ethnic empowerment became the crime of “bourgeois nationalism” (Martin 2001, 430). Due to threats from without, Stalin began to fear the possible disruption of nationalism within. Pan-Turkism was considered a threat and the Latin-based alphabet used by all nationalities with Turkic language, including the Sakha, was replaced with one based on Cyrillic (Martin 2001, 430). The glory days of the Sakha intelligentsia were over and its members began to fall prey to Stalinist paranoia. Many were killed or sent to prison camps during the “cultural revolution” of 1928 (Argounova-Low 2012, 42). Among those who survived the first wave of oppression but did not survive the Great Purge of the late 1930s were Platon Oiunskii himself who died in a prison hospital months after his arrest for “bourgeois nationalism” in 1939

(Abramov 2015, 108). The historian Gavril Ksenofontov was shot immediately following the trial where he was sentenced to death in 1938 (Ksenofontov 1992, 10). Despite the fears of ethnic nationalism, the performance and reading of *olonkho* was never fully banned, though Oiunskii's works were.

Olonkho continued to quietly persist in the villages and sometimes made it to the radio or recording studios. *Olonkhosuts* continued to gather in order to test their skills against one another. The study of the Sakha epic tradition also carried on. It is curious that *olonkho* survived Stalin's attempt to stamp out "bourgeois nationalism" despite being the center of Sakha national literature and a favorite subject of many who were purged. This may be, as prominent Sakha folklorist and head of the Folklore and Culture department at North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk Vasili Illarionov points out, due to Maxim Gorky's positive view of folklore as a possible positive influence on Soviet culture as a whole (interview with author July 11, 2016). Gorky was a leading Soviet cultural authority as well as a celebrated author. Indeed, in Gorky's famous 1934 speech to the Soviet Writers' Congress he states:

I again call your attention, comrades, to the fact that folklore, i.e., the unwritten compositions of toiling man, has created the most profound, vivid and artistically perfect types of heroes." He goes on to say, "It is most important to note that pessimism is entirely foreign to folklore, despite the fact that the creators of folklore lived a hard life; their bitter drudgery was robbed of all meaning by the exploiters, while in private life they were disfranchised and defenceless. Despite all this, the collective body is in some way distinguished by a consciousness of its own immortality and an assurance of its triumph over all hostile forces," [Gorky 2004].

Another possible reason for the survival of *olonkho* in the face of Stalin's purges was the strong tradition of using ethnography to direct policy that, as mentioned earlier,

began in the days of Peter the Great. Like the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union also relied on ethnographic data as a tool to manage its multi-ethnic population. Shortly after the revolution in 1917, Lenin was approached by a group of “ethnographers, geographers, linguists, and other scholars,” headed by secretary of the Academy of Sciences, Sergei F. Oldenburg (Hirsch 2005, 21). The importance placed on ethnographic and linguistic data fell in line with the desire to “use scientific data to turn Russia into a modern state” (Hirsch 2005, 22). The study of folklore was part and parcel of this goal. Knowledge of folklore traditions were useful as a measuring stick to see whether or not different ethnic groups were beginning to incorporate “...tales about the revolution, the civil war, Lenin, Stalin, and the ‘new life,’” into their repertoire (Hirsch 2005, 269). Using knowledge of folkloric patterns, writers could create paeans to the Soviet lifestyle to suit the traditions of each ethnic group and disseminate them like propaganda⁶. The Soviet State’s use of folklore as a propaganda tool through the great purges, the second world war, and well into the space race⁷ may account for the survival of *olonkho*. Despite the political upheaval and uncertainty during the time of the purges, Russian and Sakha folklorists traveled the countryside and studied *olonkho* from what some folklorists today consider to be the last generation of “real” *olonkhosuts*. Ethnographic work continued as well. Soviet

⁶ Several examples of official Soviet attempts at creating propaganda “folklore” can be found in *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917–1953* edited by James von Geldern and Richard Stites

⁷ A recording of “A song about the first cosmonaut” performed by T. Doidukov in traditional Sakha style can be found in the online archive Sakha Memory at <http://sakhmemory.ru/viewAudio.aspx?DocID=795&CategoryID=60>

Anthropologists also continued to conduct their censuses, tallying up citizens and dividing them up by native language ethnicity.

The Soviet Union was not against folklore itself per se and saw it as a positive tool to inspire “toilers” everywhere. The statements made by Gorky are echoed in the words of Sakha folklorists and pedagogues today. When asked why it was important to introduce *olonkho* to children and what values the epic promotes, many people to whom I have spoken have claimed that *olonkho* can in many ways be viewed as the “Sakha Bible” and provides valuable lessons about the triumph of good over evil.

When the second world war began, there was little or no money to contribute to the study of folklore. However, *olonkho* still managed to play a small role in the lives of Sakha during wartime and even contributed to the war effort. According to Illarionov, tickets to a theatrical production of “Nyurgun Bootur the Swift” written by Sakha writer Sourun Omollan were sold in order to raise money to buy a tank for Red Army during the war (interview with author July 11, 2016). This production enjoyed great popularity and was performed more than one hundred times. However, during the upheaval of the second world war, changes in the daily life of the Sakha were beginning to change the way that *olonkho* was performed. The movement of people from villages into the cities, the longer working hours mandated at collective enterprises, and restrictions on Soviet citizens ability to move as they liked, disrupted the traditional performance of *olonkho* which required the performer to wander from *alas* to *alas* (Illarionov 2006, 7). *Olonkho* performers were now

more likely to perform on stages at local houses of culture⁸. This disruption eventually contributed to the decline of traditional *olonkho* performance.

Many Sakha folklorists mentioned that the lack of an “epic environment” was a chief reason for the eventual “extinguishing” [*ugasanie*] of *olonkho*’s oral tradition. Their reason for this lies in the importance of improvisation in the performance of *olonkho*. Folklorists who recorded the performance of one *olonkho* by one *olonkhosut* several times over the years noticed a decline in variation and improvisation (Illarionov 2006, 20-22). These experts hypothesize that as *olonkhosuts* began to perform for (sometimes) larger audiences but with less frequency, their ability to improvise declined. The disappearance of the “epic environment” meant the disappearance of the “creative laboratory” of the *olonkhosut* (Illarionov 2006, 44).

After the war with new access to technology, folklorists again took to the field, this time with microphones, in order to record *olonkho* for posterity. Many of these recordings still exist and are archived at North-East Federal University. In 1970, by then rehabilitated Platon Oiunskii’s version of Niurgun Bootur Stremitelnii was recorded onto records and distributed as far away as Leningrad. It noteworthy that the performer of the recording, Gavril Kolesov was also a “Distinguished artist of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic” (Oiunskii 1975, 420). *Olonkhosuts* did in fact enjoy at least some level of renown during this period. *Olonkho* was also distributed over the radio in the sixties and

⁸ Houses of Culture were state owned buildings intended for the presentation of cultural events and the housing of culturally relevant films and books. In the introduction to *Reconstructing the House of Culture* Joachim Otto Habeck describes the House of Culture thus, “A venue for creative leisure and relaxation, a place of cultural production, a stage-for self-representation, The House of Culture performed the task of ‘carrying culture to the masses’” (Donohoe and Habeck 2011, 5)

seventies. Both in villages far from the capital though more than a decade apart, Olonkhosut Valentin Isakov as well as my mother-in-law (a professor at Yakutsk's Pedagogical Institute) recall their first experience with *olonkho* as hearing a terrifying voice coming from the radio, singing songs of demons and heroes. As well as indicating the importance of radio in the distribution of *olonkho*, these anecdotes indicate a lack of *olonkho* themed materials in Soviet era pedagogy. Andrei Borisov, former minister of culture of the Sakha Republic, as well as the founder of the Olonkho Theater, also was acquainted with *olonkho* by accident and lacked an understanding of what exactly he was hearing. He recalls being at a wedding in a village and hearing an old man begin to sing *olonkho*. This old man was soon told by other younger adults to “stop his wailing” (interview with author July 13, 2016). These anecdotes point to the some of the successes of Stalin's policy of Russification decades after his death, and the dominance of Soviet culture in the Yakut ASSR. While *olonkho* still survived, it did not enjoy the prestige it did before the 1930s.

Olonkho also played a role in the scholarship of the late Soviet period and was considered worthy of inclusion in Soviet anthropologists A.P. Okladnikov's 1970 archeological and ethnographic portrait of Yakutia before the arrival of the Russians. He draws comparisons between *olonkho* and ancient forms of epics of peoples of southern Siberia and declares it to be “testimony to the Southern origins of the Sakha”. He also makes the case that *olonkho* was protected from Buddhist influence by the movement of the Sakha to the North and that its chief worth is as a “relic in which the features of that archaic period have come down to us” (Okladnikov 286, 1970). These “features” include

evidence of daily life, agricultural practices, etc. Okladnikov was not the only one to view *olonkho* as a “pure” source of information about how the ancient Sakha lived. Many of the folklorists I spoke to over the course of my research referred to *olonkho* as being a site where ancient forms of language and cultural practices were preserved. Much earlier, in his 1937 history of the Sakha people *Uraangkhai Sakhalar*, the aforementioned Gavriil Ksenofontov stated, “It has become necessary to research the ancient history of the Sakha people, primarily, through material preserved by the Sakha themselves in their own language, legends, epics, and folklore in general” (Ksenofontov 1992, 14). The discourse of purity and authenticity of *olonkho* as well as the discourse of *olonkho* as a source of truths about Sakhaness and Sakha history was already well developed before the fall of the Soviet Union and the arrival of UNESCO and its funding.

It is worth noting that literary and scholarly interest in *olonkho* has, for the most part, been an internal and sincere affair for the Sakha. *Nyurgun Bootur* was not hunted down by a Russian folklorist to be recorded before its destruction via the onslaught of time, but rather recorded by a Sakha man who was himself studying to be an *olonkhusut*. The entextualization of *olonkho* had little to do with the “salvage paradigm” described by Janice Gurney as “an early 20th century anthropological term that describes the belief that it is necessary to preserve so-called “weaker” cultures from destruction by the dominant culture,” (“Janice Gurney”). Indeed there was very little need to “salvage” *olonkho* in the early twentieth century. The oral tradition passed from *olonkhusut* to *olonkhusut* was still alive and well and the process of remediating the epic was only barely beginning when it was first entextualized by Pekarskii. I argue rather, that the desire to incorporate *olonkho*

into the Sakha literary tradition has more to do with a desire for inclusion in the Russian dominated cultural sphere than a desire to protect it from obscurity or destruction. Benedict Anderson has described exclusion as a potent force for the creation of nationalism sentiment (2006,57). The Sakha, described as one of the many “backward” nations of the Soviet Union in a 1932 by a decree from the People’s Commissariat of Education were certainly excluded from the acclaim of high culture and their own scripts and cultural achievements were clearly either ignored or considered insufficient by Soviet standards. (Martin 2001, 167). This desire to be included was facilitated by the “affirmative action” policies mentioned earlier which attempted to circumvent Great Russian chauvinism. While the results of those policies were largely undone due to Stalin’s embrace of Russification at the end in the late 1930s, the desire of many Sakha to stand shoulder to shoulder with the great cultures of the world has persists to this day.

As we saw, the tradition of keeping the study of *olonkho* close to home continued throughout the Soviet era with Sakha folklorists recording the performances of such accomplished *olonkhosuts* as Gavril Kolesov and Darya Tomskaya. This tradition continues today with *olonkho* performers also contributing to and conducting their own research into Sakha epic heritage. This fact has allowed *olonkho* to stay largely in the hands of the Sakha themselves but as mentioned in the introduction it also makes the battle for the soul of *olonkho* more contentious.

The remediation of folklore can be seen as a dangerous enterprise that threatens the authenticity and spontaneity of an oral tradition. In their project to entextualize and “salvage” German folklore in the 19th century, the Brothers Grimm struggled to maintain

the purity of the works they collected without any “literary embellishments” (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 218). Their idea being that, in order for folklore to be used in nationalist projects, it must remain “pure” and untainted by the methods of the collector. In the beginning of his chapter about *olonkho*, Okladnikov is quick to point out that *olonkho* had been safe from writing and literature which have a “corrupting influence on epic creativity” (Okladnikov 1970, 263). For *olonkho*, there is much to be lost when it is remediated into a text: the unique voices of the characters, the improvisation of the *olonkhosut*, and social experience of viewing the performance *olonkho* in an audience. However, *olonkho* is now a fixture of Sakha literary tradition and considered a masterpiece. The preservation of the epic through text and audio recordings has allowed it to survive the fading away of the “epic environment” over the decades of Soviet rule.

The methods of entextualization and the social forces which accompanied the support of national development in the early Soviet period saved the text of *olonkho* but also contributed to the eventual disappearance of its traditional modes of performance. Due to the nature and ease of mass production of media in the twenty-first century it is likely that the majority of people today encounter *olonkho* through “fossilized” audio recordings played on the radio or on a record player or perhaps through a text version of *olonkho* in a high school class. *Olonkho*’s evolution as well as the seismic shifts in nationality policy under Soviet power allowed for its preservation but also laid the groundwork for many of the debates and controversies surrounding *olonkho* today.

Chapter 2: *Olonkho* and UNESCO’s Safeguarding Framework

While *olonkho* has weathered and adapted to the political and social changes throughout the soviet and post-soviet era, I will demonstrate how the single event that has most directly shaped the current institutional landscape surrounding *olonkho* revitalization has been its recognition by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a “masterpiece of intangible heritage” in 2005. The recognition prompted former Sakha president Vyacheslav Shtyrov to issue Presidential Order “On measures for the preservation, study, and distribution of the Sakha Heroic Epic, *Olonkho*”. This measure made provisions for the declaration of the Decade of *Olonkho* from 2006 to 2015, a monthly pension for certain renowned *olonkhosuts*, the founding of the *Olonkho* theater, the creation of a yearly Isyakh festival dedicated to epic poetry performance, a yearly television festival to be overseen by the minister of culture, as well as orders for the local parliament [*Il Tyumen*] to create more laws for the protection and distribution of *olonkho* (“*Ukaz Prezidenta*”). The UNESCO recognition was in many ways the starting gun for the creation of institutions and the competitive nature with which they have sought to revitalize *olonkho* and promote its reintegration into the lives of Sakha as a meaningful tradition

UNESCO’s adoption of the 2003 International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was the culmination of efforts dating back to the 1970s to protect folklore (Aikawa 2004, 137). The first effort in 1971 was centered around ensuring copyright protection for folklore and was spurred by a request from Bolivia that cultural patrimony of nations be added to the Universal Copyright Convention. However, it was

determined that it was not realistic to attempt to protect folklore via copyright (Aikawa 2004, 138). The use of the phrase “intangible cultural heritage” dates back to 1992 when UNESCO adopted a program of the same aim. The aims of the program were as follows:

to promote respect for intangible cultural heritage and recognition of the need for its preservation and transmission, and to acknowledge the crucial role of the practitioners and communities. As a modality of action, priority should be given to revitalization and transmission. An order of priority should be established among different forms of intangible cultural heritage to be safeguarded on the basis of the criterion ‘in danger of disappearing’ and their selection should be made by their actors/creators/practitioners and communities. [Aikawa 2004, 139]

In 1997, the project “Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” was added to the program of “Intangible Cultural Heritage”. Every two years, UNESCO would proclaim forms of traditional or popular culture as “masterpieces”. This project was created to “fill the gaps” the UNESCO concept of global heritage which had until then only included only “tangible and cultural heritage” (Aikawa 2004, 140). The proclamations began in 2001 with 19 masterpieces including the Carnival of Oruro in Bolivia, The Kun Qu Opera in China, and Georgian polyphonic singing. Finally, in 2003, the International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted, replacing a former 1989 “Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore”. Some of the main differences between the new convention and the old recommendation include the idea that heritage is “process and practices rather than end products”, “ recognition of this heritage as a source of identity, creativity, diversity and social cohesion”, as well as “guaranteeing the primary role of the artists/

practitioners/communities” (Aikawa 2004, 146). This convention represents a move away from this idea that intellectual property rights were central to protecting intangible heritage and move towards a focus on framework building within the tradition’s community in order to promote its preservation and transmission.

Olonkho was officially recognized as a masterpiece at the “Third Session of The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of The Intangible Heritage” in Istanbul on November 4th - 8th in 2005. This was the culmination of a two-and-a-half-year long process which involved two stages: the preparation and submission stage and the evaluation stage. In order for a tradition to be considered for protection by the International Heritage Fund it had to, among other criteria, be “in urgent need of safeguarding because its viability is at risk despite the efforts of the community, group, or if applicable, the individual(s) and State(s) Party(ies) concerned” or it must be “in extremely urgent need of safeguarding because it is facing grave threats as a result of which it cannot be expected to survive without immediate safeguarding.” A UNESCO report, describing *olonkho*’s situation stated that “the viability of the element has been threatened by linguistic changes and socio historical factors such as written language and literacy, book publishing, expansion of radio and television[...] In addition, repressive measures taken towards folklore and epic heritage almost interrupted the epic tradition. Mass media plays little attention to the epic” (2014 “Periodic Reporting”). It was with this interpretation of *olonkho*’s history that UNESCO agreed that it was eligible for safeguarding.

UNESCO’s goal in extending aid to intangible heritage is “safeguarding without freezing” (“Safeguarding Without Freezing”). The organization emphasizes

“transmission” of “knowledge, skills, and meaning” over protection of concrete performances. The protection of intangible heritage is angled toward ensuring that it will not be lost to future generations while recognizing that heritage is subject to change with the passage of time and that some elements will be abandoned while new ones are adopted. UNESCO, in accordance with the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adheres to the idea that traditions have “life cycles”, hence their commitment to not “freezing” the traditions they protect. The International heritage fund also emphasizes community involvement in protecting traditions:

They shall endeavor to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups, and individuals that create, maintain, and transmit intangible cultural heritage within the framework of their safeguarding activities and actively involve them in its management.”[“Involvement of communities, groups and individuals”]

This pattern of community involvement has proven to be true in the case of *olonkho* and the community dedicated to it. UNESCO has in the past denied traditions based on the inability of the local community to support the tradition. Carol Silverman stated this about the rejection of the recognition proposal for “Galick Wedding Ceremony which included many traditional dances in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia:

Galičnik wedding customs precisely fit UNESCO’s definition of ICH (Kličkova and Georgieva [1951] 1996).⁸ However, the actual inhabitants of Galičnik, the grassroots connection, were missing. [2015, 240]

Part of the reason for the rejection was the fact that the village where the wedding ceremony is usually held, is only occupied year-round by two people and the Wedding ceremony as it exists today is only performed for tourists. Silverman goes on to state the “festivalization” of intangible heritage in part to promote tourism is not inherently a

disqualifier for UNESCO consideration, but rather that it is hard to make a case for a tradition that has no grassroots support in the local community and is forced to persist only to draw tourist money.

UNESCO's periodic reports indicate that the progress the epic has made in terms of framework building since its recognition to be a success story. A report from 2014 recounts the steps taken toward the preservation of the epic. It cites the development of a framework for preservation comprised of local organizations such as the National Organizing Committee for the Olonkho Decade, the Culture and Spiritual Development Ministry of Yakutia, the Olonkho Association, the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North; the Olonkho Research Institute of North-Eastern Federal University, the National Schools Research Institute; and the Republic Olonkho Centre. In addition to the mobilizing of these institutions, the recognition also has resulted in the local parliament [*Il Tyumen*] passing legislation to protect *olonkho* and encourage participation in *olonkho* related activities ("Periodic Reporting"). Such legislation includes the "State Targeted Programme for Preserving, Studying and Promoting the Yakut Heroic Epos (2007–15)". Other important actions mentioned in the report are the founding of the *Olonkho* Theater by former minister of Culture Andrei Borisov, the designation of November 25th as *Olonkho* Day, the opening of *olonkho* storytelling schools for children, ten expeditions to identify regional heritage, and joint expeditions to explore Turkic-Mongolian oral heritage in other regions of Russia and the former Soviet Union. UNESCO optimistically reports that "community participation in safeguarding is high" and mentions that formal as well as non-formal means of

transmission of *olonkho* are now being fostered among children (“Periodic Reporting”). The scholars, performers, and experts I interviewed all seemed in agreement that the 2005 recognition was an important turning point in the direction of resources and attention towards *olonkho*.

The epic is now being explored and celebrated from many different perspectives. Sakha academics, who are sometimes (as in the case of Iurii Borisov) performers as well as researchers, study *olonkho* from an ethnomusicological, linguistic, and literary standpoint. They study regional differences in performance, narrative, and characterization. Performers portray *olonkho* and *olonkho* themed materials in modern minimalist styles as well as in rich costumes attempting to recreate the richness and abundance described in the epic. On social media networks such as vkontakte⁹, young people create fan-art of their favorite *olonkho* characters in Japanese anime style and have created comic books telling the stories of epic heroes.

⁹ Vkontakte meaning “in touch” is a social media site and can best be described the Russian version of Facebook

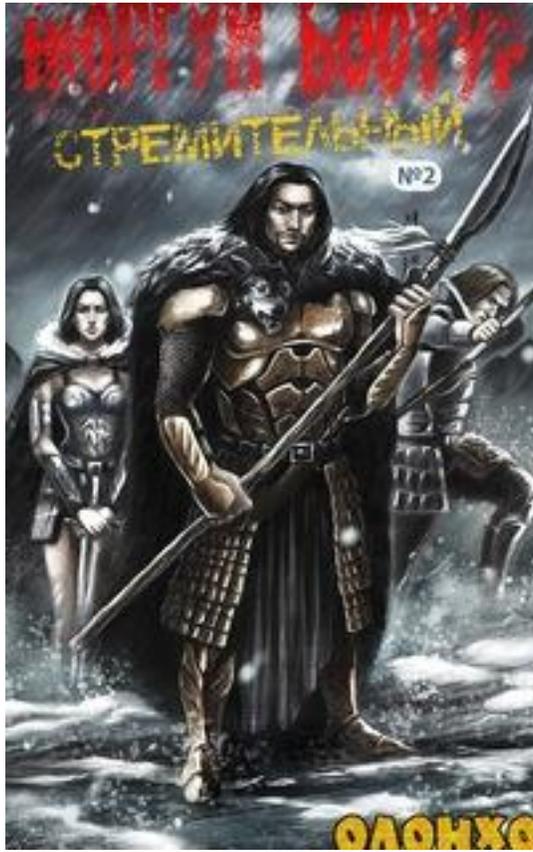


Illustration 3: Cover of the second issue of a *Niurgun Bootur Stremitel'nyy* comic (*Olonkhocomics*)

The institution mentioned in the UNESCO report with which I had the closest communication during my fieldwork was the Scientific Research Institute of Olonkho (SRI Olonkho). This institute was founded in 2010 by order of Evgenia Mikhailova, the rector of the North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. With the goal to “fill the vacuum of study of the epic to place upon the institute the enormous responsibility of formulating and spreading a scientific understanding of the pan human environment of the Sakha epic” (*“Ob institute”*). As with most institutions, projects, and programs created after 2005, the UNESCO recognition is mentioned prominently on the “about” page. The website bases

the Institute's uniqueness on the fact that it is "the only institute in the world which specifically studies the problems of consciousness and propagation of the monument of the Sakha heroic epic *olonkho* which in 2005, received the highest status of a UNESCO masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage."

The institute is tucked away in a far-flung wing on the first floor of the "Main" building on the campus of North Eastern Federal University. This structure is built in a neoclassical style with columns out front and painted the pale yellow that one often sees in Russian cities. This is in stark contrast to the reflective curvature of the modern looking physical and natural sciences building which is its closest neighbor. Despite its name, the "Main Building" no longer houses the university's main administrative body or the offices of important university officials. Its name is a holdover from its time as the "main" building of Yakutsk State University before it was transformed into North-Eastern Federal University in 2009 as part of the Former Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's decree for the creation of a federal university system. The building now houses the Institute of the East, another of the University's research institutes, a few offices, and an English language learning center. A prestigious Sakha language children's school recently occupied the second floor but has since been relocated to another building on the University campus.

Though the dimly lit corridors leading to the Institute are poorly kept and one must be wary of loose or crumbling tiles, the SRI Olonkho welcomes visitors with a large golden sign. Once through the wooden doors, the short hallway is lined with glass cases that display *olonkho* texts in book form with decorative covers. On the right, you can find an office space as well as the office of the director of the Institute, Vasily Ivanov. On the left

you will find the large open office with high ceilings that houses several computer desks as well as the *balagan* which dominates the space.

The goal of the SRI Olonkho as stated on its mission page is as follows, “the implementation of research activities on the complex of scientific problems of the Sakha heroic epic in the context of the entire genre system of Sakha folklore and its comparison with the epic heritage of the peoples of the world as well as the preservation, development, and scientific interpretation of *olonkho*”. The institute clearly has a many faceted mission and is divided into sectors to accomplish different goals. These sectors include: “The heroic epic *olonkho*”, “The *Olonkho* Information System”, “Olonkho and the epics of the peoples of the world”, “Translation of *olonkho* into the languages of the peoples of the world”, “Epic heritage and the contemporary world”, and “the epic and ethnic history”. These sectors and their goals in many ways reflect some of the controversies and desires that surrounded *olonkho* at the beginning of the Soviet era. Once again *olonkho* is being presented as the chief cultural achievement and also as a site of Sakha values and cultural history. Just as *olonkho* still had much to offer those Sakha whose living conditions fluctuated rapidly with the needs, whims, and growing pains of the Soviet States, many Sakha educators, folklorists, and political figures believe it still has much to offer Sakha almost a century later. Also enduring is the theme of comparison though now in a different way. Now *olonkho* is studied alongside other “epics of the peoples of the world” such as the Kyrgyz *Manas* the Finnish *Kalevalu*. This is perhaps a fairer “apples to apples” comparison than the early Soviet examination of *olonkho* and *olonkho* themed compositions against the avant-garde stylings of the prolet-cult and 19th century Russian

novels and operas discussed in the previous chapter. The Sakha are no longer struggling for a place among the nations of the Soviet Union for recognition as a “non-backward” people, but rather for global recognition. The desire to assert *olonkho*’s worth and belonging in a great human canon of some kind is still there.

In the early 20th century, the chief goal toward the preservation and propagation of *olonkho* was its entextualization and recording, one of the most important goal of SRI Olonkho at the beginning of the 21st century is to translate it into different languages¹⁰. The translation of the epic and academic materials regarding it is one of the *Scientific Research Institute of Olonkho*’s chief activities. The institute’s website has this to say about the need to translate the epic: “The translation of *olonkho* into the languages of the peoples of the world is one of the priorities of the institute and suggests spreading the text of *olonkho* globally and facilitates the study of the Sakha by scientists from other countries” (“*Sektor: perevod olonkho na iazyki narodov mira*”). The desire to translate and promote *olonkho* abroad fits with the pattern of seeking international recognition demonstrated by many of the scholars and performers I spoke with. So far the institute has supported and participated in the translation of several academic articles about *olonkho* by such notable figures as Sakha intellectual and writers Suorun Omolloon and Platon Oiunskii, *olonkho* experts such as I.V. Pukhov, and soviet anthropologist A.P. Okladnikov. The institute has also facilitated the translation of several *olonkho*. Perhaps the most famous *olonkho*, “*Niurgun Bootur Stremitelni*” has been translated into English. Ogotoev’s “*Eles Bootur*”

¹⁰ It should be noted here that translations of *olonkho* into Russian have existed since the early twentieth century and are not a high priority in the *Scientific Research Institute of Olonkho*

has been translated into both English and French and Zakharov's "*Cheebii*" has been translated into Turkish and Russian. The Institute has also participated in translation exchanges. The Kyrgyz epic *Manas* has been translated into Sakha and "*Niurgun Bootur Stremitelni*" has been translated into Kyrgyz.

When asked why it is important to translate *olonkho*, folklorist with the Svetlana Mukhopleva of the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North stated that it is important because the Sakha epic contains values that all humans share, "it teaches us to be human in all circumstances" (interview with author, 14 July 2016). This statement was echoed by Sakha pedagogical expert and poet *Kechime*, who added that the epic describes how people came to populate the earth, and how all of the earth's people are blessed by Sakha gods and spirits (interview with author, July 12th, 2016). The attitude prevails that while *olonkho* is uniquely Sakha in its language and performance, it is also universal in the messages about human nature and the struggle between good and evil. The inevitable triumph of good over evil was the common answer when asked about *olonkho*'s most important modern humanist message. SRI *Olonkho* folklorist Varvara Oboiukova shared with me that one the lesson of the epic is that "the tribe *Aii Aimaga* always win with their smarts and they never lose hope" (interview with author, July 12th, 2016). When asked specifically why *olonkho* should be translated into other languages, she replied, "We translate so that other people can know our folklore and epics. It gives them an opportunity to look at their OWN culture from a different point of view and maybe revive their own traditions." She did however repeat the common refrain that Sakha epic poetry is like the bible. This is a sentiment passed down to her from her

teacher, famous *olonkhosut* Gavril Kolesov and echoed by many folklorists and performers including Mukhopleva. None of my informants delved deeply into the comparison with the bible but when combined with other statements made about the import of *olonkho* we can list the “biblical” qualities of the epic: a mythologized early history of the Sakha people, a collection of spiritual practices and deities, as well as narratives providing life lessons to Sakha.

Despite the SRI Olonkho’s dedication to distributing written translations of *olonkho*, the views of the Institute and its members regarding what constitutes “real *olonkho*” and its performance are centered around how they believe the epic was performed before the advent of Soviet power, collectivization, and industrialization. The emphasis remains set on defining *olonkho* as “theater of one man” [*teatr odnogo cheloveka*], a phrase often used by scholars describing Sakha epic performance, in a setting as close as possible to the “epic environment”. This conservative attitude toward *olonkho* is shared by the director of the Institute, Vasily Ivanov. He holds the opinion that only the performance of the epic by an *olonkhosut* can be considered *olonkho*. According to Ivanov, the written texts of the epic are not *olonkho*, audio recordings are a better way of preserving traditional performance. However he discussed with pride the 2014 publication of an English translation of Oiunskii’s “Niurgun Bootur the Swift” and stated his happiness that now *olonkho* can be found in libraries all over the world. He also expressed that much of the epic’s value is in its universality and contains values that all people shared. He claims that Platon Oiunskii intended for *olonkho* to be shared with others (interview with the author, 13 July 2016). Ivanov’s ideas about the Sakha’s greatest cultural and literary achievement

echo back to the previous chapter's discussion of the struggle of the Sakha to gain recognition for their work beyond of the level of an indigenous curiosity. The director of the Institute proudly reminisced about a letter he had received from a colleague in Spain declaring that *olonkho* was a greater epic than even the *Illiad*. For some Sakha, it seems that the desire to distribute their epic is not only a desire to share its universal value to humanity, but also to ensure that *olonkho* claims its place in the pantheon of global cultural achievement.

While the members of the Institute seem to recognize the “universal values” of *olonkho* and claim it should be read by all, they value the epic poems for their “Sakhaness”. Oboiukova described as “a great epic written by a great people” and the “riches/wealth” of the Sakha people (interview with the author, 14 July 2016). The SRI Olonkho then serves to protect and preserve these riches as they exist in their “traditional” form, hence their recreation of traditional performance spaces such as the *balagan* as an approximation of the epic environment. According to Oboiukova, other less traditional forms of *olonkho* themed performance are useful as propaganda, but the institute will become “the base of preservation of *olonkho*”. I will address in the next chapter, the SRI Olonkho's work to ensure that *olonkho* is handled “properly” in the modern era. These more conservative views are shared by the Institute's younger researchers, such as Iurii Borisov. When asked how the performance of *olonkho* might evolve in the future, he was adamant that *olonkho* is “archaic” and “should not be changed” [*olonkho menyat ne ctoit*]. He goes on to say, “Among the people [*sredi naroda*] there is this idea that in the modern world, we can write a modern epic. But that epic would just be a literary composition and

would not be a real epic” (interview with the author July 11th, 2016). This belief was echoed by every other academically affiliated folklorist or *olonkho* researcher I spoke with. Although the institute’s stance remains firm on what is and is not “authentic *olonkho*”, it has not stopped the organization from becoming involved in and attempting to police the creation of these new epics in an advisory role. The next chapter will discuss a meeting between folklorists and an *olonkho* writer held in the *balagan* inside the SRI Olonkho

Another organization lauded by UNESCO as being part of the “framework” of safeguarding is the *Olonkho Theater*. The presidential order mentioned earlier in this chapter called for the for the theater’s founding after *olonkho*’s recognition by UNESCO. This directive was later confirmed in a government order entitled “On the State Cultural Institution ‘the *Olonkho Theater*’. The first performance “On the Waves of Life” took place in Yakutsk in 2009. The director and founder of the theater is former minister of culture, Andrei Savvich Borisov. Borisov believes that his theater is just as important as institutions dedicated to preserving *olonkho* in its traditional form stating, “If *olonkho* stays on the level of folklore, it will only attract folklorists”. A Russian/English ebooklet about the history of theater that can be accessed from the theater’s website states the theater’s grand future goals: “In the future the Theater of Olonkho will become another stage in the consolidation of ethnic self-consciousness of the Sakha people. According to the intention of the creators today, the Theater of Olonkho will preserve Yakut culture in a much broader aspect including the preservation of the richness of the native language, diversity of musical and song culture of the people, spiritual and moral values, ensuring

the continuity of traditions.” This statement by the theater indicates that *olonkho* means much more than simply folklore to many Sakha. It points to the fact that in many ways, *olonkho* itself has become an avatar of Sakhaness. Thus by supporting and popularizing *olonkho* the theater can make the claim above that they are supporting Sakha culture, morals, native language, etc. The epic does not simply represent an oral or literary tradition, but Sakha traditions, plural. I understand the phrase “ethnic self-consciousness” [etnicheskoe samosoznanie] here as knowledge of what it means to be Sakha as well as increasing knowledge and pride in the national epic. This echoes the statements made by prominent Sakha folklorists that *olonkho* is like the bible to some Sakha. It teaches them how a proper Sakha should act and connects them to a pre-Russian past. For the *Olonkho* Theater, preserving the epic includes preserving the cultural sphere surrounding it, preserving the intent rather than the form of the epic as it was performed before the coming of Soviet Power. It is the content of the epic and its role in Sakha identity that is most important.

Despite his disagreements with the conservative approach taken by the *SRI Olonkho* which tends to look down upon theatrical interpretations of *olonkho*, Andrei Borisov shares many of their ideas about the origins and importance of the epic. An important one of these is that *olonkho* is not written, it is gifted by the cosmos. According to Borisov, one must “open their antenna” and receive it. The concept of the national epic as a gift of the universe is shared by the scholars I interviewed and is considered an integral part of *olonkho*’s authenticity and its importance in the creation of new *olonkho* compositions will be discussed in the following chapter. Borisov also shares the desire to have *olonkho*

recognized as a body of work of global importance and makes similar comparisons to the folklorists. Like institute director Ivanov, he compares *olonkho* to the works of Homer. When asked about how much *olonkho* themed material there was to create new theatrical productions, he declared, “Shakespeare weeps at all the different plots there are in *olonkho*. There are at least 180 years left for the theater”.

The theater currently has no permanent home for its performances and stages many of its performances at the Oiunskii Sakha Theater in Yakutsk on Ordzhonikidze Square. Some members of the theater have expressed that it is a shame that the government of the Sakha Republic has not provided a home for them. While the theater’s website lists the site of the Sakha Theater as the Olonkho Theater Company’s address, I was invited to conduct interviews with two of the company’s actors at an office down the street. The office was decorated with the theater’s promotional posters. This building is shared by several Sakha governmental organizations: The Ministry of Youth and Family Matters, The Republic Center for Physical Education and Child-Youth Sports in the Sakha Republic, and the alcohol licensing bureau. The Sakha branch of the Russia-wide famous youth sketch comedy competition “Club of Funny and Inventive People” [KVN] also shares the space. It should come as no surprise that the Olonkho Theater works in such close proximity to governmental organizations. As mentioned, the origins of the theater itself lie in a governmental order. The theater’s founder was the Minister of Culture of the Sakha Republic at the time of its creation and he still holds government office today. The current director of the theater Maria Turantaeva worked as an assistant to a member of the local parliament [*Il-Tiumen*]. It is mentioned in her bio that she participated in a forum

entitled “The Spiritual Potential of Society in the Innovative Development of Yakutia” in 2013 and was instrumental in the passing of the law “On Culture” in the *Il Tiumen* (“*O nac*”). Given the theater’s origins and its current management, it is clear that the theater’s mission is sanctioned by the state and part of the greater cultural development strategy of the Sakha Government which of course includes the SRI Olonkho as well.

Productions at the theater are widely varied in terms of aesthetic and theatrical style. This ranges from the pageantry of the production of the “Legend of Ellei Bootur”, which describes deeds the mythical founder of the Sakha using vividly colored national costumes and a screen behind the stage depicting running water, stars, and other backgrounds to the minimalist staging and costuming of the *olonkho* “Udaganki” which tells the story of two female shamans. “Udaganki” is a good example of how the theater seeks to pay homage to the traditions of *olonkho* while presenting a dramatized version of the plot for audiences. The cast of the play includes an *olonkhusut* who serves as a narrator and utilizes a vocal style mimicking that of an epic performer. It can also be argued that the use of simple props which include only long wooden poles, a large cloth, and two balloons and plain gray costumes served as an incentive for the audience to engage their imagination as they would have when listening to the performance of a single *olonkhusut*.

“Udaganki” makes no effort to shy away from the sexual elements found in the Sakha epic tradition. After the two female shamans have claimed their husbands as a reward for their services to village, the two couples simulate sex as rhythmic music plays in the background. Later, in an interview with actress Matrena Kornilova who played the role of the *olonkhusut*, she revealed that the one couple was attempting to mimic the style

of birds mating, and the other horses mating. The large balloons were then used to humorous effect during a childbirth scene. The Shamans scream and grimace with balloons under their dresses. Their balloons are popped and two grown men emerge from between their legs, crying like babies. The audience laughs when they realize that the “babies” are the actors who played the fathers of the Shaman’s husbands.

The theater spares no effort in acknowledging its origins in the UNESCO recognition. The pages of the theater’s website include an image of the UNESCO certificate of Recognition, the full texts of the Presidential order “On measures for the preservation, study, and distribution of the Sakha Heroic Epic, *Olonkho*”, and copy of the 2009 governmental order. The frequent mention of UNESCO on the *Olonkho* Theater website once again demonstrates the organization’s authenticating power and supports the argument that work of the theater is important. The inclusion of the presidential order emphasizes the theater’s role in the protection of the national epic. Indeed, the large website of the theater is indicative that its goals are much broader than staging and performing dramatized version of epic poems. There a visitor can access a page which includes the biographies and photographs of *olonkhosuts* both living and deceased. The site includes a virtual bookshelf where visitors can read *olonkho* as well as histories of the theater itself. Also included on the bookshelf are a guide to UNESCO Masterpieces, a copy of the Sakha translation of the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, books about “northern” dances and musical instruments, and a guide to the Archy Center for Spiritual Culture in Yakutsk where visitors can tour reconstructions of traditional Sakha buildings, receive a blessing from a shaman, and hold wedding ceremonies. Once again we see *olonkho* being used as a sign

of Sakhaness. As an active participant and arbiter of epic culture, the theater finds itself in the appropriate position to distribute other knowledge of other cultural forms as well. It should be mentioned that the site contains text in both Russian and Sakha language.

In addition to spurring the development and support of new institutions dedicated to the study and performance of *olonkho*, the UNESCO recognition has provided support to those performers who still adhere to the old oral traditions. Before their deaths famous *olonkhosuts* such as Darya Tomskaya received a pension from UNESCO as a keeper of *olonkho* tradition. Valentin Isakov, the performer highlighted in the introduction of this thesis has since been recognized as an epic performer and receives a stipend (interview with the author, 25th July 2016). The original text of the UNESCO document only named Darya Tomskaya and Petr Reshetnikov. This indicates that a willingness is emerging to recognize a new generation of *olonkhosuts* as “authentic” and worthy of state support. This act of naming new recipients seems to demonstrate a desire to move forward with *olonkho* and all its traditions despite the breaking of the chain of purely oral transmission of the epic and the fading of the epic environment. This is also consistent with the Heritage Fund’s recognition and that traditions have a cycle and their commitment to “safeguarding without freezing”.

Oral heritage has also worked its way into the commercial life of the Sakha. While strolling through the city center along Poyarkova street, you can see the *Olonkho* shopping center which does not specialize in stores selling items of national dress or Sakha art, but rather is home to a children’s clothing store, a jeweler, a pharmacy, a payday loan center, and other shops important to everyday middle class life. One of Yakutsk’s many fur stores

takes its name from Tuiaarima Kuo, the epic beauty who was nearly sawed in half in Valentin Isakov's demon song. The monument to Platon Oiunskii on one of the central city squares includes a scaffolding covered with plates engraved with selections from his *olonkho*. Also worth mentioning are the establishments: a sauna, sports complex, and billiard hall named after Ellei Bootur the legendary founder of the Sakha people. While Ellei Bootur is not among the many numbered cast of characters of *olonkho* he is another example of the integration of folkloric and legendary themes into the daily life of the Sakha and how they have come to represent Sakhaness in general. Sakha folkloric heritage is ubiquitous in the Yakutsk and may serve as a reminder of both ethnic identity and specifically Sakha cultural achievement in the modern capital.

The institutions supported and put into place following UNESCO's recognition of *olonkho* as a masterpiece of intangible heritage continue to grow and remain active in their mission to promote and increase interest in Sakha epic poetry. The members of the *Olonkho* Theater and the SRI Olonkho envision a role for their organizations in the future and are convinced of the necessity of the work they do. The ways in which each organization go about fulfilling their missions differ, however. Although there is general agreement on the origins, relevance, and worthiness of *olonkho* as the greatest cultural and literary tradition of the Sakha, the real disagreements with lie in what constitutes "authentic" epic heritage and what is the best way to attract interest and preserve it. Despite these conflicts, the creation of a "safe-guarding framework" seems to have been successful. However, whether these measures will be enough to ensure continued interest and transmission of *olonkho* to subsequent generations remains to be seen. The debates

over the authenticity and the attempts to embed Sakha epic poetry into the social and cultural fabric of the younger generation will be documented in the following chapters.

Chapter 3: “Real *Olonkho*”: The Epic and the Authenticity Debate

Since funding and government support for *olonkho* has become more available after the UNESCO recognition in 2005, the proper way to preserve and ensure that transmission of the national epic has become a point of controversy. The debates held around how *olonkho* should be safeguarded center largely around whether to prioritize authenticity or accessibility. In this chapter I will discuss in greater depth the viewpoints of the institutions which support *olonkho* and *olonkho*-related performance and the ways in which their views manifest within the safeguarding framework. I will also discuss current efforts to create new epic themed compositions and how these have been received by the institutions supporting *olonkho*. UNESCO’s reliance on community participation in the transmission and preservation of the Sakha epic has facilitated a conversation about the handling of Sakha epic heritage that leaves room for contestation and competing manifestations of *olonkho* traditions.

One of the first points of contentions is whether or *olonkho* still exists as an oral tradition. Many Sakha folklorists, including Aitalina Kuzmina of the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North, working on *olonkho* today share the belief that the last “real” *olonkhosuts*, Darya Tomskaya (1913-2008) of the Verkhoyansky *ulus* and Petr Reshetnikov of the Taattinsky *ulus*(1929-2013) have died. The “authenticity” of these epic performers was affirmed by the Sakha government when both were recognized and granted stipends by the order the President in the Order “For the preservation, study, and distribution of the Sakha Heroic Epic” discussed in the previous chapter. To many, their deaths represent the final severing of the

chain of oral transmission of *olonkho*, meaning that they were last performers to whom the epic was transmitted without the use of written texts or other media. Those *olonkho* performers that exist today such as Valentin Isakov who performed his demon song in the *balagan*, cannot truly be considered to be “real” *olonkhosuts* because they learned their epic with the help of texts and radio broadcasts. It could be argued that the *olonkhosuts* today are too far removed from the epic environment to be “authentic”. The kernel of this particular controversy lies in that if the oral tradition has passed into history, so too has *olonkho* itself.

Folklorists at the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North, have suggested that today’s epic performers should be called something else, and not *olonkhosuts*. The desire to revive *olonkho* after the decline of state enforced Soviet culture in a social atmosphere that sometimes prioritizes spectacle and commercializing of culture and heritage, has led to a policing of *olonkho* by those invested in its study. Kuzmina expressed that there exist today only writers and performers. “They are rude to folklorists”, she added (interview with the author July 14, 2016). She asserts that not one of today’s performers [*ispolniteli*] can recite an epic poem in its entirety. Another folklorist at the Center, Nadezhda Orosina, added that “people are not ready to admit that *olonkho* is in the past” (interview with the author July 14, 2016). The Center’s colleagues at the SRI *Olonkho* echo this viewpoint and it is not limited to the older generation. Indeed, Orosina herself was twenty-seven years old at the time my interview with her and the Institute’s Iurii Borisov, also twenty-seven has made similar claims about the extinction of *olonkhosuts*. While he himself competes in *olonkho* competitions and

sings epic poetry, he prefers to refer to himself as a “performer” [*ispolnitel*]. Expressing a more inclusive viewpoint, modern day *Olonkhosut* Valentin Isakov has expressed the necessity of flexibility in terms of what is and is not epic performance. Isakov has taken a more liberal stance on who should call themselves an *olonkhosut*, but stated that perhaps the title should be denied to those who “come to the festivals and sing the exact same selection year after year” (interview with the author July 26th, 2016).

The second controversy revolves around the creation of new *olonkho* compositions. Dr. Vasily Illarionov, a prominent *olonkho* researcher and head of the Department of Culture and Folklore at North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, has stated his opposition to the idea of the creation of new *olonkho* texts entirely. According to Illarionov, an *olonkho* is the composition of the people [*narod*]. A new epic cannot simply be created by one person, it is accumulated over the course of generations. Some of Illarionov’s work centers on the role of the “epic environment” in facilitating the health of an epic. He states that frequent performance in an authentic environment encourages improvisation. Through this improvisation, over the course of many years, an epic is composed. If the improvisational feature of epic performance is absent, the composition stagnates. The authentic “epic environment” refers here to a pre-industrial time when *olonkhosuts* wandered from homestead to homestead to perform. The coming of industry and the Soviet planned economy led to the often forced concentration of Sakha in towns and village centers thus disrupting the epic environment. Illarionov’s work discusses how as *olonkhosuts* were marginalized in Soviet society and confined to performances at special

events at collectivized farms [*kolkhozi*] and houses of culture, their performances included less frequent improvisations and variation.

The conservative folklorists at the SRI Olonkho and the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North believe it is their duty to become involved with those who perform and write new *olonkho* themed materials in order to research the new trends that develop, as well as in an advisory capacity to make sure that the new creations remain true to the spirit of *olonkho*. An example of the consultation between new *olonkho* writers and the academic sphere of *olonkho* took place at the SRI Olonkho inside the *balagan*. In 2016, a writer from the Taatta *ulus*, Akulina Egasova was in the process of writing an *olonkho*. The concept of an *olonkho* writer is an entirely new phenomenon. Those epics that had been “written” were entextualized versions of *olonkho* that existed in the repertoire of living performers. The idea that a Sakha person could put pen to paper and compose a new epic in this way is controversial and as we have discussed, many would not view the composition as an *olonkho* at all. While the epic has been composed as a text, Egasova told me that she is working with an epic performer in her home region who has already begun to perform pieces of her work (interview with the author, July 12th, 2016). Egasova, escorted by her daughter, met with members of the *SRI Olonkho* as well as with an expert in *olonkho*-based education.

In light of all traditions being turned on their heads in Egasova’s case, the way she describes her *olonkho* as having come to her coincides with the way that the epic has come to her. As I described in the previous chapter, *olonkho* is gifted to the performer from “the cosmos”. Egasova has stated that this is true for her was. Prior to the past year, she had no

desire to write *olonkho*, but then her epic came to her, “I just walk and the words of *olonkho* come to me, from where I don’t know. Once the words come, the *olonkho* is already inside me” (interview with the author, July 12th, 2016). She told me that she saw visions of lakes, birds, and birds of prey wheeling in the sky overhead. She said the story of her hero came to her from an unknown place, she does not search for it. Whether or not Egasova engages with *olonkho* in a traditional way, she describes a very real connection to strong forces that provide her with these images.

Egasova is not the only one to feel a powerful spiritual connection with the past and with ancestors while interacting with *olonkho* in new ways. Matrena Kornilova, an actress with the *Olonkho* Theater described feeling the influence of her ancestors, of not knowing how her performance was going to be affected by them on a daily basis. To her, being an *olonkhosut*, in the production “*Udaganki*” was much more than playing a role on the stage and was a different experience from the non-epic roles she had played in the past. For her, representing such a powerful figure as an *olonkhosut* requires a substantial spiritual investment and responsibility. Much like Egasova described the words of *olonkho* coming to her from an unknown place or “the cosmos”, Kornilova related to me the experience of having her ancestors speak through her. She stated that she never quite knew how their presence would impact a performance from night to night (interview with the author July 20th, 2014). Engaging with *olonkho* in any way, no matter how far divorced from the ancient or pre-Russian past, is powerful.

However, the culture of preservation and authenticity in many ways still dominates the academic side of *olonkho* study and management. As mentioned earlier, Folklorists at

the Center for the Humanities have expressed a desire for a consultative role in the creation of new materials. Egasova's meeting with the *Olonkhko* Institute indicates that the scholars there are also seeking such a role and with that role can engage in a policing of the expression of the powerful spiritual experience described by Egasova and Kornilova.

One particular example involves a small controversy over what kind of language should be used in the writing of Egasova's new epic. The language of *olonkho* is different from the standard Sakha spoken today. Indeed, one of the reasons mentioned for the preservation of *olonkho* is the need preserve for study and posterity the archaic and ancient Sakha language it houses. During Egasova's meeting with SRI Olonkho scholars in the *bbalagan*, a debate broke out as to whether or not it was appropriate for Egasova to use a dictionary to search for Sakha words in the older style to use in her epic. Egasova herself claimed that sometimes she has no words for the images in her mind and that it is right for her to look into the Sakha language of the past to find the proper descriptors for what she sees. One folklorist in particular, Varvara Oboiukova, vehemently disagreed with this position. In her opinion, the *olonkho* came to Egasova and thus Egasova should use the language she herself possesses in her writing of the epic. Filtering the gift of the cosmos through the medium of a dictionary or attempting to mimic the language used in previous *olonkho* would be more inauthentic than using modern Sakha speech. Most important to this scholar was the idea that the creation of the epic not be influenced by outside forces and that the spiritual connection be preserved.

After the meeting about Egasova's *olonkho*, I conducted an interview with this folklorist. Oboiukova describes herself as having a very meaningful relationship with the

epic and spoke of the necessity of engaging with it on spiritual level. She expressed worry about the damaging relationship that literature and the epic can have on one another. However, she recognized that today's performers and writers of *olonkho* must be supported or else the "genetic component" of engagement with *olonkho* might be lost. Like many, she believes that the Sakha of today need genuine interaction with their epic, but wants to preserve the authenticity of the epic as far as is possible.

There is clearly a tension between the desire to create *olonkho* themed material that approaches "authentic" *olonkho* and the desire to create compositions and performances that resonate with Sakha on a personal level. Actress Matrena Kornilova described to me how these tensions can cast a pall on *olonkho* expression. She told me that when an epic themed production is put on in the city, many academics try to find fault and decry the inauthenticity of their performance. However, she claimed, when the theater company goes on tour in the villages of all the *uluses*, they are always met with a warm reception. The implied conflict here is between city dwelling academics who believe they understand what *olonkho* is and should be based on data collected in field expeditions, with simple villagers who are more deeply connected to the Sakha past and have a better feel for the spiritual meaning of *olonkho*. These caricatures of the out of touch "city-folk" and "simple villagers" do not simply apply to discussions revolving around Sakha folklore but also to many areas concerning what it means to be Sakha.

A person born in the *uluses* tends to be seen as more authentically Sakha. When describing her pride in being Sakha, Oboiukova made it a point to mention that she had been born in the village. The claim that the Olonkho Theater is well loved in the villages

is a claim to authenticity of their interpretation of *olonkho*. The views of the academics are secondary to the views of the “real” people, despite the village roots claimed by many involved in the study of *olonkho* today. In an article describing the village-city dichotomy and tensions within the Sakha Republic, Dr. Tatiana Argounova-Low writes about her own experience as a Sakha woman who was born in the capital city of Yakutsk:

A Sakha person is often asked about his origin: "Where do you come from?" [*Khantan syl'dagan*], in reply one is expected to name the ulus of one's origin or that of one's parents. A few years ago an elderly woman told me off when I, born in Yakutsk, introduced myself as from the city. She frowned: "Nobody can be from the city, we [Sakha] all have roots and we all have our homeland. To say you are from the city is almost to say you have no mother." [2007, 54]

In another work, Argounova-Low discusses the Soviet repression of Tatta village because it was perceived as a “Sakha heartland” and site of Sakha nationalist resistance (2012, 107). It is also worth noting that because of Platon Oiunskii’s and Tabakharev’s (the *olonkhosut* who taught him) roots in Tatta, the village is also seen as an *olonkho* heartland. Egasova herself is from Tatta and expressed this with pride. According to Argounova-Low, Sakha from Tatta were ashamed to mention where they were from due to the stigmatization of ethnic-nationalist beliefs. Now, at least in the case of Tatta, it appears as though there has been an inversion this of stigmatization. Those from Tatta can claim authenticity in their Sakhaness and those from the once culturally privileged cities are “motherless”.

During my interviews, I asked all of my informants what their thoughts were about non-traditional interpretations of *olonkho*. Despite the firm assertions by many that *olonkho* themed theatrical productions are not *olonkho*, many academics holding what I

call purist beliefs seem to recognize that these productions have an important function in maintaining interest in Sakha epic poetry in a way that is accessible and entertaining for Sakha. Vasily Illarionov, head of the Folklore Department at North Eastern Federal University, remarked that theatrical performances break *olonkho* traditions but are necessary for busy modern people who need their entertainment to have a short running time. He believes that the way to better accommodate the modern lifestyles of the Sakha is to create and release multi-media materials. In 2016, he spearheaded the release of a dvd and book set which included a recording of one of Darya Tomskaya's performance of "Kyys Kylaabynai The Warrior". The book includes a transcription of the *olonkho* in Sakha tyla as well as translations into Russian and English. The first ten pages of this set are devoted to a Russian language commentary on Darya Tomskaya's life (focusing heavily on her cooperation with folklorists) and an ethnomusicological description of *olonkho*. Next comes an English translation of the previous commentaries. While Illarionov related to me that he sees such releases as a better way for people to enjoy *olonkho* and listen to the work of a real *olonkhosut* than attending a theatricalized performance, this release seems to have little to offer the average Sakha person. Even the preface of the multi-media release indicates that it was intended for a more scholarly audience with the statement, "In this multimedia release, we offer an authentic recording of the *olonkho* 'Kyys Kylaabynai The Warrior' to the academic world, firstly to folklorists and also to a wide circle of readers" (2016, 5).

While such releases are an enormous accomplishment, the question must be posed about how they serve the purpose of integrating *olonkho* into the daily lives of Sakha, how

the appeal of such releases compares to a night at the theater viewing an epic themed performance. In his work regarding the remediation of the “knights errant” genre into “digital video knights errant hand-puppetry” in Taiwan, Teri Silvio discusses the necessity of remediations to appeal to the public. “To be compelling, a new media product must capture the psychic and social experiences of a particular time and place, and these include the experiences of older media, as well as the hopes and anxieties around the introduction of new media technologies themselves” (2007, 286). It is difficult to imagine that this set, released with folklorists and English speaking audiences in mind would be able to capture, “the psychic and social experiences” of the 21st century Sakha Republic better than staged dramatic reproductions.

Folklorist Oboiukova has stated that these new productions serve a propagandizing purpose. As might be expected Akulina Egasova, the woman who has written a new *olonkho* spoke positively about theatrical interpretations of Sakha epics claiming that they really attract people. It should also not be forgotten that *olonkho* was first remediated into theatrical performance by the same generation of Sakha intelligentsia that first entextualized the epic, and that adapting the epic to conform to the popular expressions of Soviet culture at the time likely helped interest in *olonkho* survive until today. Theatrical performance and *olonkho* have been connected since the very beginning of the epic’s enshrinement as a Sakha literary achievement.

For purists, there seems to be a sense of uneasiness about the coexistence of “traditional” performance of *olonkho* and contemporary writings and productions. While no one has said outright that non-traditional *olonkho* poses a threat to epic performance as

the narrative “theater of one man”, every academic I have spoken to stresses the fact there exists “real” *olonkho* and then other epic themed performances as though there is a risk that people might confuse or conflate the two. Dr. Svetlana Mukhopleva in the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North went as far to draw a parallel between the marketing of “milk made from oil” as cow’s milk when stating the need for a new term for new *olonkho* compositions (interview with the author July 14, 2016) . She does not want people to be fooled into thinking they are viewing authentic *olonkho*. She also mentioned that new *olonkho* cannot be called the real thing because they are missing an essential “vibration”. The use of the word “vibration” hearkens back to the discussion of *olonkho* as a cosmic gift. Just as using a dictionary would dilute the epic according to some researchers, so too might the truncating and remediating of the epic to fit on a theatrical stage.

Despite this harsh criticism by some researchers it is clear that *olonkho* researchers remain torn as to how to protect and defend the authenticity of “real” *olonkho* while studying and being supportive of the new traditions surrounding *olonkho*. Even Nadezhda Orosina who earlier stated that *olonkho* was in the past believes that the new traditions are worth studying (interview, with the author July 14th, 2016). It is possible that some of the anxiety surrounding new compositions is the fear that older more authentic forms will be overwhelmed and swallowed up by the new. Researcher Kuzmina stated that one of the most important tasks facing her generation of scholars is finding, reprinting and rerecording the written and oral recordings of *olonkho* performances before they can rot away in archives (interview with the author, July 14th, 2016). If indeed the days of “authentic

olonkho” are at an end then a sense of urgency to firmly establish what *olonkho* is before the understanding of the form is lost with time is to be expected. The fear of loss of heritage may be the reason behind the adherence to authenticity policing and the salvage paradigm within Sakha Folkloristics.

While there is general agreement and discussion that there are positive values and lessons that are still important to impart to the next generations of Sakha, there seems to be little discussion about the function of *olonkho* as performance. If the value of *olonkho* is that it is a form of narrative expression that combines fantasy, folklore, spirituality, and moral teachings then the policing of adherence to traditions that are now impossible to replicate (if we are to believe that indeed the epic atmosphere has truly been extinguished) ironically stands in the way of *olonkho* performing its traditional function. In his article arguing for the compatibility of aesthetic philosophy and multicultural proposals in musical education, Oscar Barragán mentions how educators adhering to the idea of aesthetic formalism would be primarily concerned that students appreciate works in the “right way” (2013, 73). Much in the same way that aesthetic formalists prioritize the formal properties of music such as melody, harmony, timbre over the expressive nature of music, *Olonkho* scholars could be said to prioritize formal properties of *olonkho* performance such as improvisation, appropriate venue, pedigree of transmission¹¹, and authenticity of the text over the expressive ability of *olonkho* themed compositions to speak to Sakha. Unlike the formalist educators in Barragán’s article, those who study *olonkho* must take performance

¹¹ By “pedigree of transmission” I mean a performer’s place in the chain of oral transmission of the epic since without the use of texts or other aids

into account. However, they may perhaps be discounting the performative role of the epic audience.

If the expressive quality of *olonkho* performance is undervalued, the symbiotic relationship between an *olonkhusut* and his audience might be lost. Zoya Sysolatina, an expert in *olonkho* education stressed the importance of the audience in the preservation of *olonkho*. She stated that the chief goal of educating children in *olonkho* is not necessarily that they become performers themselves but that they are motivated to join the audience necessary for the survival of epic tradition (interview with the author July 13th, 2016). I believe there is a strong argument to be made that attending an *olonkho* performance is in and of itself a performative act of Sakha identity. In his discussion of performativity and indigenous activism in Ecuador, Sergio Miguel Huarcaya expands Judith Butler's framework regarding gender performativity to ethnicity, "Ethnicity, like gender, is both performed and performative. Individuals and groups might present themselves as ethnic but do so according to expectations shaped by the daily enactments constituting the ethnic boundary. Such iterative acts do not have to be conscious to be effective..." (2015). *Olonkho* has been placed at the pinnacle of Sakha achievement and is often used as a signifier of Sakhaness. Therefore, a performance of Sakha identity shaped by societal expectations within the Sakha Republic would certainly include participation in the epic audience.

By attending performances, those who do not have a desire or ability to sing *olonkho* are able to demonstrate their investment in the epic tradition. Multimedia releases such as Illarionov's cd/ booklet of Darya Tomskaya's performance are invaluable in

preserving and introducing the work of some of the greatest *olonkhosuts* to the next generation. They are, however, insufficient in creating and maintaining the performer-listener relationship that is so vital to *olonkho* and its expressivity. The performative act of the listener is removed. The designation of newer *olonkho* performers and compositions as inauthentic creates additional barriers to community participation in the epic tradition and their ability to perform Sakha identity.

It may seem strange that many folklorists feel so invested in policing the authenticity of compositions that they do not see as *olonkho* in the first place. It is possible that such feelings stem from a desire to ensure that the epic is properly transmitted to the next generation. At least among the Sakha academics with whom I spoke, the desire to police *olonkho* comes from a sincere desire to protect what they view as an essential part of their cultural heritage. Charles Briggs's 2012 article which describes the lessons which the discipline of Folkloristics has failed to take from Americo Paredes and explores the problems taking place in folklore scholarship today is relevant to my discussion here. The case of *olonkho* and how the scholars attempting to police its authenticity are indicative of many of the issues pointed to by Briggs. The desire to protect the authenticity of *olonkho* has led to many Sakha folklorists to adopt a viewpoint which resembles Richard Dorson's delineation of folklore and fakelore. Charles Briggs describes Dorson's views on folklore and folkloristics:

Dorson consolidated the role of the folklorist as providing a unique bridge between autonomous and opposing models of communicability, traditional and modern. he required that folklore be mediated only by traditional, oral communicabilities—elements of mass media and print transmission must be expunged and

commodification clearly avoided—lest cultural forms be cast into the denigrated realm of “fakelore” (Dorson 1976).” (2012, 102)

Since Dorson, much has been written on the formation of national identity and the invention of traditions in order to support it including Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Terrence and Hobsbawm’s *Invention of Tradition*. While these books and the ideas within them have been invaluable in the dissection of nationalism and explanation of how quickly traditions can become ingrained into identity, they have had a harmful effect on indigenous groups specifically. Briggs goes on to provide a genealogy of scholars who have written against authenticity politics in folkloristics including Alan Dundes, Hermann Bausinger, Richard Bauman, Patrick Feather, and Regina Bendix. Briggs references Bendix’s critique of folkloristics:

“Regina Bendix (1997) argued that the notion of authenticity was central to constituting folkloristics as a discipline and infusing it with scholarly authority; authenticity is a communicable construct par excellence, projecting routes of transmission for cultural forms that keep them within spaces that are certifiably “traditional.” (2012, 102)

The main thrust of Brigg’s discussion of scholarly genealogies in Folkloristics is how the strict delineation of folklore as a “traditional” cultural artifact that must be held separate from the processes of modern has largely been disregarded by anthropologists as an incorrect way of viewing folklore which does not coincide with the reality of how oral heritage is created and disseminated.

Despite the mounting arguments against authenticity policy taking place within the discipline of folkloristics dating back from the 1980s, Sakha folklorists at both the *SRI Olonkho* and the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People

of the North seem to adhere quite strictly to the “modern vs traditional” dichotomy and have positioned themselves as the arbiters of how and when the modern realities of Sakha life are a threat to *olonkho* (theatrical interpretations, new compositions) and when they are acceptable (entextualization of “real” *olonkho*, and audio or video recordings of authentic performances).

Policing the production of new epic compositions, declaring that the last two *olonkhosuts* are gone, and denigrating theatricalized versions of *olonkho* may be counter-productive to the sincere desire of these scholars to preserve epic traditions. What is to attract future generations to *olonkho* performance if their participation will always be regarded as an inauthentic mimicking of a once all important now extinct tradition? How can *olonkho* be transmitted to the next generation if it has been taken out of “authentic” circulation so to speak? Briggs (2012) describes folklore as “[...]actively made through the circulation of social representations and aesthetic forms through time and space and across borders, including those of race, genre, and mode of transmission (newspapers, oral history, ballads, etc.)” By freezing the definition of *olonkho* to be only the continuous oral tradition which ended with the death of Petr Reshetnikov in 2013, folklorists are removing the authenticity from all forms of the epic that have since resulted from the process described by Briggs. The strict delineations of what is and is not “authentic” run counter to the desire for the continuation of *olonkho*’s importance in Sakha society because it removes most Sakha from the process of folklore creation.

Referring to a wedding tradition that was rejected for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia due to its

“inauthenticity”, Carol Silverman had this to say about change as a natural process of intangible heritage:

“How far the wedding has changed from its “natural” context and whether that disqualifies it from UNESCO’s definition of ICH is part of a wider conversation about authenticity and purity. I agree with folklorists who claim that change signals a healthy folklore environment; however, not all changes are equivalent.” (2015, 241).

Indeed, not all changes are equivalent, and the refusal to call an opera or theatrical production authentic epic performance is understandable. However, as mentioned earlier, several folklorists have suggested finding a different name for *olonkho* based compositions and today’s *olonkho* performers. The stripping away of the title *olonkho* by scholars removes prestige and influence from performer, writer, and the listener/reader and may even disincentivize participation in the very festivals and camps that these same institutions so heavily promote. It is difficult to invest in something that has gone extinct. People cannot participate in a tradition that exists only in texts and recordings gathered during Soviet folklore expeditions. They become witnesses to impressions of what once was rather than active members of the epic audience.

Briggs includes this statement in his article’s final paragraphs, “Folklorists are now taking on some powerful “folk,” such as UNESCO and WIPO bureaucrats, major recording artists and companies, and the representatives of nationstates who attempt to regulate how “intangible cultural heritage” is defined, possessed, preserved, and globally circulated,”(2012, 107) Ironically in the case of *olonkho* it the folklorists themselves who

have taken the task of regulation upon themselves, perhaps to the detriment of those Sakha who wish to express their national identity through participation in epic traditions. The main concerns of Sakha academics seem to be torn between “salvation” folkloristics as expressed by Aitalina Kuzmina, and moving on towards studying new forms and expressions of the Sakha epic tradition. The conversations that have been going on in folkloristics delegitimizing the “folklore vs fakelore” dichotomy since the 1970s are of little relevance to the Sakha folkloristics who are trying to ensure that their own intangible heritage is being discussed and remembered in the “right” way. My conversations with members of the *SRI Olonkho* and the Institute for Humanitarian Research and Issues of the Indigenous People of the North have led me to believe that while *olonkho* scholars recognize the process of circulation that Briggs discussed, they are still resistant and hesitant to legitimize through their institutions any changes to the oral traditions, despite wishing to participate in and to some extent regulate the evolution of *olonkho* performance.

Briggs indicates that folklorists should take a more critical view of the ways that they deconstruct modern expressions of folklore, “my goal was thus not to induce scholars to turn off their deconstructive skills but to provoke them to extend their critical, analytical gaze—by turning it on themselves and the positions of privilege they sometimes enjoy as much as on those performing (ethno-)nationalist traditions,” (106). In the Sakha Republic, however, the delineation between the scholars and those “performing (ethno-)nationalist traditions” is by no means cut and dry. Some scholars holding conservative views about what constitutes *olonkho* are performers themselves such as Iurii Borisov.

Where then does the anxiety surrounding the authenticity of new compositions and today's performers come from? UNESCO's principle of "safeguarding without freezing" and acknowledgement of the "life cycle" of heritage makes it unlikely that the scholars fear the loss of *olonkho*'s place on the world heritage list. The Sakha government's support of more recent epic performers such as Valentin Isakov and promotion of non-traditional *olonkho*-based performance as well as SRI Olonkho suggest that funds exist for both traditional and non-traditional epic performance and study. This indicates that the desire to police the epic might stem from ideological rather than practical concerns. The deconstruction of new performance and the policing of legitimacy undertaken by *olonkho* scholars seems not to be deconstruction for deconstruction's sake, but rather comes from a belief that they possess the folkloric knowledge to ensure that their traditions are handled properly, that *olonkho* as an ancient oral tradition does not become buried under the new compositions arising out of the revitalization of interest in Sakha ethnic heritage.

Chapter 4: Transmission of *Olonkho* to the Next Generation

This chapter addresses the efforts being made to keep *olonkho* relevant in the lives of modern day, and to encourage youth and children to participate in epic tradition as both performers and spectators. The institutions that have been created as a result of government action following the UNESCO recognition such as the SRI Olonkho and the Olonkho Theater have taken steps to include youth oriented programs and events in their activities to promote the epic. They have also created networks of online resources featuring video clips of epic performance as well as wikis containing information in response to the modern realities of the lives of modern Sakha, especially young people. In an attempt to expose children to *olonkho* as early as possible, some Sakha educators and even members of the local parliament have pushed for the inclusion of Sakha epic literature and materials in school curricula for Sakha children. While these efforts have met with varying amounts of success, they demonstrate a united goal amongst the promoters of *olonkho* despite their differences of method.

Members of the SRI Olonkho have taken steps to create a framework that supports young people interested in *olonkho* performance. A young man himself, 27 year old Iurii Borisov, an *olonkho* scholar and member of the institute is concerned about his generation's loss of interest in the epic. He is also president of an organization of young *olonkhosuts*. Borisov takes a rather grim view of the current state of interest in epic performance among Sakha youth, "Young people are practically not interested in *olonkho* at all." He states that despite the successes in integrating *olonkho* into the curriculum for school children, when these children become teenagers and later enter university, they

leave *olonkho* behind as they pursue their careers. At competitions of performances, there can be more than three hundred children participating in the school age group and as many as 150 in the 30 and up age group. However, people like Borisov who have performed *olonkho* since childhood and continued on into adulthood, there are fewer than twenty in the entire Sakha Republic. Therefore, Borisov asserts that it is important for organizations like the *SRI Olonkho* to support young performers. One particular initiative of the Institute was to advocate for the inclusion of *olonkho* in a youth summer festival [*Isyakh Molodezh*].

Isyakh is an important Sakha summer festival and includes many national traditions such as the reciting of blessings [*algys*], drinking of fermented mare's milk, Sakha wrestling and "tug-of-stick", traditional dances, circle dancing and chanting [*osyokhai*], etc. It is celebrated in all major villages and towns in the Sakha Republic. According to Polish exile V. L. Seroshevskii's 19th century documents about the Sakha with whom he spent twelve years, *Isyakh* used to be held often to commemorate weddings or special events in addition to the large summer festival (*bolshoi Ysyakh*) but were already on the decline in the late 1800s. He writes:

In the past, people loved to play and have a good time. *Ysyakhi* were organized often and many people gathered there to celebrate. [...] They ate, drank, jumped, played, fought, and danced...it was very merry! [...] Now *Ysyakhi* have diminished. The Yakuts have stopped milking their horses, the herds have become smaller. Everyone became poor, the herds have dispersed, and people are chasing after money more than ever. [1993, 445].

If Seroshevskii's informants were accurate about the past glory of *Ysyakh* and its diminishment as the 20th century approached then the festival was to return to importance in the Soviet Era. As early as 1921, Soviet officials were organizing the “big” midsummer *Ysyakh* and transforming it into a worker's festival which included: “sports competitions, competitions of singers and storytellers, musical and vocal numbers by schoolchildren, exhibition of agricultural implements, speeches on education and political issues, if possible, plays or scenes” (Romanova and Ignateva 2014, 45). The practice of holding special *Ysyakh* celebrations was also revived by the Soviet Union with the organization of the “Victory” *Ysyakh* in the summer of 1945 following the end of the second world war. The “Victory” *Ysyakh* is also notable in that it is the first time in which *olonkho* was given great importance at the summer festival because the organizers felt that the themes of the inevitable triumph of good over evil were suitable to commemorate the victory over the German fascists. (Romanova and Ignatieva 2014, 46). *Olonkho* until then had been more associated with Sakha winter tradition and never had a large role at summer festivals (Romanova and Ignatieva 2014, 53)

Today, many epic centered *Ysyakh* celebrations have been organized such as the relatively recent *Ysyakh Olonkho* and *Ysyakh Mologezh* [Youth *Ysyakh*]. Until recently, *olonkho* performance had not been included in the youth focused celebration. Thanks to the efforts of young *olonkho* performers like Borisov and the support of his organization and the SRI *Olonkho*, performance of epic poetry was featured at the 2016 Youth *Ysyakh* which took place in the Amga region and twenty-one people performed in the *olonkho* competition (interview with the author, July 11th, 2016). The *Ysyakh Olonkho* is another

project that was brought about by UNESCO's recognition of the Sakha epic and implementation of the subsequent government decrees made to support *olonkho*.

The first *Isyakh Olonkho* was held in 2006 in the Suntar region and have continued every year since. The photo album "Nyurba: Sun Granting Life" created to commemorate the *Isyakh Olonkho* held in Nyurba in 2012, opens with a monograph from Platon Oiunskii's *Niurgun Bootur Stremitelny* and includes a forward from Grigorii Ordzhonikidze, the Secretary-General of the Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO. The photo album of course contains English translations. The fact that events such as the *Isyakh Olonkho* and the "I am a child of the land of *Olonkho*" festival, a competition for young epic performers, take place at rotating locations around the Sakha Republic is likely to have a positive impact on the transmission of *olonkho* in the future. The diversity of location of these events has the ability to increase access to *olonkho* to the inability of many Sakha to travel across their Republic due to the many regions mentioned above.

The merging of *olonkho* and *Ysyakh* has not been without controversy or detractors. In article describing the state of *Ysyakh* in Yakutia today, authors Romanova and Ignatieva stated in no uncertain terms that *olonkho* and especially its popularization to due UNESCO were harming the festival:

The attributes of *Olonkho*, including the name of the epos genre itself, its characters, and plots, have begun to be used for commercial purposes (the "Olonkho" shopping center, "Olonkho" restaurant, "Olonkho" vodka, "Ellei" beer, etc.) In particular, we note the construction of the widely advertised *Olonkholand* as a center of the entertainment industry. All this is destroying the fabric of the national festival. [(2014, 53)]

The authors argue that *olonkho* and *isyakh* should be kept autonomous from one another. Part of their claim for *Isyakh* to be protected from *olonkho* comes from survey data collected from an unspecified number of respondents during fieldwork in the Churapcha *ulus*. The data state, as interpreted by the authors, state:

for most respondents their ethnic identity is based on their native language (55.6 percent) and folk traditions (38.4 percent), which include ritual culture and the Ysyakh calendar holiday. However, the epos heritage of the Sakha people is in last place (4 percent). [2014, 52]

I think it is important to note here that the *ulus* where this fieldwork conducted is not for its strong epic tradition. During my fieldwork in Yakutsk, Churapcha was never mentioned as a site of *olonkho* heritage (or at all for that matter) by the folklorists I interviewed. No *olonkho* from Churapcha were included in the series of ten epic texts released by the SRI Olonkho in a series entitled “The Knights of Sakha” [*Sakha booturdara*] (Tagrov 2012, 3). One must wonder what the results of this survey might be if it was administered in the Taatta *ulus* which has been described by many as the “heartland” of *olonkho*, or even if the survey had been taken this year, after the Olonkho Ysyakh was hosted in Churapcha in June of 2016. The claim made by Romanova and Ignatieva that this survey represents the feelings of Sakha in general and not merely those from Churapcha as well as their blanket assertion that “people by no means consider listening to *olonkho* recreation” (2014, 52) are dubious at best.

In addition to supporting the inclusion of Sakha epic heritage in festival traditions. The SRI Olonkho is also pursuing internet archives housing audio and visual clips and searchable and user edited online “wikis” as a way to ensure that *olonkho* remains

relevant in the future. One of these sites, *Olonkho* TV is a collection of videos of epic performance that anyone can access and watch. The site includes videos of varying length, from less than five minutes to almost one hour as well as videos of performers of varying ages, from children to the elderly. Given the debate discussed in the previous chapter, it is worth mentioning that despite the generally conservative stance of many members of the Institute regarding the authenticity of *olonkho*, this online archive includes videos of theatricalized performances of *olonkho*. These videos are, however, demarcated by titles which include the phrase “olonkho spectacle” [*spektakl olonkho*] in order to differentiate them from the other performances which simply have the name of the performer and the name of the *olonkho* they are performing selections from. Many of the videos are youth oriented including a video recording of a “Night of Kolesov” held at the Khatassi musical school and other *olonkho* themed events at other musical schools. Another noteworthy fact about the video archive is the diversity regional representation. Many uluses are represented, and the site also includes a photo gallery showcasing snapshots from two *Iskyakh Olonkho* which took place in the Mirny and Gorny uluses as well as an *Isyakh* in Yakutsk. The gallery also includes selections of epic performance from an expedition by North Eastern Federal University to the Republic of Altai. In addition to *olonkho* themed materials, *Olonkho* TV also hosts videos of *khomus* performance, the reciting of traditional Sakha blessings [*algis*], and performances of Sakha circle dances with chants [*osuokhai*]. The fact that an video archive dedicated to *olonkho* performance would also include these other displays of traditional culture indicates that in this particular archive, the point is to preserve and create access to traditional Sakha

performances with the title Olonkho TV being used to indicate important cultural heritage rather being a true descriptor of the site's contents. Indeed, the site does not contain one complete recording of a single *olonkho* performance. The word *olonkho* functions here as a signifier of Sakha tradition.

Another project spearheaded by the SRI Olonkho is the The *Olonkho* Online Portal. This archive was modeled after Wikipedia and built using the “free software open source wiki package” from Media Wiki. Its search function works well. Users can search through lists of *olonkhosuts* and performers both alive and deceased as well as upload new files, though they cannot edit articles without logging in. There also seems to be no way for users to register a username on the site. In addition to serving merely as wiki of performers and the plots of epics, Olonkho.info includes a section entitled “Olonkho in the Modern World” which contains information that may be useful to people seeking to engage with *olonkho* today. The subcategories on this page include: Press, *Olonkho* and Theater, Isyakh Olonkho, Contests for Olonkho Performers, Republic Festival “I am a child of the land of Olonkho”, Yearly Contest for young olonkho performers, Childrens Camps, Pages of gradeschool artistic collectives, Pages for children's artistic collectives, Educational and methodical materials, Republic Scientific Conference for Young Researchers “A Step Into the Future”, Papers by University and Highschool students of the theme of *olonkho*, *Olonkho* games, traditions, and republic competitions. It is clear given the emphasis on youth involvement in this subsection that keeping children engaged with epic tradition, both with its performance and study, is a high priority for the this *SRI Olonkho* funded project. The addition of the subcategory “olonkho and theater” also speaks to the institutes

perhaps grudging acceptance of the necessity of [*spektakli*] for the purpose of attracting interest and “propagandizing *olonkho*” as well as their willingness to tolerate broader definitions of epic heritage.

The website has many technical problems. None of the links to videos work properly and there are no postings of any *olonkho* performances dating earlier than 2010. Many of the links lead to pages that do not exist and work on them has been stalled, abandoned, or deferred. Some pages appear to have been neglected, for instance the page dedicated to the “Yearly Contest for young *olonkho* performers” only includes links to the competitions that were held from 2001 to 2010 and none held after. In addition to sporadic upkeep and uploading of new materials, the online portal has little diversity of region. For example, in the section “Papers by University and Highschool students of the theme of *olonkho*” only three *ulus* are represented. Of the seven papers listed on this page, seven of nine were written by students from the Tattinskii *ulus*. While, as I have mentioned, not all *uluses* equally share in the epic tradition. However, the fact that *Yskyakh Olonkho* has been held in many different *uluses* and the publishing of the Olonkho Institute published “Knights of Sakha” series indicate that there is indeed interest and participation in epic heritage from the varied regions of the Sakha Republic. It is likely the lack of *ulus* diversity has more to do with the shattershot nature of the site’s upkeep than any particular agenda.

It appears that the *Olonkho* Online Portal is suffering from a lack of care and shows the signs of an overly ambitious but now neglected: broken links, incomplete pages, and date stamps indicating a lack of maintenance. *Olonkho* TV also suffers from this lack of maintenance and lack of proper metadata. The lack of accessibility to *olonkho* for many

brings up an issue of democratization and privileged access to cultural heritage. During our interview, folklorist Aitalina Kuzmina mentioned the issue of documents related to Sakha cultural heritage rotting away in archives in Moscow and St. Petersburg. She attempted to make copies of these Sakha language texts that had become almost illegible due to the wear of time and expressed frustration that they were so far away and of use of to no one in these western archives since only a Sakha speaker could read them. By storing documents in archives at universities and institutes in Yakutsk, these institutions are replicating the issues of difficulty of access described by Kuzmina. A villager with poor Russian language skills attempting to view a recording of an *olonkho* performed by a relative for an ethnographic mission may very well find the trip to Yakutsk and struggle with the barriers academic bureaucracy just as challenging or even more so than a trip to a St. Petersburg archive for an established researcher. By placing barriers, or failing to remove them, in the way of people attempting to access their heritage, institutions are impeding the transmission of *olonkho*. Scholars working on the creation of a post-colonial archive such as Kimberly Christen (2011) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) have explored online archives as a way for indigenous peoples take back ownership of their heritage. While these archives are not without their own issues of access they may offer an improvement on the institution driven methods of the past.

The idea of creating new *olonkho* themed compositions more suitable to the struggles of the modern world *olonkho* comes from one of the most unlikely of places. The head of the SRI Olonkho, Vasily Ivanov, described to me his ideas about Sakha epics for the future. He believes that even though the epic environment might be gone the “heroic

nature” of the Sakha warrior [*bootur*] still exists in the Sakha people. Rather using the phrase “epic environment” to refer to the pre-industrial and pre-collectivization era which was conducive to the flourishing of an epic tradition, Ivanov uses it to refer to the environment in which the stories of *olonkho* took place. In his opinion, while demons and spirits and gods no longer roam the earth among the Sakha, there are still new battles to be fought. He poses the question that if *olonkho* was a heroicized version of the daily life of the Sakha people, then why can we not heroicize the daily life of the Sakha people today? According to Ivanov, there are still many Sakha heroes today, just heroes of a different kind. He reminisced about one of his teachers who fought for what was right and overcame adversity as such a hero. Ivanov stated that the Sakha can attempt to recreate “classic” *olonkho*, or they can write new epics. As could be expected, as director of the SRI Olonkho, Ivanov acknowledges that these new epics would not be *olonkho*, but that they would be “epics of modern society”, (interview with the author, July 11, 2016). Through his desire to see the Sakha of today framed in epic compositions, Ivanov seems to be asserting that the epic traditions must continue whether or not it is given the title of *olonkho*.

Many educators in the Sakha Republic have taken up the task of integrating *olonkho* into the lives of children from birth. Their goals are twofold, the first being to ensure the transmission of epic heritage to the next generation, and the second to raise a child with the values exemplified by *olonkho*. When I discussed the question of which values found in *olonkho* are the most important, these in particular were mentioned most often: the necessity and inevitability of the triumph of good over evil and the use of wits as well as strength to defeat enemies and achieve goals. Sakha language schools are incorporating

olonkho related texts and inviting performers such as *olonkhosut* Valentin Isakov to perform for students. As discussed above many schools are also holding *olonkho* themed cultural events such the “Night of Kolesov” celebrating epic performance and famous *olonkhosuts*.

Many have also pointed to the preservation of the older forms of the Sakha language as a reason to teach *olonkho*. One such educator and poet who preferred to be referred to here by her pen name *Kechime*, discussed the benefits of being raised with *olonkho* as she was. She stated that the heroes of *olonkho* were greatly important to her as she grew up, and that being able to “understand the language of *olonkho*” influenced her decision to become a teacher of Sakha language and is also the reason why she writes poetry. It is unclear whether *Kechime* is referring literally the archaic language of *olonkho* which differs from modern Sakha speak, or whether she is using “language” here as a metaphor for epic derived knowledge of how to live one’s life. She mentions how her brother, due to his being raised to understand *olonkho* and Sakha cultural heritage, recites *algis*, traditional Sakha blessings.

Kechime states that her goal as an educator and pedagogical researcher is to answer the question “How can the pedagogical potential of *olonkho* be used in the raising of children?”. One of her largest tasks has been organizing the “I am a child of the land of *olonkho* festival” where young people and children six years and older can participate in *olonkho* performance competitions. She added that she had worked on creating this festival for twenty years and that establishing *olonkho* within youth culture is a long process. According to *Kechime*, the festival has its success stories. Iurii Borisov, the performer and

scholar, mentioned above and in previous chapters was a participant in such festivals during his school years and continues to perform and study.

When asked whether a person's life could be improved if they are raised with *olonkho*, *Kechime* gave the mysterious answer that it depends on the person themselves. Among all of my informants, *Kechime* is the only one to hint that perhaps a person might glean something sinister from *olonkho*, rather than immediately extolling the positive values and cultural import of the epic. She claimed that *olonkho* had a specific rhythm and that one must find their own place within that rhythm. Part of finding this rhythm is being exposed to *olonkho* from birth. According to *Kechime*, even though a baby obviously cannot understand the world and stories in *olonkho*, they will be able to "feel" it, hinting at the idea of genetic memory and spiritual quality of the epic that many have mentioned. The next step is to incorporate *olonkho* based education in the child's school education. *Kechime* states that she as well as others are still working on a system of *olonkho* based pedagogy, but that it is important that it does not include harsh standards for a children, "a person should not be standard". This harkens back to her previous statement about each person finding their own place within Sakha heritage and within the rhythm of *olonkho*. Her use of the words rhythm and feeling when discussing the pedagogical value of *olonkho* suggest to me that exposing children to the epic, in *Kechime's* view, is more about exposing children to cosmic and spiritual world of the Sakha rather than inculcating particular values.

What, however, are exactly the particularly Sakha values that many claim must be passed on to the next generation via engagement through cultural heritage and epic

tradition? In their book, “The Ethnopedagogical View of the Sakha People based on *Olonkho*”, M. I. Baisheva and local parliament representative A.A. Grigorieva refer back to the writings of 19th century ethnographers and exiles such as Middendorf, Seroshevskii, Korolenko, and Pekarskii to compile a list of particularly Sakha values. The list of values describing the “spiritual-moral foundation” which must be passed on to children is as follows: native solidarity, mutual support, openness towards others, unselfishness, hospitality, honesty, integrity, lack of bawdiness, cult of the mother and maiden, love and attachment to children, the industriousness and mental capabilities of children, love of work, ability to “work smart”, endurance, development of physical qualities, agility, and bravery (27). According to Baisheva and Grigorieva, it is the goal of Sakha “ethnopedagogy” to focus on both these particularly national values as well as “universal values” with *olonkho* as their source (5). While it may seem strange that Baisheva and Grigorieva rely on the words of European exiles to determine intrinsic Sakha values, much of the perceived value in the epic tradition comes from the assertion that it is ancient and predates the arrival of Russians and industrialization to Sakha land. Due to the fact that Sakha had no written script, Baisheva and Grigorieva may be reaching as far back into history as they can, 17th-18th, to determine the historical values of the Sakha people.

The authors claim that the Sakha have had an ethnopedagogical view of raising children with these values at their base since antiquity. They do however discuss the role of interaction with other cultures in shaping and strengthening these Sakha values. They reference notable early 20th century Eurasianist Lev Gumilev’s theories about Russian and Turkic nationalities as “complimentary peoples”. While this seemingly odd sidebar into

Eurasionist philosophy may seem irrelevant to a discussion of *olonkho* based education, the authors use this to explain the “integrative-synchretic” nature of the Sakha view of ethnopedogy. They state that the genealogical connection to Turkic people and thus the ability to have a “communal and spiritual” connections with Russians is a reason for the longevity of Sakha child raising culture. The authors give no concrete examples of why or how exactly this complimentarity with Russians has benefited Sakha culture or what values it has strengthened or added. The argument could be made that this particular argument is being used to reconcile the Russian presence and influence on Sakha child-raising culture that would now be almost impossible to recognize and eliminate.

Rather than painting Russian influence as a direct threat to the transmission of Sakha values to Sakha youth, Baisheva and Grigorieva have established western capitalist consumerism as the greater danger. This reconciliation with Russification and villainization of the West may have to do with the fact that authors of this book, as well the vast majority of people and institutions are funded by are directly members of the government of the Sakha Republic which is explicitly pro United Russia, Vladimir Putin’s political party. The authors emphasize the necessity of explicitly teaching Sakha values as opposed to assuming that they will be absorbed by young people through simple exposure to Sakha culture and heritage outside of the classroom. They describe the difficulty of teaching Sakha values to children in the post-soviet era where they are bombarded by the “cult of money and wealth obtained by any means” (5). They state that this “living knowledge cannot merely be assimilated, but must be built” (5). There are however disagreements that explicit instruction is the proper way to connect children to *olonkho*

itself. Director of the SRI Olonkho Vasily Ivanov believes that *olonkho* will come to children in the same way that it has come to all Sakha from the cosmos. Without elaborating further he stated that “olonkho schools” being made these days will “only teach children how to read and write texts”. This comment reflects on the suggestion of the mysterious and spiritual component that was discussed by many of my informants and suggests again the difficulty of teaching what to many Sakha is so much more than an epic poem or a heroicized history.

The idea of the spiritual component of *olonkho* relates to the comments of SRI Olonkho Folklorist Varvara Oboiukova about “genetic memory”. She claims that “genetic memory” is necessary for the proper understanding of Sakha culture and language, without elaborating on exactly what “genetic memory” enables a Sakha person to understand that a non-Sakha could not (interview with the author, July 12th, 2016). I believe that the discussion of the genetic memory of the Sakha and their special connection to *olonkho* may be a way to attempt to balance the narrative of *olonkho*’s universality with its Sakhanness. Oboiukova also discusses the necessity of teaching *olonkho* at a spiritual level. The idea of the spiritual component in *olonkho* and its ability to contribute to the education of youth is reiterated in Baisheva and Grigorieva’s book through the frequent reference of “spiritual-moral” [*dukhovno-nravstvennii*] values. For example, when discussing the various “programs of personality development” [*tuskuli*] found in *olonkho*, they describe the program of the protective goddess Aiyysyt as “preventing the destruction of a person inside and out by maintaining harmony in a healthy body and spirit” (69). There are nine such programs each based on a god/goddess or hero of *olonkho* and each are attached to

certain values such as proper gender roles, “cult of pedigree and kinship”, care of the natural environment, and again purity of spirit (75). These “programs” are discussed in Baisheva and Grigorieva’s text as both models for the development of values in the personality of a child and as a way for unpacking and understanding the moral lessons that can be found in any *olonkho*. In the conclusion of the discussion of the *tuskuli* the authors state, “the Sakha representation of a complete person consists of a harmoniously developed personality with a good spirit, good strength, and a good mind.” (75) They go on to write, “[...] We have tried to uncover the spiritual-moral values of the Sakha people which have not lost their relevance in today’s world in their original sources [*olonkho*] which have not been distorted by time or ruling power,”(76).

A particular aspect of *olonkho* education and transmission that should be mentioned is the large participation in *olonkho* related studies and performance by women and girls. I believe this is worth remarking upon due to the fact that when studying the history of *olonkho*, only one female *olonkhusut* of great renown was mentioned, Darya Tomskaya. This indicates that despite the wealth of female heroes and shamans that can be found in *olonkho*, the performance of the epic by women has perhaps been marginalized or under emphasized. The majority of the researchers, educators, and performers I interviewed were women. Women appear to be at the forefront of *olonkho* transmission. In the section of the Olonkho Information Portal mentioned above which contains links to epic themed papers written by university and high school students, seven of the nine papers were authored by young women. The director of the SRI Olonkho (Vasily Ivanov) stressed the increased participation of girls in new *olonkho* based

compositions. The interest in *olonkho* by women and girls is supported by scholarly and artistic works which emphasize women's role in cultural heritage. Two such works are researcher at the Institute for the Humanities Anna Danilova's book describing female warriors in *olonkho* and the Olonkho Theater Company's presentation of the play *Udaganki* which stars two female shamans who defeat enemies, win the hands of husbands through acts of magical heroism, and engage in stylized sex on stage. These powerful depictions of women may encourage girls and young women to participate in the study and performance of Sakha oral heritage. The inclusion of women and girls in *olonkho* culture is vital. In my interview with educator and researcher Zoya Sysolatina, she mentioned that she had received criticism for her emphasis on girls in *olonkho* based education. Sysolatina stated that imbuing girls with a love for *olonkho* and its values is important because when these girls become women they will be the ones to transmit this connection to *olonkho* to their children. She stated, "children must take in *olonkho* with their mother's milk".

The complexities of integrating *olonkho* into educational curricula for children become amplified when one takes into consideration what the epic represents to many Sakha and the enormous task placed upon such a system to impart all of the proper Sakha values to the next generation. *Olonkho* is at once considered to be spiritual, historical, a source of moral education, a philosophical text, and a place of preservation for the high style of Sakha speech. With the immense importance and multifunctionality placed on *olonkho* it is no wonder that attempts to transmit it "properly" and "authentically" creak under the weight of such responsibility. It is clear that in order for *olonkho* to be transmitted to the next generation, issues of accessibility and preservation must be

addressed. All of the *olonkho* educators I spoke to stated that *olonkho* contains values which teach one how to be Sakha as well as how to be a complete person. Educators and legislators are pondering how to impart these values to the next generation, especially girls, through transmission of *olonkho*. Rotating schedules for festivals as well as academic works focusing on regional differences in *olonkho* help increase access to and pride in Sakha epic heritage for many groups scattered across the vast Sakha Republic. While no solutions have been found for the issue of creating a sustainable and well-funded online source for *olonkho* or for a complete system of *olonkho* based education in Sakha schools, the various institutions and researchers dedicated to solving this problem continue to work toward ways to integrate *olonkho* into the everyday lives of Sakha.

Conclusion

According to UNESCO, the actions it has taken to preserve *olonkho* have been largely successful and its goals of creating a safeguarding framework with enthusiastic support of the local community have been met (“Periodic Reporting”). Current trends indicate that support for Sakha epic heritage will continue to grow. Scholars at the SRI Olonkho state that attendance of their *olonkho* themed *Ysyakh* celebrations is increasing every year. A second “Decade of Olonkho” from 2016 to 2025 was declared by current President of the Sakha Republic Egor Borisov in 2014, a year before the first “decade” declared by previous President Viacheslav Shtyrov was set to expire (“*Desiatiletie Olonkho*”). In 2016, the “Olonkho Day” celebrations lasted from the 25th of November to the 5th of December and included theatricalized performances of epics, a meet and greet with “story tellers and *olonkhosuts*”, traditional performance by epic performers, and several conferences to discuss *olonkho* related issues such as the study of the epic, the epic’s role in the modern world, and the use of *olonkho* in preschool education (“*V Iakutii proidet dekada olonkho*”). The enthusiasm of many Sakha and its growing relevance in the conversation of national identity is evident.

With this enthusiasm, there has also been controversy and disagreement between some of the institutions promoting the national epic. It is clear that these differences involve the prioritization of authenticity vs engagement of the public. I assert, however, that the inability of these institutions to agree upon how best to promote the epic is not indicative of a failure of the Sakha Government’s efforts to preserve *olonkho* or the safeguarding framework that it helped to create. Rather these conflicts of opinion on how best to

preserve and promote the epic indicate a permission of multivocality and a reluctance or refusal of the government and UNESCO to police the perception of *olonkho*. The conflicts also show that the community that has come together to preserve the national epic tradition is large and robust enough to support a diversity of opinion. The community size and strength is a positive indicator.

Through the diversity and enthusiasm of expression of the *olonkho* tradition, many Sakha are showing that their epic still enjoys the support of the local community. Participation in *olonkho* competition festivals sponsored by the SRI Olonkho as well as attendance of Olonkho Theater performances indicate a vibrant local community. I believe that the differences coupled with the individual success of these organizations indicate a healthy environment for the growth of *olonkho* that allows room for contestation. This idea is consistent with Charles Brigg's assessment of the current opinions in folkloric studies with UNESCO's policy which states that oral heritage is subject to change and that this change points to a tradition that is still transmittable and able to flourish. The institutions I have discussed in this thesis all serve important purposes: preserving the recorded performances and texts of the epic and promoting participation in more "traditional" *olonkho* performance and the other garnering public interest and ensuring that there is an audience for expressions of Sakha oral heritage. If the events of the Olonkho Day celebrations are any indication, traditional and remediated *olonkho* performance are still able to coexist and draw their unique audiences.

As the importance of *olonkho* continues to grow in the conversation of Sakha cultural heritage, the parallels between between the state sponsored support of controlled

national expression of the early Soviet Union and the state sponsored support of *olonkho* within the Sakha Republic. I assert that measures taken by the government of the Sakha Republic with the support of UNESCO are in many ways a new iteration of the “national in form, socialist in content” policies discussed in Chapter One. Instead of having a socialist message, the desired content now revolves around being a good citizen of the Russian Federation. As discussed in Chapter Four, a book on the use of *olonkho* in pedagogy co-authored by a member of the local parliament [*Il Tiumen*] suggest that education centered on the national epic is a way to combat the *westernization* of Sakha youth with no mention made of the dangers of Russification. This fits well with the anti-west narratives currently circulating in Russia today. I would like to clarify that I am not suggesting that the state has altered or fabricated the text of *olonkho* to suit its aims or that the revival of Sakha heritage and epic tradition is a conspiracy fabricated by Yakutsk or Moscow. Rather I am arguing that the steady governmental support of the epic may stem from the state’s recognition of *olonkho*’s utility in promoting desired values. One could also speculate that support of and participation in UNESCO’s efforts to promote indigenous heritage allow the Russian Federation the ability to act as a good global citizen. At least for now, the values being promoted in the Sakha epic tradition do not run counter to the goals of the state. Supporting the *olonkho* poses no risk to the Sakha or Russian government and thus far has created little if any controversy and has been almost entirely positively received by the Sakha.

Sakha participation in the national epic continues to grow and the scale of the promotion of the epic is increasing as well. Investors are being sought for the construction

of the Olonkho Land complex which is planned to be constructed near the North Eastern Federal University (NEFU) campus in Yakutsk on a peninsula jutting into lake Saisari. The complex is another project created by government decree and headed by an organ of the Sakha Republic, the Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development. The stated goal listed on the project's website is to, "Create within the city territory a cluster with a creative economy on the cultural basis of the world masterpiece Olonkho. The Olonkho Land will be a cultural, scientific and production complex in close proximity to the territories of federal scientific and educational institutions." The website also states that the project wishes to group together the creative companies which are already using "the *olonkho* brand" ("*Proekt Zemlia Olonkho*"). The plans for the complex include, an amusement park, a performance space, a celebration venue, an "IT Park", a permanent presence for NEFU, and "ethnographic objects". The former Minister of Culture and founder of the Olonkho Theater also indicated that Olonkho Land would include a permanent home for the Olonkho Theater. Whether or not the dream of Olonkho Land is realized, its plans and conceptualization show that government investment in the epic is increasing. The inclusion of an "IT Park" in the complex and the use the phrase "*olonkho* brand" could indicate a desire to attach Olonkho and all that it signifies about Sakhaness and Sakha values to the economic and technological developments taking place in the region.

When we consider the parallels between early Soviet nationality policies and the government's enthusiastic support of Sakha epic heritage, it is difficult not to remember the violent shift from Soviet "affirmative action" policies to the state's persecution of ethnic expression as "bourgeois nationalism". Time will tell if the Russian Federation's

tacit support of the national epic will continue indefinitely or if there will be a drastic shift in policy. Time and more study is needed to determine if the goals of the Sakha ethnic nationalist revival will continue to focus on the promotion of intangible heritage and its use in molding desirable Sakha citizens or if the goals will shift in a way that Moscow may find threatening, such as a desire for greater autonomy and control of natural resources. The current political climate, characterized by a distrust of international institutions, may influence Russia's desire to participate UNESCO's global initiatives. Tensions between Russia and "the West" may also compromise UNESCO's role as arbiter of what is and is not valuable heritage within Russia. While current trends indicate the continued rise of Sakha epic heritage, its future as a well-funded and celebrated signifier of Sakha culture is by no means certain. However, the epic's demonstrated ability to weather political and societal paradigm shifts as well as the sincere dedication to *olonkho* by scholars and performers alike give a reason to believe that Sakha epic heritage will persist in one form or another.

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