



## REVIEW OF: STORYTELLING IN SIBERIA — THE OLONKHO EPIC IN A CHANGING WORLD

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URBANA, CHICAGO, AND SPRINGFIELD:  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS.  
PUBLISHED IN 2017

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### ABSTRACT

This book review highlights the specific features of an important publication about Siberian traditions. The author spent much time and energy in compiling convincing material. The reviewer goes through some details regarding the contents and structure of this publication.

### KEYWORDS

Storytelling, Siberian cultures, Epic songs, Music education

The cover picture creates seemingly specific expectations: children with handmade wooden weapons surround an elderly man who is dressed up in a traditional costume. Some children also wear traditional symbols such as footwear, outfits like robes with stitching patterns and headscarves.

The man, old enough to remember important events of the past 60 years, is symbolizing a storyteller (olonkhosut). This picture may also indicate that the audience consists of children, eventually with a fresh mind yet in a mood of their current symbolic appearance. Generations exchange their wisdom. Old teaches young. The old person's dress looks feminine and appears outdated, echoed in the unified symbols of the traditional children's outfit.

The scene takes place on wooden stairs. Looking like a stage, some palettes, in front of a brick-red wall, which reflects some shadows of cave drawings. Covers are important and indicate purposes and statements. Much later in this volume, the same picture but in black and white carries a caption: "Semyon Chernogradskii at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ysyakh of Olonkho in Borogontsy 2009. Photo by Maria Vasilyeva, [www.ysia.ru](http://www.ysia.ru), used by permission" (page 48). Then, the expectations are resolved in the direction of a modernized staging. It represents the current imaginations of storytelling rather than trying to revitalize traditions.

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The book is structured into a small beginning part, seven chapters, and a back part that consists of a very helpful glossary, notes section, a list of works cited, and an index of terms.

The introduction is part of a bigger contextual scene. In addition to this, the first chapter also serves as an introduction, since it focuses on historical and social preconditions. Right at the beginning is a helpful description of the main topic. Olonkho is, according to the author, an “oral epic tradition composed of alternating sections of narrative poetry and song...” (page 11). The author opens the chapter with a short statement about an epic singer made by Albert Lord. Its central theme is “tradition”. However, the author is in no part of his work explicitly defining “tradition”, which is central to all following chapters, and does not require any definition. This first chapter is a summary of findings and statements about the history of the region and its cultural ties in changing social contexts. Since the extant literature and historical dates are rare, this part cannot be really large.. It turns out that the author goes to operate with the expressions “pre-Soviet”, “Soviet”, and “after-Soviet” for periods of time, which puts a specific emphasis on the undefined term “Soviet”, which one would definitely need as the imagination about it are widely varied. Remarkably, the fact of being Soviet or not makes a difference in the author’s descriptive standards. While pre-Soviet times are summarized as the “pre-Soviet centuries” (page 18), the Soviet times play a much more significant role in later analyses of narrated text and context (chapter 2–7).

The first chapter is critical to the understanding of the author’s motivation and the way of interpreting current issues of preservation and revitalization. While the author has overwhelmingly used the writings of authorities in the field, such as Slobin or Khazanov, in search for the support of the author’s opinion about oppressing minority arts in the Soviet period, he is less stringent toward parallel studies quoted in several other places. This phenomenon may be a general sign of today’s academic literature dealing with a social system that seems to be not popular in present times.

Other terms, such as “epic”, are well discussed and put in use. The contents of the olonkhos are unfortunately, only in later chapters, dealt with from a musical perspective. The places associated with musical contents had very few remarks. The author mentions, i.e., distinct leitmotifs, central tones, and other melodic-ambitus-related factors, rhythmic and temporal characteristics. Musically relevant parameters in this specific context stay possibly far in the background and the dominant discussion, elaborated and thoughtfully classified, is the sung text, or as the author puts it “sung speech” (page 19). Thanks to the authors’ own knowledge and many reliable partners, these text parts are a great resource for further studies in epics as art expressions that are key to musical developments within and beyond Siberian communities.

The author had shown bravery in collecting nearly all “sung speeches” and honest opinions of the practicing performers available at the time of the fieldwork. The material concentrated in this volume is of yet unidentified richness and surely a great addition to already existing research materials provided earlier by Ignatieva (2013) and her team. This is without doubt the most valuable contribution to this research area. The data collection presented in this study is excellent.

Another achievement is a detailed look at the development after the Soviet period that is – at first sight – slightly idealized. The author writes “The surge in freedom of expression for minority peoples during that period of Russian history laid the groundwork for widespread cultural renewal among the Sakha” (page 33). The central point of the author is the cultural liberation of the Sakha, seen as a unique and distinct people inhabiting their geographical places in Siberia. The author provides a map of the Republic of Sakha with Yakutsk as its capital, yet he does not state time frames and other important parameters such as the dynamics of population density, income generation, age structure, or any other demographics of this republic, which would be helpful to understand the relationship of the Sakha to the overarching power. Most of the author’s photographs and figures are not easy to identify according to their strength of proof or their actual rights. This can only be excused as being highly focused on the main topic of the olonkho. However,

the author brings UNESCO's "Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" program into discussion and analyzes related processes from different perspectives by dividing them into pre-application, during application, and after-application periods of time. Orality and literature-based transmissions play an important role in this regard. Yet again, significant terms are missing a clear definition such as "renewal", "revitalization", "vitality", or even "minority". In this regard, it might have been more helpful to look specifically into the fate of diverse epics performed throughout Asia, in order to avoid an ideologization of thoughts, which, in an ironic way, are a dominating tone in explanations about the changes during the Soviet period. Ideological oppression happened in many places throughout the world regardless of social systems and the number of operating political parties within a country. Different religions and common beliefs were often twisted and taken as an alibi in order to introduce advanced cultural products, mass products, and, at the same time, controlled entertainment that became possible through technological advancements. Therefore, Chapter 2 is, compared to the following chapters 3–7, a rather less inspiring since it is overloaded with quotes from economically frustrated informants, which do not contribute much to the understanding of olonkho as an art. The revitalization after the Soviet period, so it seems, is subsequently surprising and appears artificial. Thankfully, the author tries hard to find a balanced view by providing a large number of quotes from many informants and supporting academic and other writings. Especially profound and detailed reports are delivered by the performers. The author also tried to give hints and insights into genuine conflicts among performers, audiences, their expectations, and their will to modernize. Looking at the different perspectives taken through the interviews, a picture of the entire story appears that is close to current experiences of cultural changes, not only referring to olonkho.

This book by Robin P. Harris is an important work that greatly contributes to the current understanding of a number of burning cultural questions among people seeing themselves as large minorities within an even larger state. Continuous observations and more such collections are required to follow up and to make use of the interesting insights provided in this volume.

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