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## **Review of Harris, R.P. (2017) *Storytelling in Siberia: the Olonkho epic in a changing world***

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Review

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hearing—so often positioned as the passive counterpart to listening—is not at all passive, nor free from ideology. This helps us better understand why a sound can mean so much to a nation.

Tom Western

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**Robin P. Harris, *Storytelling in Siberia: The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-04128-0 (cloth) US\$ 60.00.**

In *Storytelling in Siberia: The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World*, Robin P. Harris explores the revitalization of *olonkho*, the epic storytelling tradition of the Sakha (Yakut), an indigenous group living in the vast Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in North-Eastern Siberia. Through ethnographic snapshots, extended interview fragments and a selective performance analysis, Harris provides a firsthand look into the twentieth century decline and transformation of *olonkho* storytelling-singing and into its post-Soviet resurgence and revitalization. Declined to the brink of extinction during the Soviet era, *olonkho* saw a growing interest from *perestroika* onwards, and a remarkable re-emergence from the early 1990s. This resulted in the genre’s recognition as a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005. Harris searches for the keys to revitalize *olonkho*, “giving it a chance for sustainability as a performed artistic genre” (p.3). To this end, she looks into factors that contributed to *olonkho*’s decline during the Soviet era, its rise to prominence in the early 2000s, and its revitalization and transformations in the twenty-first century. She imbeds these processes in Jeff Titon’s novel music resilience theory (2015) and analyses them with a newly-designed model adapted from applied music revitalization models.<sup>1</sup> Resilience in *olonkho*, Harris argues, depends as much on robust transmission as it does on the right amount of malleability in the tradition, that is, on sufficient variability and flexibility in both transmission and performance (pp. 148–9).

Harris raises a highly relevant and urgent issue regarding the chances for epic traditions to continue in the future. How to keep alive highly-demanding narrative performance practices, in what shape(s), and serving what function(s) in society? The book takes a first step in answer-

ing these questions specifically for Sakha epic storytelling, to support the author's local partners' revitalization endeavors and to contribute to similar projects elsewhere. Harris grounds her discussion in broad knowledge about and involvement with the Sakha people since 1995 and *olonkho*-related research since 2009. She relies on interviews, colloquial conversations, observed *olonkho* events, and Russian and English language scholarship. Along with the book goes a generous companion website with audio and video footage. Additional video footage resulting from her research is available at YouTube channel *SiberianEthnoArts*.

In her introductory chapter, "Introduction: Encountering *Olonkho*," Harris sets forth her connection to the Sakha people and the book's theoretical undergirding. In chapter 1, "Epic Traditions, Performers, and Audiences," she outlines the main characteristics of traditionally-performed *olonkho*. Some *olonkho* stories recount at length the coming-into-being of the world, the primordial ancestor, and the first Sakha people. Others narrate the life and deeds of warrior heroes of supernatural nature, destined to protect people, herd and homeland against enemy powers of human and underworldly origin, supported by protector animals, shamans and deities. The stories are alternately recited and sung, without instrumental accompaniment and with only sparse use of gestures.

As Harris demonstrates in the next chapter titled "Effects of Change during the Soviet Era," orally transmitted and improvised in interaction with an attentive audience, old-style *olonkho* performance was flexible to adapt to changing circumstances, a trait it lost in the course of the twentieth century when it became fixed *fol'klor*. In this chapter, Harris uncovers the mechanisms at play in *olonkho*'s decline and transformations, tracing it back to the loss of "epic *sreda*," the socio-cultural milieu that allows epic storytelling to thrive. A fine example of oral historiography, this chapter provides a nuanced picture of the vicissitudes of epic performance and individuals' experiences during the Soviet era. The following chapter, "Esteem for a Masterpiece: The Quest for Recognition," addresses *olonkho*'s transformations in the early twenty-first century, and the recurred interest and revitalization activity prior to and following the genre's proclamation as a UNESCO Masterpiece. Together, these two diachronic chapters inform the discussion of continuity, change, vitality and the possibilities for resilience in *olonkho* performance that Harris presents in later chapters. In these following chapters, Harris examines the official governmental *olonkho* revitalization project and the genre's chances for long-term sustainability from various angles. She provides insights into, respectively, the role of institutions (chapter 4), performance aspects vital to the genre's continuation (chapter 5), and the political background for the post-Soviet overly resurgence of interest in *olonkho* (chapter 6).

Chapter 4, "Examining the Role of UNESCO and Intangible Cultural Heritage", screens both the local official program and the UNESCO guidelines. Harris is largely positive about the effects of the UNESCO recognition on local revitalization efforts. Increased visibility greatly energized the revitalization endeavors, as is clear from the astonishing amount and scale of government-sponsored *olonkho*-related activity since 2005. Harris' screening of the *olonkho* revitalization program for the chances it offers to actual long-term sustainability provides the focal points for further analysis. She finds two essential components insufficiently covered by the program: transmission to younger generations and innovation within the genre. These components lead her through the remainder of the book.

In the central, quite dense fifth chapter, somewhat cryptically titled "Elements of Resilience: Stable and Malleable," Harris introduces her model for measuring continuity, change and vitality in *olonkho* performance, and traces key factors for attaining its long-term vitality. She builds her model on interactions between stable and malleable features in epic traditions, and tries it on a selection of indicative performance elements related to both the genre's form

and its performance contexts. The flexible elements (like *olonkho*'s oral and improvisatory nature, and performer-audience interaction) in particular provided resilience in old-style epic performance and therefore need nurturing. Given its complexity and the wide-reaching statements that she makes based thereon, Harris' performance analysis occupies too small a part of the book. On the other hand, with few models available at the time of her core research, which took place just prior to the recent emergence of a body of applied ethnomusicological literature regarding music endangerment, sustainability and vitality (cf. Titon 2015; Schippers & Grant 2016), she did a great job. However, questions arise as to her selection of performance elements, the chosen analytical parameters, and the unquestioned comparison of early twentieth century storytelling practices with twenty-first century theatre productions. Furthermore, while covering a carefully chosen cross-section of performance aspects, the assessed performance elements remain exactly that: performance aspects. Harris does not include *olonkho*'s function(s) in Sakha society in her analysis, whereas for an epic genre, its continued or regained relevance for society will be decisive for its possible revitalization.

In the last main chapter, "Epic Revitalization: Negotiating Identities and Other Challenges," Harris highlights the importance of ethnic belonging for both twentieth-century *olonkho* and its post-Soviet resurgence. All over the Soviet Union, epic storytelling was used to reinforce ethnic-cultural identities. This issue, Harris assumes with good reason, will continue to shape the relevance *olonkho* has for the Sakha people, and will thus remain a key issue in its revitalization. As she found, among a large majority of Sakha people "the living tradition appears less necessary than the epic's role as an identity marker and nostalgic touchstone" (p. 144).

Is there hope, then, for *olonkho* to continue as a performed narrative genre? In the final chapter, "Ensuring Sustainability through Transmission and Innovation," Harris reflects on this question. To keep the genre alive in Sakha society, she argues that robust transmission, including the art of improvising, and abundant innovation, including the creation of new art forms, are vital. Only this way, the genre may gain renewed interest in society and be flexible to adapt to changes in Sakha life. Harris thus walks a two-track path, recommending to both invest in continuing the traditional, improvised form in innovative ways, and in further developing "derivates" such as theatre productions, movies, animated film and computer games. She seems to see a future for *olonkho* mainly in the further development of the latter forms, which are thriving today.

While thus providing the reader with interesting insights into *olonkho*, the book also provides some challenges. Throughout the book, for example, Harris foregrounds the voices of her interlocutors. These, however, turn out to be quite one-sidedly selected, without clarification of the selection process. For a large part, they are professionals from the *olonkho* revitalization "cadres," Sakha's cultural-scholarly community in the capital Yakutsk in which Harris is firmly embedded. The reader stays uninformed about any grassroots *olonkho* revitalization efforts, or about *olonkho* reception republic-wide. *Olonkho* reception among the Sakha population at large is estimated from a local survey, but voices from other ethnic groups living in the Sakha Republic, like the many small-numbered indigenous groups and the large Slavic population, are absent. While reading, I wondered about their opinions about (and involvement in) this central-Sakha revitalization project, especially given the project's exuberant consuming of public funding.

Of greater concern is the pervasive influence of the author's dominant but concealed personal religious conviction, which undoubtedly is related to her ethnodoxological take in the core areas of her academic work.<sup>2</sup> Harris bypasses any reference to local-specific religious or spiritual meanings, practices and functions related to *olonkho* and its performance, by fore-

grounding Christian Sakha voices (a disproportionate number of her interlocutors belonging to Christian denominations; exclusion of shamanic and Tengrianist voices), by neglecting or selectively using the body of literature on animism and shamanism in Siberian and related epic traditions and in post-Soviet revitalization movements, by reframing *olonkho*'s animist-shamanic contents in religious-universalist terms (pp. 15–8), and by ignoring ritual and spiritual aspects in the performance and transmission of *olonkho* (cf. Balzer 2011; Emsheimer 1991; Larionova 1997). She validates these choices by pointing to Sakha's dominant identity discourse which promotes a shamanic identity and "marginalizes" all kinds of confessional strands, in particular newly-Christianized ones (pp. 16, 17, 180n29). This intentional void is questionable as it disregards local concerns and overlooks an inherent part of indigenous revitalization efforts (Balzer 2011 on Sakha cultural revitalization; reviewer's fieldwork observations in Sayan-Altai, 1996–2013). It also is problematic in relation to the author's goal to contribute to *olonkho* revitalization. Apart from a partial understanding and presentation of the *olonkho* tradition, such a confined take impedes adequate assessment of its revitalization and may hamper its chances for attaining long-term vitality, as it neglects an important (grassroots) drive for engaging in epic performance. Epic practices in Siberia are gaining new relevance in society by reconnecting to local religious or spiritual worldviews, not only symbolically, but also through active use, such as performing in new religious rituals (cf. reviewer's fieldwork observations; Pegg & Yamaeva 2012), and through new spirit vocations into storytelling (cf. Balzer 2011 for Sakha; reviewer's fieldwork; Funk 2005; van der Heide 2008; Kharitonova 2006; Van Deusen 2004), which creates both viability for and resilience in the genre.

Finally, several small imperfections, often due to negligent final editing and layout, hamper the reader in seizing the many valuable insights the book has to offer. These include needless borrowing of Russian academic terms (*sreda*, "derivate"), poorly organized analytical charts, a key to the companion website missing, a lack of reference to the provided event recordings, and the comprehensive yet rather incomplete index. Another issue is Harris' relying on communication in Russian, as the Sakha language still serves as the primary language for most adult Sakha people, and conversation in Sakha (or through an interpreter) would have raised additional topics related to *olonkho* and its revitalization.

That said, Harris accomplished a laudable, be it somewhat overambitious, work. While one may object to the author's a personal stake behind the project, one cannot but value the amount of effort and commitment in supporting Sakha people's endeavors to carry on a vital part of their culture. Rich in information about a sonic performance tradition little known in the West, *Storytelling in Siberia* is an important introduction to both Sakha storytelling and its history. Multidisciplinary in scope, the book will appeal to ethnomusicologists, anthropologists and scholars from folklore and cultural studies interested in the performing arts or (post-)Soviet cultural-political processes in indigenous Siberia or the Turkic-speaking world. Designed for practical application, it will be equally useful to scholars and cultural specialists involved in revitalizing performance practices.

Liesbet Nyssen

## Notes

- 1 "Resilience refers to a system's capacity to recover and maintain its integrity, identity, and continuity when subjected to forces of disturbance and change" (Titon 2015:158).
- 2 Ethnodoxology has been defined as "the theological and anthropological study, and practical application, of how every cultural group might use its unique and diverse artistic expressions

appropriately to worship the God of the Bible” (Paul Neeley) or as “how peoples around the world worship God and encourage them to create in response to God’s work in their lives” (Robin Harris) (<https://www.worldofworship.org/what-is-ethnodoxology>; accessed 01-02-2017). It pops up in the book largely in footnotes, when the author points to Sakha people using *olonkho* song styles for the praise of a Christian god (e. g. pp. 57, 177n58, 180n29).

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