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# ***Olonxo* as a masterpiece of cultural heritage**

**Agafia Zakharova**

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*Olonxo* is the heroic epos of the Sakha (Yakut) people of Siberia. *Olonxo* is a general term used to denote the whole epic tradition of the Sakha as well as separate works of epic literature recorded from hundreds of different bearers of the verbal traditional culture. The poetics, contents and plots of *olonxo* are similar to those of the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* and other West-European chef-d'œuvres. The main difference consists in the fact that the poems of *olonxo* do not belong to one particular author but represent the result of collective work created over the course of several centuries by generations of *olonxosuts* 'performer of *olonxo*' with the immediate participation of the audience itself.

In 2005 the Sakha heroic epos *olonxo* was recognized as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity at the Third Proclamation of UNESCO in Paris on the 25th of November. This was a significant event in the cultural life of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), and its celebration culminated in July 2006 when an international forum on "Sustainable development of the Arctic countries and the northern regions of the Russian Federation in the context of education, science and culture" took place in Yakutsk, organized by UNESCO, the government of the Sakha Republic and the Yakutsk Institute for Research in the Humanities.

This article deals with *olonxo* and its history, its current state, the background behind the proclamation of *olonxo* as a masterpiece and the international forum held in Yakutsk.

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## **1. General characteristics of *olonxo***

*Olonxo* narrates the adventures and deeds of ancient heroes. The events in *olonxo* take place during epic heroic times in the mythological space of the three worlds—Middle, Upper and Lower. The ancient heroes described in *olonxo* are the first inhabitants of the Middle World, the ancestors and defenders of the Uraangxaj-saxa tribe. Uraangxaj-saxa is the old epic name of the Sakha people. The content of *olonxo* reflects the period when the tribal system was disintegrating. The tribal chiefs were patriarchs who possessed large herds of cattle. The plots and images of *olonxo* are interwoven with rich and variegated mythology reflecting the *weltanschauung*, beliefs, ancient rituals and complex history of the people. The mythology of *olonxo* bears witness to *olonxo* having emerged in deep antiquity when epic narration was closely connected with the creation of myths. That is why *olonxo* abounds in mythological characters such as gods, spirits, demons, animals and birds.

*Olonxo* is a general name for the numerous Sakha heroic narratives. The size of one particular narrative averages 10-15 thousand verses, the size of a bigger *olonxo* can reach 20 and sometimes even 50 thousand lines. For instance, the *olonxo* "Njur-gun Bootur the Impetuous" reconstructed by Ojuns kij contains 36 thousand lines. Another example is the *olonxo* "Alaatyr Ala Tujgun" which consists of 50,109 verses and which was recorded in the 1960s by R. P. Alekseev, a native of the Ust-Aldanskij region, see Alekseev 2002.

However, since *olonxo* belonged to the oral tradition, its size was determined not by the number of lines but by the length of the performance—lasting one night, several days, etc. For instance, *olonxo* researcher I. V. Puxov writes: "The performance lasted from 6-7 o'clock in the evening till dawn. In other words, the whole performance lasted approximately 10-12 hours" (cited after V. V. Illarionov 1982: 133). Judging by the tape-recordings, such a "one night" performance consisted of 9-10 thousand verses. Waclaw Sieroszewski met *olonxosut* Manchaary, who said that he could narrate one *olonxo* over the course of one month.

In the 1970s folklore researchers I. V. Puxov and P. N. Dmitriev recorded legends that the famous *olonxosuts* I. Oxlopkov-Čočojbox and I. V. Tabaxyrov could not finish even an introductory part of an *olonxo* during one night. Thus, taking into consideration the improvisational character of performance, *olonxo* when performed orally apparently had a larger volume than the versions recorded later. During long winter evenings, in the dim light of a yurt, the Yakuts of pre-revolutionary times had enough to ponder upon, to polish leisurely the language of popular poetry, to "whet" various images of *olonxo*, to practice eloquence. Incredibly abundant is the repertoire of descriptive means of the Saxa *olonxo*. The mastery of a narrator consisted in realizing epic knowledge during performance. Understood under epic knowledge is the *olonxosuts*' combined knowledge of various plots, motifs, a corpus of epic formulas and typical loci, a system of artistic-descriptive means. For instance, the repertoire of the *olonxosut* P. Kolesov from Nam numbered 45 different plots.

A classical description of an *olonxo* performance is given by the founder of Sakha literature A. E. Kulakovskij (1925: 69): "Look at a Sakha family listening to an *olonxosut* on a long winter night... Everyone is listening with bated breath, totally carried away and trying not to miss a single word... Everyone has forgotten his worries, his sorrow and rushed into a magical, beautiful world of enchanting dreams... And the story-teller himself as a true poet got carried away more than everyone else, even his eyes are shut so that he could renounce once and for all this sinful earth with its spiteful petty squabbles and everyday humdrum...". Indeed, the arrival of an *olonxosut* in a settlement was a truly joyful event. As noted by Vasil'ev (1973: 80), "listening to *olonxo* was a true holiday in the yurt. In the depressing and monotonous environment, one could hardly think of a better entertainment for people who were under the pressure of poverty and petty household chores".

*Olonxo* has been passed on by word of mouth in the form of oral narrative tradition. In the past *olonxo* circulated among people in numerous versions; there existed local oral narrative schools, for instance, those of Taatta, Amga, Uus-Aldan, Viljuy,

Verkhoyansk, and others. *Olonxo* was usually performed in small circles of family members and the nearest neighbors but sometimes at various festivities as well. *Olonxo* was characterized by a certain traditional manner of performance with the *olonxosut* sitting with his legs crossed and with one hand on his ear or cheek. Descriptive narrative extracts are recited at a quick pace, while monologues and dialogues are performed in the form of a song. Pathetic spots are characterized by gesticulation; sometimes the *olonxosut* half-rises and expresses the hero's feelings with his facial expression (Ėrgis 1974: 183). Comparable descriptions of the *olonxosut*'s pose are given by Žirkov (1981: 51) and Šerxunaev (1977: 198).

The narrative tradition developed both solo and choral performance. The simplest type of performance was a duet where one performer read recitatives as the other sang monologues. Cases of choral performance by several prominent *olonxosuts* were known, and famous *olonxosuts* and narration schools organized competitions. All this developed mastership of performers and stimulated people's interest in the epos. Later, for historical and social reasons, the epic environment decayed, and the epic narrative tradition embodied in the form of schools declined. Today, solo performances with all their unique features (improvisation, performing manner, rich poetical speech, specific guttural singing, facial expression, gesticulation, etc.) no longer exist.

## 2. The history of *olonxo*

This section gives some information on the historical background of *olonxo* itself as well as research devoted to *olonxo*.

### 2.1. The emergence of *olonxo*

From a mythological point of view, the first *olonxosut* was Seerkeen Sehen, a wise old man, himself one of the characters in a number of epic poems. From a historical point of view, of course, the names of the very first *olonxo* performers have long been forgotten. *Olonxo* originated in deep antiquity and is considered to be one of the most ancient epic monuments of the Turkic-Mongolian peoples. Rudiments of *olonxo* developed at a stage when the ancestors of the Sakha were territorially close to these peoples (no later than 4th-9th centuries).

An outstanding Soviet archeologist, academician M. P. Grjaznov (1961: 31), made the following suggestion with regard to the age of the verbal art of the nomads of Altai, Baikal, Mongolia and present-day northern China: "If until recently it was considered that the antiquity of the heroic epos of the peoples of our country is estimated to be only a few centuries... then during the last years researchers more often reach the conclusion that it is much older, that it developed during the period of the military-democratic system which on our territories corresponds to the time of early nomads, more specifically the second half of the first millennium B.C."

As far as the dating of *olonxo* itself is concerned, Ojunkskij (1962: 133) supposed that "the appearance of the first *olonxos* in the form of separate narratives about the

war should coincide with the time of the Tatar and Mongolian invasion of China". Puxov & Ėrgis (1985: 544-558) considered that "apparently, *olonxo* was created during the period when the ancestors of the Sakha still preserved in their memory hostile relations with the ancient Turks in the 6th-7th centuries. Of course, this does not mean that the emergence of the epos should be necessarily assigned to the 6th-7th centuries. But it is possible that *olonxo* was being formed at the time when the forefathers of the Sakha were still singing about their battles with the Turkic *kagans*".

## 2.2. The history of *olonxo* studies

Research on Sakha folklore at all stages of its development dealt with problems of collection, study and preservation of the traditions of oral narration by passing it on to a younger generation.

The collection of the monuments of Sakha epic culture began from the middle of the 19th century. Today the archive of the Yakut scientific centre of the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and other archives in the Republic have in their storage 127 full versions of *olonxo* in manuscripts, more than 100 extracts and short summaries of plots, around 300 sound and video recordings taken in different years. During 80 years of Soviet power 8 *olonxos* were published out of all the epic heritage; nowadays the number of published *olonxos* is 22.

Traveler and researcher Middendorf was the first person to make a recording of the Yakut heroic epos for the scientific community in 1842 (during his expedition to Siberia which took place from 1842 to 1845). An excerpt that Middendorf recorded was the beginning of the *olonxo* "Eriedel Bergen". In addition, Middendorf rendered the basic content of the *olonxo* succinctly in Russian. However, the first *olonxo* "Er Sogotox" in A. Ja. Uvarovskij's rendering was published by the Sanscrit scholar and academician Boehtlingk (1815-1904) in 1851 in Yakut and German. The well-known folklore researcher I. A. Xudjakov during his exile in Verkhoyansk in the 19th century studied the Yakut language and simultaneously collected specimens of Yakut folklore. He recorded and translated into Russian four *olonxos*, including a "three-generational" *olonxo* "Xaan Djargystaj" which depicts the deeds of three generations of warriors.

Ė. K. Pekarsky did not leave behind any work dedicated to a special investigation of *olonxo*, but he carried out extensive textological work reflected in his articles on the publication of works of Yakut oral folklore. In addition, basic epic texts of *olonxo* recorded with the help of *olonxosuts* of central and northern Yakutia appeared for the first time in "Specimens of folk literature of the Yakuts", also published by him. Pekarsky devoted half a century to compiling the dictionary of the Yakut language, and almost all illustrative materials of this three-volume work consist of folklore, viz. epic specimens.

The political exile S. V. Jastremskij, an active participant of Sibirjakov's expedition of 1894-1896, also conducted successful work on the translation of Yakut

*olonxo* into Russian. He recorded and translated into Russian five *olonxos* published for the first time in 1929.

Following Russian researchers, Yakut scientists and writers also engaged in the collection and study of folklore. The contribution of P. A. Ojunkskij—a prominent Yakut politician, scientist, poet—to the collection, publication and study of *olonxo* is priceless. He regarded this work as one of the basic tasks of the Scientific Research Institute of Language and Culture of the Yakut ASSR, which he founded in 1935. From this time on, the process of collecting Yakut folklore, including *olonxo*, began. This was done through numerous folklore expeditions into various districts of the Republic organized by the Institute of Language, History and Literature (now Institute for Research in Humanities of the Academy of Sciences of the Sakha Republic) (by G. A. Popov, S. I. Bolo, A. A. Savvin, G. U. Germogenov-Ėrgis, I. V. Puxov, G. M. Vasil'ev, N. V. Emel'janov, P. E. Ėfremov, V. V. Illarionov, P. N. Dmitriev and others). A series of important fundamental scientific works on the study of *olonxo* was written by well-known Yakut scientists: I. V. Puxov, G. U. Germogenov-Ėrgis, G. M. Vasil'ev, V. T. Petrov, N. V. Ėmel'janov, P. E. Ėfremov and others.

### 2.3. Famous *olonxosuts*

*Olonxo* was created by the efforts of many generations of *olonxosuts*. *Olonxosuts* always commanded great love and respect of all Sakha people. The honor of being called an *olonxosut* was granted only to those individuals who met the esthetic and spiritual requirements of the epic environment, had a true talent for creating and performing *olonxo*, loved and respected it and forgot their own interests for the sake of becoming an *olonxosut*. Nowadays, based on written and archival sources, 613 *olonxosuts* of the past and present (17th-21st centuries) have been identified. These were all talented and bright individuals who became part of Sakha history. Among them we can name I. Oxlopkov-Čočojbox, I. V. Tabaxyrov from Taatta, T. V. Zaxarov-Čeebij and E. E. Ivanova from Amga, S. A. Zverev from Suntaar, I. I. Burnašev-Tong Suorun and N. A. Abramov-Kynat from Menge-Khangalas, D. M. Govorov and N. P. Burnašev-Boodoghosh from Uus-Aldan, S. V. Petrov from Njurba and many others.

In 2005, only two bearers were still alive. One of them was Daria Andreevna Tomskaja (Čaajka), who was born in 1913 in the district of Verkhoyansk. Her repertoire consists of the following *olonxo*: “Kun Kuohengse”, “Erbeger erčimneex Eliter Bergen”, “Kulun Kullustuur”, “Učugej Uodjujeen Kuhaġan Xoodjugur”, “Kyys Kylaabynaj”, “Kuoxa emeexsin”, “Njurgun Bootur”, “Sahyl ulaan attaax Sandaly Bergen”, “Xaan Ilbisteen Buxatyryr”, “Omunnaajy buxatyryr”, “Ellej Baatyr”. She died in 2008. The other is Petr Egorovich Rešetnikov, born in 1928 in the district of Taatta. Rešetnikov is still active and performs several of his *olonxos*. One of his *olonxos*, “Ahynygas sanaalaax Ajyy Djuraġastaj buxatyryr”, has been recorded.

On December 29, 2005 the President of the Sakha Republic V. Štyrov passed a decree “On measures for the preservation, study and dissemination of the Yakut heroic epos *olonxo*”. One of the measures includes appointing a lifetime monthly personal stipend to the living bearers of the epic tradition Daria Tomskaya and Petr Rešetnikov.

### 3. Various transformations of *olonxo*

We must keep in mind that *olonxo* was originally a genre of verbal, unwritten culture. Its proclamation as a masterpiece of *oral* and *intangible* heritage implies that we must preserve it as such. This, in turn, requires the creation of an epic environment and the schooling of genuine *olonxosuts*, i.e. individuals who combine both creating and performing skills. Understood under epic environment is the audience itself: *olonxo* is a whole performance in which an *olonxosut* enacts completely different characters—from gods to demons, from humans to animals, from men to women, and the audience watching and listening to the performance plays the role not only of judge but also that of coauthor. Indeed, the public supplements the performance by suggesting corrections and insertions and by applauding at successful improvisations, thus showing its approval. This exceptional role of the audience was already noted by the very first documenter of *olonxo* Middendorf (1878: 792).

It is clear from this exposition that once *olonxo* is recorded on tape or video, put down on paper, enacted as a theatrical play or represented in painting, the conditions for the epic environment are no longer met. Nonetheless, such transformations are invaluable: not only do they enrich our cultural and spiritual lives but they also contribute greatly to the noble cause of preserving *olonxo* for future generations. Below we shall consider the various metamorphoses that *olonxo* have undergone.

#### 3.1. Theatre

The first stage adaptations of *olonxo* started in 1906 when the *olonxo* “Beriet Bergen” was played in the non-Russian club of Yakutsk. There were several performers including among others a famous *olonxosut* P. A. Oxlopkov (*Naara Suox*), a folk storyteller, the wife of a political exile, M. N. Ionova-Androsova, and the first Yakut writer, A. E. Kulakovskij. The second *olonxo* to be put on stage in March 1907 was “Warrior Kulantaj on a frisky horse”. These were amateur performances. The main roles were played by the *olonxosuts* themselves. The plays had enormous success and opened new avenues on the perception and interpretation of *olonxo*.

An invaluable contribution into promoting *olonxo* on stage was made by well-known *olonxosut* N. I. Stepanov-Noorj. Starting from 1921 he staged several *olonxos* with amateur troupes (e.g. “Sabyja Baaj Tojon” in 1921, “Beriet Bergen”, “Oqo Njurgun” in 1936). The latter two were even performed on the professional stage of the Yakut drama theatre with enormous success. In 1939 professional composers Pejko and Steiman made musical notations of Stepanov-Noorj’s *olonxo*. An unforgettable performance of “Oqo Njurgun” was given in 1945 during festivities



dedicated to the Victory: the *olonxo* itself was perceived as a symbol of victory reflecting patriotic themes and ideas of the heroic epos.

In the 1930s and 1940s traditional folk melodies of *olonxo* were recorded from the *olonxosuts* themselves. The first Yakut composer and folklore researcher M.N. Žirkov played a prominent role in the process: he translated into musical notation the song melodies of chief *olonxo* characters, using them later in his (jointly with G. Litinsky) opera “Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous” based on an *olonxo* of the same name. The first public presentation of the opera took place in 1947. The successful Moscow premiere of the opera was in 1957.

A new tendency in the transformation of *olonxo* was introduced with the spread of mass media—radio and television. Audio recordings of famous *olonxosuts* (I.G. Teplouxov-Timofeev, I. I. Burnašev-Tong Suorun, U. G. Noxsorov, N. I. Stepanov-Noorj, P. P. Jadrixinsky-Bedjeele, V. O Karataev and others) and a series of performances by the people’s artist of the Yakut ASSR G. G. Kolesov were broadcast on radio in the 1950s. Based on Kolesov’s recordings a set of 9 gramophone discs of P. A. Ojunskey’s “Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous” was issued. Later these recordings were issued on compact disks. With the appearance of television, a series of programs dedicated to the works of well-known *olonxosuts* were broadcast thanks to TV-journalists A. G. Zverev and E. S. Mironova.

Starting from the 1980s-90s amateur folk theatres of the Republic began showing broad interest in the epos. Commemorating the 100th anniversary of P. A. Ojunskey in 1993, a republican festival of folk theatres was organized in Ytyk-Kuol, the central village of the Taatta district. For the most part, theatres showed dramatized plays based on the motifs of the heroic epos. During the festival there was a single instance of the transformation of an *olonxo* into a dance performance. The dance theatre “Erel” staged N. Abramov’s *olonxo* “Female shamans Uolumar and Ajgyr” (libretto by A. Zaxarova, production by S. Tolstjakova), which became the best performance of the year 1996.

The recreation of the *olonxo* theatre invokes the archaic genetic memory of the people and restores ways for the revival of the people in all respects of modern life. This is witnessed by the production of the *olonxos* “Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous” (new production of the opera by the director A. S. Borisov in 1993), and “Maiden Debilije” in recent years in the Sakha academic drama theatre after P.A. Ojunskey. Thus, the talented staging of the *olonxo* “Maiden Debilije” was awarded the Russian “Golden mask” prize in 2002—an achievement which once again bears witness to the wide range of possibilities for transforming the Sakha heroic epos into an on-stage performance.

### 3.2. Fine arts

The heroic epos and folklore in general have always inspired painters, starting from the very emergence of fine arts in Yakutia in the 1930s. Close collaboration between *olonxo* and fine arts began in 1930 with the creation of “The portrait of *olonxosut* I.



N. Vinokurov-Tabaxyrov" by I. V. Popov, the first professional artist of Yakutia. Since then a whole gallery of the portraits of famous *olonxosuts* has been created ("The portrait of I. I. Burnašev-Tong Suorun" by P. P. Romanov in 1944, "The portrait of P. P. Jadrixinskij" by E. S. Sivcev in 1966, "The portrait of folk singer E. N. Čarpykova" by L. A. Kim in 1984, and many others).

The first interpreter of epic images in painting was P. P. Romanov. In his epic canvas "Warrior with the Bride" (1938) Romanov for the first time transfers the figurative structure of the Yakut *olonxo* into a picturesque narration about human life.

An important role in the artistic transformation of *olonxo* was played by M. M. Nosov, an ethnographer and researcher who was also among the first Yakut artists. In his paintings he frequently used historical and folkloristic motifs. These works are "Dance of the Ancient Yakut" (1946), "Battle of the Warriors" (1940), "The First Settlers on the Lena River" (1947) and a series of graphics "Yakutia in the Folklore Epos" (1945). The works introduce us to the unusual fictional world created by the author's fantasy, with the epos represented as a fairy tale. Nosov's graphic works "Yakutia in the Folklore Epos" remained unfinished: the author completed only seven graphic sheets devoted to the *olonxo* heroes and the mythical world that surrounds them.

An entirely new stage of *olonxo* transmission through fine arts starts in the 1960s-1970s when Yakut engraving and print receive international acclaim. A large number of graphics, prints, plates, and etchings have been created since then. Transition from ethnographic orientation to a spiritual reinterpretation of folklore is seen in the works of graphic artists E. S. Sivcev, V. S. Karamzin, V. R. Vasil'ev, A.P. Munxalov, and others. Among their most notable works we can single out a series of etchings "Yakut National Games" (1969) and a series of lithographs "Guest" (1978), "Shamans" (1988) by the Yakut pioneer printmaker E. S. Sivcev, a series of etchings "The Ysjax Festival" (1968), "The Yakut Heroic Epos" (1969) by V. S. Karamzin, the triptych "Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous" by V. R. Vasil'ev, lithographs "Shaman" (1981), "Olonxosut Bedjeele" (1982), "Warrior of the Middle World", "Warrior of the Lower World" (1984), "Udagan (Female shaman)" (1992) by S. S. Parnikov and many others.

The traditional Sakha folk art of bone carving deserves a special note. The various characters of *olonxo* and certain events from *olonxo* were reflected in exquisite works by famous bone carvers such as A. V. Fedorov, T. V. Ammosov, S. N. Petrov, N. D. Amydaev, R. N. Petrov, F. I. Markov, R. M. Pinigin, and others. T. V. Ammosov takes a special place among these artists: not only was he a talented bone carver, he was also a gifted narrator-improviser and a fine connoisseur of folklore. Based on the *olonxo* motifs, Ammosov created goblets, snuff-boxes, chess sets, boxes and miniature decorative sculptures (composition "Njurgun Bootur and Soruk Bollur" in 1958, goblet "Ysjax" in 1965, a set for playing chess "*Olonxo*" in the 1980's, box "*Olonxo*" in 1985 and many others).

Thus, *olonxo* received and continues to receive extensive coverage in the fine arts of the Republic. The artistic transformation of *olonxo* has resulted in numerous invaluable works of art.

### 3.3. Translating *olonxo*

The Sakha heroic epos *olonxo* also underwent literary transformations in the form of translations into various world languages. The very first translations were into Russian: a text of the *olonxo* "Erejdeex-Burujdaax Er Sogotox" prepared by A. Ja. Uvarovskij, a native of Yakutia, was published in 1851 in Böhtlingk's work; Böhtlingk also provided German glosses for the complete *olonxo*.

The first excellent rendering of *olonxo* into Russian was published in 1884. This was N. S. Goroxov's *olonxo* "Urung Uolan (Sakha fairy tale)". N. S. Goroxov was a student of I. A. Xudjakov, a political exile in Verkhoyansk in 1867-1875. Goroxov helped Xudjakov learn the Yakut language, and gather and analyze folklore materials. Later Goroxov became a well-known ethnographer. Xudjakov himself wrote down and translated into Russian 4 *olonxos*, among them one long *olonxo* "Khaan Djargystaj", which tells the story of the heroic deeds of three generations of warriors (father, son and grandson). In 1890 Xudjakov published "Verxojanskij sbornik. Jakutskie skazki, pesni, zagadki i poslovitsy" in Irkutsk. The extensive folklore material of the book apart from "Xaan Djargystaj" also included narrations of three *olonxos* with translations into Russian: "Bert Xara", "Old woman with an old man", "Basymnilan Baatyr" (the original Yakut text is lacking for the last one). The work received high approval from the academic community. Translations of 5 *olonxos* into Russian were also undertaken by the political exile S. V. Jastremskij. These were published in "Specimens of folk literature of the Yakuts" in 1929.

Apart from Russian, *olonxo* were also translated into English, French, Japanese, and Slovene. In 1971 Douglas Linds of the University of Arizona Medical School translated and published in the university's working papers A. Ya. Uvarovskij's "Erejdeex-burujdaax Er Sogotox" (The Poor Suffering Lonely Man).

The *olonxo* "Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous" by P. A. Ojunsikij was translated into Slovene from the Russian edition in Yugoslavia (1984) by Milos Krno, with illustrations by the Yugoslav painter Miroslav Kipara.

In 1987, the translator of the Japanese broadcasting corporation NHK Ogawa Masakuni began translating P. A. Ojunsikij's "Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous" into Japanese.

French researcher Jacques Karro translated K. G. Orosin's *olonxo* "Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous" recorded by E. K. Pekarsky and translated into Russian by G. U. Ėrgis. In 1990 this translation was published in Paris as a separate book with the title "Sibérie légendaire: Niourgoun le Yakoute, guerrier céleste" and a total of 1000 copies were printed. The book was illustrated with the unique photos of A. I. Vinokurov, J. Karro and the artist T. A. Stepanov.

In 1994 the publishing house Gallimard published “Les guerriers célestes du pays yakoute-saxa” in French. The book included three works by Yakut authors: “Ellej Bootur” by G. V. Ksenofontov, “Uluu Kudangsa” by P. A. Ojunskey and K. G. Orosin’s *olonxo* “Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous”.

The Even poet D. Krivošapkin-Njimkalan translated P. A. Ojunskey’s “Njurgun Bootur the Impetuous” into Even, and the book was published in parts in 1996, 2000, 2003.

Thus, the most well-known *olonxos* were published not only into Russian but also into other languages of the world, becoming integral part of the world culture and bearing witness to the broad public interest in the Yakut epos.

#### **4. The proclamation of *olonxo* as a masterpiece and the Forum**

In 2000 the Department of *Olonxo* of the Institute for Research in the Humanities of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) held an international conference called “*Olonxo* in the context of the epic heritage of the peoples of the world”. At the conference it was recommended that Yakut *olonxo* be nominated as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Following this conference, a UNESCO seminar “On the preservation of traditional culture and folklore in the Siberian region of the Russian Federation” culture, education and informational space”, all directed at the support, preservation and popularization of epic heritage.

The result of all this work was the recognition of the Yakut heroic epos *olonxo* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity at the Third Proclamation of UNESCO on the 25th of November. The proclamation of *olonxo* as a masterpiece was received by the people of the Republic as an event of vast historical and cultural significance, as an intellectual and cultural breakthrough into the world’s cultural space. On December 29, 2005 the President of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) issued a decree “On measures for the preservation, study and dissemination of the Sakha heroic epos *Olonxo*”. The decree declared 2006-2015 a decade of *olonxo* in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

The first larger event of the *olonxo* decade celebrating the proclamation was the official visit paid to the Republic by the Director-General of UNESCO Koichiro Matsuura. In connection with this visit, an International Forum on “Sustainable Development of the Arctic countries and northern regions of the Russian Federation in the context of education, science and culture” was held in Yakutsk on July 24-25, 2006. Participants of the Forum included scientists and government officials both from within Russia (Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tuva, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Taymyr, Khanty-Mansiysk, Yakutia, Irkutsk region, Omsk region, Novosibirsk, Bashkortostan, Yamal, Koryak Okrug, Altai) and abroad (Denmark, Kyrgyzstan, Sweden, Moldova, Finland, Belgium, Japan, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Holland, Poland).

The program of the Forum consisted of two sessions: “Dialogue of Cultures and New Partnership: Spirituality and Preservation of Traditions” and “Dialogue and

Integration: Risk of Disappearance and Search for Stability". The participants of the Forum signed and handed the Forum address to Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, expressing their gratitude for all the work UNESCO does for the preservation of indigenous cultures.

A diverse specter of problems discussed by the participants of the Forum determined several priority tasks which must be solved, taking into consideration the current situation in the Russian North as well as in the northern and arctic regions of the world. First of all, it is necessary to establish under the auspices of UNESCO a special international complex program "Sustainable development of the Arctic in the context of education, science and culture". It is advisable to work out scientific research projects which focus on the specifics of indigenous peoples' lives (creation of folklore archives, archives of audiovisual materials on languages and ethnic culture of the arctic peoples, ethnographic expeditions, folklore festivals, etc.). In light of the international recognition of *olonxo*, it is necessary to initiate the popularization of the specimens of oral folk arts and to organize international contests on the translation of *olonxo* into European and Asian languages. Developing the idea of the Council of Europe and UNESCO directed at the formation of a spiritually rich individual as a necessary prerequisite for a comprehensive development of modern society, it is important to support the educational policy of UNESCO: to broaden research and experimental projects on the creation of a network of arctic schools associated with UNESCO, and to promote the organization of nomadic schools of various types with the aim of revitalizing traditional ways of life of the arctic peoples. One of the achievements of the forum was the signing of a joint communiqué between UNESCO and the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). Pointed out in the communiqué were a variety of priorities for possible cooperation in the areas of education, science, environmental protection, culture, communication and information. The communiqué was signed in the city of Yakutsk on 24 July 2006 both in Russian and English by the Director-General of UNESCO Koichiro Matsuura and the President of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) Vyacheslav Shtyrov. During a festive ceremony on July 25, the Director-General of UNESCO Koichiro Matsuura laid the first stone in the foundation of the future International Centre for *Olonxo* in Yakutsk. The Forum was extremely important in popularizing *olonxo* in the world community and in promoting research cooperation between scientists was held in the Sakha Republic in 2001.

In the summer of 2003 materials for an international contest in translating *olonxo* into European languages were drafted and received the support of the Russian Commission on UNESCO Affairs headed by E. G. Ordzhonikidze. The preceding material gathering and research activities of Yakut folklorists of all generations formed a basis for mounting a project on such a large scale. As a result of the preparatory work, a project dossier was formed (500 and 900 pages respectively in English and Russian), and the accompanying documentation was prepared: an artistic catalogue "*Olonxo* in the fine arts of Yakutia" in three languages; multimedia CD's on solo song introductions in Yakut and English. According to UNESCO's

requirements, the package of documents on *olonxo* was put forward by the Republican public organization “*Olonxo* Association”. The project was presented on behalf of the Russian Federation to the headquarters of UNESCO and officially registered in October 2004.

In compiling the project dossier, more than 70 specialists of the Republic from different fields (epos researchers, musicologists, ethnographers, philologists, literature researchers, theatre researchers, translators, cartographers, IT specialists, etc.) participated in writing articles and as performers. Thanks to their professionalism and understanding of the importance and significance of the given project, an enormous amount of research, translation, editing and technical work was carried out in a short amount of time. Several long-term complex subprograms formed part of the dossier: a) “Computer informational system *Olonxo*”; b) “Traditional music of the Yakuts”; c) “*Olonxo* as a factor retransmitting spiritual heritage in the sphere of

### 5. A note on the current state of *olonxo* and future perspectives

As mentioned above, traditionally *olonxo* represented unwritten oral culture, an ephemeral and intangible genre. The recognition of *olonxo* by UNESCO as a masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity demands great responsibility not only in documenting and studying *olonxo* but most importantly in preserving it in its original state.

Starting in the 1990s, a number of enthusiasts and cultural institutions initiated work on the preservation and revival of *olonxo* among the population and young people, including the Republican children’s contest of *olonxo* performers; children’s performance studios and epic schools began to be founded. In 1999 the Republican public organization “*Olonxo* association” was founded, organized by the Department of *Olonxo* of the Institute for Research in Humanities of the Academy of Sciences of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). With its foundation, the interest shown for *olonxo* by the population at large within the Republic rose to a new level. Currently a variety of activities devoted to the popularization and publication of *olonxo* are taking place. Thus, the *Olonxo* Association commenced the publication of the 21-volume series “Sakha booturdara” (“Yakut warriors”) in Yakut. These *olonxo* plots that have not been previously published comprise the oral epic tradition of different ulus’. For now 4 volumes in 6 books have appeared. In the future, the *Olonxo* Association in cooperation with the *Olonxo* Department of the Yakutsk Institute for Research in Humanities will continue to carry out the subprograms of the UNESCO project.

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