

Harris, Robin P. *Storytelling in Siberia: The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World* [Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World]. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017. Glossary. Notes. Works Cited. Index. xv+235. \$60.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-252-04128-0. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN 978-0-252-08552-9.

With *Storytelling in Siberia*, Robin Harris provides an engaging and detailed account of an epic tradition's near disappearance and revitalization over the past century. It will be of special interest to those working on intangible cultural heritage, music, and post-socialism. Harris lived in Siberia's Sakha Republic (officially designated as Yakutia within the Russian Federation) for a decade from 1995 onward, and returned for fieldwork between 2009 and 2011. Accordingly, she possesses time-tested insight and an ethnographic network that many would envy.

Olonkho is traditionally an unaccompanied solo genre that narrates lengthy mythico-historic epics through song and recitative chant-speaking. Respected performers known as *olonkhosuts* formerly traveled peripatetically between small winter settlements, providing entertainment to their hosts by narrating a single epic tale over the course of several extended evenings. Drawing on foundational research on oral poetry by Lord/Parry and Bauman, Harris describes how the *olonkhosut* would use formulas and a variety of improvisational strategies to elaborate or truncate their tale, depending on the emergent reaction of audience members. In the Soviet era, *olonkho* suffered from diminishing audiences and a loss of performers' improvisatory skills in the context of political mixed messages and a newly literate populace. However, a successful application in UNESCO's first competition to identify Masterpieces of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) pulled *olonkho* "back from the brink of permanent disappearance" (135). Throughout the bulk of the book, Harris explores how this happened, and devotes limited space to musical or thematic analysis. Although a few brief musical transcriptions are included, along with a list of typical features, there is no actual translated text of a master *olonkhosut*'s performance included in the book or the accompanying website. While *olonkho*'s untranslatable orality is fundamental to Harris's argument, it still would have been interesting to get a flavor of the verbal art as it unfolds. Harris acknowledges her own limited knowledge of the Sakha language, but she puts her Russian skills to good use, frequently quoting Eduard Alekseyev, a Sakha ethnomusicologist who has been writing prolifically since the 1960s.

After introductory chapters, the book shifts to a chronological presentation, describing solo *olonkho* at its artistic peak (the late 1800s into the 1910s), the far-reaching effects of Soviet governance, and the period of national resurgence that led to the successful Masterpiece application. The final chapters are dedicated to extensive reflection on the Masterpiece program's implementation during the two "Decades of *Olonkho*" declared successively by the Sakha government since 2005. As Harris notes, despite all of the projects undertaken since then, *olonkho* as a solo improvisatory artform is still at risk of disappearing. As of 2013, all of

the Sakha Republic's few officially recognized *olonkho* masters (skilled tradition bearers capable of improvising in the old style) had died without being replaced. A newer theatrical form of *olonkho* performed by a collective cast has proven much more accessible to mass audiences. Today, solo *olonkho* is more valued as a universal symbol of Sakha identity than enjoyed as entertainment, and when performed, it is generally in brief memorized snippets on a brightly-lit concert or competition stage rather than in an immersive home setting.

Compounding these problems, the Russian Federation has never ratified UNESCO's convention on ICH, meaning that the Republic of Yakutia is ineligible to apply for UNESCO funding (being on the list does not guarantee external funding—an application actually represents a years-long financial commitment for the applicant). In the absence of interest from Moscow, Yakutia must provide all funding for *olonkho* revitalization from its own budget. Harris's book provides a valuable corrective to critiques of UNESCO's ICH program that see it mostly as a tool for nationalist self-aggrandizement. Here, UNESCO recognition has allowed Sakha intellectuals to build scholarly alliances and collaborate on conferences and publications with other Asian states and Siberian republics, outside of the direct oversight of an imperial center that is increasingly re-asserting control. *Olonkho* thus becomes a site for the periphery's pride and agency (although the Sakha Republic contains religious minorities and non-Sakha indigenous peoples with their own relationship to *olonkho*, shamanism, and the locally dominant Sakha people, glancingly revealed in a few brief comments). Harris's close read of the relationship between UNESCO's goals for revitalization and their practical outcome as implemented through Yakutia's parliamentary action plan is detailed and thoughtful—the kind of analysis that deserves to be done for any cultural revitalization project.

Harris's primary theoretical contribution is the discussion of stable and malleable elements in cultural traditions, and how these two aspects interweave in transmission and innovation, both necessary for resilience. In this, she draws on recent ethnomusicological work on cultural sustainability that draws from sociolinguistic models, primarily turning to her colleagues Neil Coulter and Brian Schrag, who like Harris are associated with SIL International (a Christian linguistics organization, formerly known as formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, supporting missionary work and publishing) and the affiliated Dallas International University. Harris adapts Coulter's "Graded Music Shift Scale" and Schrag's "Graded Genre Health Assessment" to analyze *olonkho*, ultimately determining that solo *olonkho* is somewhere between "threatened" and "locked" (still performed, but becoming rigid and disconnected from community life). She then analyzes each *olonkho* component (e.g., musical materials, performance contexts, audience verbal responses) in terms of stable and malleable elements, finding that as time has passed, there is generally less malleability and agency, which damages both transmission and possibilities for innovation. She assesses the newer form of theatrical *olonkho* at slightly better than "threatened," even approaching "vigorous." Harris sees theatrical *olonkho* not as a threat to the improvised tradition's vitality (or not *merely* as a threat), but as an artistic

“descendent” that can help to rebuild the “epic *sreda*” (milieu) necessary for sustainability. While the chapters on revitalization are frequently repetitive and the stability/malleability dialectic at times feels like a truism confirming what we have already learned, this kind of analysis could also be helpful in assessing cultural revitalization projects.

Harris admirably foregrounds the voices of many interlocutors throughout, and does not shy away from presenting the diversity of opinions among them. One official’s extended description of the Masterpiece application is particularly engaging, featuring a comedy of errors during a trip to Moscow to obtain state documents. This bureaucratic ethnography has almost enough intrigue, stakeouts, *deus ex machina*, and last-minute reversals for a film plot. Besides culture workers and political officials, the author also interviews members of the general public and *olonkho* listeners and performers, including an extended interview with the late Pyotr Reshetnikov, one of the last improvising master *olonkhosuts*. Those who understand Russian can listen to many audiovisual interview clips on the book’s website (which also includes the recorded sources of the music scores provided in the book). The only downside of this emphasis on local voices is that, other than at specific moments like the introduction and conclusion, Harris’s own voice seems to be backgrounded. Although she is certainly present in the narrative throughout—for example, describing her powerful experience sitting “under the mouth” of Reshetnikov’s live improvisation (2)—at times I found myself wanting her to state her own opinion or indulge in more self-reflexivity.

Harris does explicitly tip her hand in the concluding chapter with specific recommendations and hopes (she suggests identification and compensation of more tradition bearers; creation of performance and learning milieus that better reflect traditional spaces). Ultimately, this is a powerful and grounded work of scholarship on an understudied region, with useful insights for applied folklore and ethnomusicology.

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