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Sacred Sites in the Sakha Epics (*Olonkho*) and in Other Shamanic Traditions

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Abstract

This essay identifies descriptions of sacred lands within the Sakha (Yakut) *olonkho*, and compares them to mythopoetic honoring of sacred mountains among the Tlingit of Alaska and the Mapuche of Chile and Argentina. The *olonkho* of Niurgun Bootur, Kulun Kullustuur, Kyys Diəbəliye, and Ər Sogotokh are featured. Sacred site depictions in *olonkho* range from the fantastic and metaphorical to the more realistically descriptive and named. Given that many epics were composed before Uraangkhai Sakha ancestors arrived in territories of the Far North, it is difficult to identify specific sites with known current geography, although some Sakha scholars have tried. The Sakha *olonkho* depicts a well-known cosmology describing three worlds — Upper, Middle, and Lower. But what more specifically constitutes sacred geography? Natural criteria (mountains, lakes, rivers, meadows and trees), as well as characteristics of beauty within the Middle World, are revealed in *olonkho*. Rituals such as summer solstice ceremonies, *yhyakh*, and spirit offerings made with blessing prayers, *algys*, are associated with sacred sites. It is significant that many *olonkho* end with grand finales depicting these special places and rituals. I argue that “sacred land” ritual spaces of other indigenous peoples may be comparable to sacred spirit offering groves and special *yhyakh* sites, and that efforts to preserve sacred lands for contemporary rituals are part of ongoing cultural revitalization projects tied to ecological and spiritual consciousness in places with significant shamanic legacies.

Keywords: sacred sites, epic, shamanic traditions, Sakha, the Tlingit, the Mapuche.

Cosmographies and Worldviews in Olonkho

Early in the epic Kulun Kullustuur, the bright sunlit homeland of the hero is described as a vast land where “nine magical white headed free-flying cranes could not circle the territory in nine years”¹ [Okruzhnosti kotoryi ne smogli obletet’ deviat’ vol’nykh belogolovykh zhuravlei za tselykh deviat’ let’; *ahys tyhy mangan kytalyk kyyl...*] [Timofeev-Teploukhov 1985: 11 [Sakha], 289 [Russian], lines 146–149]. Like other Turkic epics, the basic shamanic cosmography of the *olonkho* depicts three layers of the universe: Upper, Middle and Underworld, with many levels and directional divisions within them [compare Gogolev, Burtsev 2012: 18–25]. These are the worlds that shamans and epic heroes, after spiritual turmoil, penetrate and negotiate as mediators to trouble- shoot problems, with the help of cosmos-transcending spirit animals such as cranes, loons, bears, horses and many others. In some *olonkho*, as Ergis and Pukhov explain [1985: 581, note 30], a lonely orphan hero (for example Өр Sogotokh) recalls his Middle World homeland as a peaceful paradise that is the “bellybutton of the earth,” a central portal where one can access “residents of all three worlds.” In addition, shamanic “world tree” imagery abounds in *olonkho*, featuring certain aged, magnificent trees with many flourishing branches and roots described as strong as iron, gigantic *Aal luukh mas* able to provide pathways to all three worlds (eg. the old larch in Kulun Kullustuur line 1538, *muṅur*; cf. Eliade 2004). Significant for every Sakha were more common sacred groves, featuring imposing trees not far from known paths, where people could give local spirits symbolic offerings, a spirit-honoring ritual practiced by some to this day².

¹ In Sakha, “*Ahys tyhy mangan kytalyk kyyl...*” In Russian, “Okruzhnosti kotoryi ne smogli obletet’ deviat’ vol’nykh belogolovykh zhuravlei za tseykh deviat’ let.” [Timofeev-Teploukhov 1985:11 [Sakha], 289 [Russian], lines 146–149].

² A typical *algys* (prayer blessing) to the spirit of the earth begins: “*Aan doidu ichchitə / Ərsəṅniir bəriṁməṅ buolla / Onuokha bihigi / Siəllvkh delbirgə sitii baaian...*” In English, “Spirit Host of the Earth / the time of giving you offering has come / accept our sacrifice of braided horse-hair rope...” In Russian, “Dukh-khoziaka zemli / Zhibotvoriashchei silou napolnit’sia vremia tebe prishlo / Na eto [v otvet] myi / ssuchiv zhertvennyiu volosianuiu verevku s puchkami grivy” [Emelianov 2003: 117]. See also Ergis et al [1976, 1977, 1980, 1983]; Emelianov [2003].

Sacred meadows, valued for their beauty as well as their accessibility near rivers, lakes and *alaas*-based household compounds, were the sites of various *yhyakh* ceremonies, celebrated at the end of many *olonkho*. For example, in the happy finale of the *olonkho* Kyys Diəbəliye (about the heroine shaman who saves her tribe from evil child-kidnappers) “three big circles” of guests gathered for the *kymys* drinking and *okhuokhai* chant dancing around a *tuhiulgə* meeting place, by definition enhanced by clusters of horse hitching posts (*sergei*). A white horse and black raven looked on at the singing, (reflexive) epic recitation and general merriment.

Specific sites are also described in *olonkho*, while maintaining typical metaphorical flair. For example, in Kulun Kullustuur the freed (with the help of a female shaman) hero flies over a never-freezing sea called Araat-Baiḥjal “with nine bays” (a sacred number implying ‘many’) from which extend “nine rivers”. Ergis and Pukhov [1985: 593, note 163] locate it in the earthly Middle World, and in his annotation of Niurgun Bootur, Pukhov [1975: 425, note 90] mentions that some consider this is the Aral Sea. Seas or lakes in *olonkho* also may refer to today’s Lake Baikal, thus supporting Anatoly Gogolev’s theories [1993] on the origins of the Sakha people as connected with mixed Turkic-Mongolic Kuriakan peoples living near the sacred Lake Baikal.

Sakha ancestors, people of the sun rays, Aiyy-aimaga Kiun Өrkən [cf. Romanova 1997], had points of access to the sky through specific mountains, places where shamans and other messengers of the deities could pass to and from other worlds. One such mountain in Niurgun Bootur is Siəgi-Magan-Aartyk [Oiyunski 1975: 269, song 7]. Although Pukhov [1975: 428, note 264] does not identify it with a specific place, we can plausibly imagine that as Sakha ancestors came North, they may have seen the mountains of the Verkhoyansk range, especially a place like Kihylyakh, near where the famed *olonkho-sut* Daria Tomaskaia (“Chaika”) sang her version of Niurgun Bootur, in terms of Upper World access. When I did fieldwork at Kihylyakh in 2010, one elder called it a “blessing place,” and recalled it as a site of legendary shamanic competitions. In the old days, before the recent tourism boom, most people were forbidden from going to the peaks, especially women (if they were not *udagan*), precisely because it was considered to be a spirit-filled portal to the sky.

Sacred Sites of other Indigenous Peoples with Shamanic Traditions

Magnificent mountains are known as sacred sites in other parts of the “middle world,” and precisely on such mountains shamanic rituals have long been practiced, or in some cases recently revived. As in *olonkho*, mountain peaks are considered to be portals to sky worlds, for example among the Tlingit of the Alaskan coast, living under Mt. St. Elias. In Tlingit legends, the sky world was visited by ancestors, one of whom was Łqayak, who, having mocked the Northern Lights, followed his dog through a hole into Sky Land (*Kiwa'ai*). Separated from his brothers, he has shamanic adventures that include meeting tiny spirits. Guided by a little bird, he eventually finds his way home through a mountain stream in a bark canoe, or, some say, the skeleton of a shaman. Frederica de Laguna [1972: 795-6], my thesis advisor who recorded this legend, suggests the Sky Land is like “the interior country behind the Mt. St. Elias Range,” open, grassy and cold in winter. Tlingit say that telling the legend “always brings the north wind.”

The Mapuche of Andean Peru and Argentina have ceremonial fields where mounds of ancestors (*kuel*) are seen as “animated beings like humans,” with kinship relations, feelings, competitions and fears. As Tom Dillehay explains [2014: 278], “They can communicate and transpose themselves from the living world to the sacred upper *Wenumapu* world.” They require “nourishment and care” from local human communities living near them, and thus they become conduits for interaction with the upper world. Such places “register and sustain identity, memory and agency, which is also the case in many other regions of the Andes”¹.

Given their long-term spiritual significance, such sacred sites have become the center of ecology activism among many indigenous groups [cf. Sponsel 2012]. Native ethnographer Marisol de la Cadena [2010: 335] reminds us that the 2008 constitution of the Republic of Ecuador includes rights for Mother Nature: “*Pachamama*, where life becomes real and reproduces itself, has the right to be integrally respected in [her] existence...” This is akin to

the Republic of Sakha having a “Ministry for the Protection of Nature” – with the word for Nature, *Aiyylgha*, itself containing the word for “Spirit.”

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¹ The quoted analysis is from Dillehay [2014: 278]. A poetic Mapuche shamanic incantation appeals to a bi-gendered Foye God through the Foye Tree: “I am calling your path to the high sky, your path beside the transparent earth.... Send us from above water from waterfalls; lighten up the powers of the original earth” [Bacigalupo 2007: 1].

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СВЯЩЕННЫЕ МЕСТА В ЭПОСЕ (ОЛОНХО) НАРОДА САХА И ДРУГИХ ШАМАНСКИХ ТРАДИЦИЯХ

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Аннотация. В этом очерке рассматриваются описания священных земель в сказаниях саха (якутов) *олонхо*, а затем они сравниваются с мифопоэтическим почитанием священных гор в культуре тлинкитов Аляски и мапуче Чили и Аргентины. Анализируются *олонхо* «Нюргун Боотур», «Кулун Куллуустуур», «Кыыс Дэбилийэ» и «Эр Соготох». Описания священных мест в *олонхо* варьируются от фантастических и метафорических до более реалистично описанных и имеющих название. Учитывая, что многие эпические поэмы были сложены до того, как предки ураангхай саха пришли на территории Крайнего севера, определить нынешнее географическое положение конкретных мест сложно, хотя многие ученые пытались это сделать. В сахском *олонхо* изображена хорошо известная космология, описывающая три мира: Верхний, Средний и Нижний. Но что именно составляет священную географию? В *олонхо* показаны природные объекты (горы, озера, реки, луга и деревья), а также особые красоты Среднего мира. Различные ритуалы, например церемонии летнего солнцестояния *ысыах* и подношения духам с молитвами благословения *алгыс*, связаны со священными местами. Важно отметить, что многие *олонхо* торжественно завершаются описаниями таких особенных мест и ритуалов. Автор считает, что ритуальные пространства «священных земель» других коренных народов схожи со священными рощами для подношений духам и особыми местами для праздника *ысыах*, а мероприятия по сохранению священных земель, где проводятся современные ритуалы, являются частью существующих проектов по возрождению культуры, связанных с экологическим и духовным сознанием в местах с богатым шаманским наследием.

Ключевые слова: священные места, эпос, шаманские традиции, Саха, тлинкиты, мапуче.