

Khomus: Voice of the Sakha in Siberia

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Introduction

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) can be described with a number of superlatives; it is the largest republic in the Russian Federation and the largest sub-national entity in the world. Approximately twice the size of Alaska, it is located in northeastern Siberia and holds the distinction of being the coldest inhabited region of the world; in the capital city of Yakutsk, the average January temperature is minus 45 degrees Fahrenheit and other towns in this Siberian republic are much colder. The Republic of Sakha has a population of roughly one million people, more than half of whom are ethnic Russians and thirty-three percent of whom are Sakha, making them the second largest indigenous group in Russia. Sakha linguistic roots come from the Turkic family of languages, although there are significant Mongolian and Russian influences as well.

When Russia first explored and settled this region in the mid-1600s, they established the capital city of Yakutsk, which now has a population of approximately 250,000. Yakutsk residents can boast of an international airport, noteworthy music and drama theaters, a state university and several institutes, a port on the Lena River – the tenth longest river in the world (Wikipedia, 2006), and a pre-conservatory for gifted children that is acclaimed world-wide by classical musicians for the quality of its graduates.

Since *perestroika* and the fall of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s, the Sakha culture has been undergoing a remarkable rebirth. The Sakha language is now enjoying widespread use and is being taught in the schools. Sakha traditional arts and music are flowering as never before; many skills in art and music that had almost been lost during the Soviet period are being re-learned and developed to a high degree of artistic professionalism.

Of all the Sakha traditional instruments, the *khomus* (a type of Jew's harp) is currently the only one enjoying widespread popularity. Its use can be observed in many aspects of Sakha life including national festivals, radio, television, music and folklore competitions, music education programs, and as the featured instrument in everything from solo to symphonic performances (Il'ina, 1987). In July of 1991, the Second International Jew's Harp Conference was held in Yakutsk; this gave Sakha *khomus* players the opportunity to show their talent to the world. The international recognition that resulted from that conference is being enjoyed to this day, as Sakha *khomus* techniques have gained the respect and admiration of Jew's harp players from around the world. In the summer of 2005, Nikita Bayeshev ("Darkhan"), an outstanding *khomus* player, was featured with a troupe of other outstanding Sakha musicians in *Jewels of the East*, an international festival of ethnic music held in Beijing, China. The Sakha delegation won the grand prize, and upon their return, the president of Yakutia presented them with an exceptionally fine *khomus*.

A better understanding of this instrument and its position in Sakha society can be gained by examining the *khomus* in relation to Merriam's tripartite model (1984, 32): concept, behavior, and sound. This paper will adapt Merriam's ideas to the exploration of the *khomus*, addressing the three aspects in modified order through the following questions: 1) Sound – How is the sound of a *khomus* produced and what should be the resulting organology classification of this instrument? 2) Concept – What are the societal and contextual aspects of how the *khomus* is viewed and perceived in Sakha culture? 3) Behavior – What are the performance practices and techniques employed by professional players of the *khomus* that allow them to produce such an amazingly wide variety of sound?

Sound: Overtone production and the *khomus* - idiophone or aerophone?

Hornbostel and Sachs (1961, 16) classified the instruments commonly known as *Jew's harp* or *jaw's harp* as belonging to the category of *plucked idiophones* [HS number 121.221], indicating that the source of the sound is the vibration of the lamella.

This classification is not without debate. Ledang asserted that “it has not been adequately proven, neither empirically nor theoretically, that the vibrating lamella is the proper sound generator” (1972, 96). Spectral analysis of this instrument’s sound demonstrates that “the rich harmonic spectrum emitted by the Jew’s harp cannot be adequately explained only by reference to the vibrating lamella” (Ledang 1972, 97). In addition, Ledang made a striking observation; no matter what the composition of the Jew’s harp (bamboo or various kinds of metal), the sound produced is roughly the same.

This evidence led Ledang to the conclusion that the distinctive sound of the Jew's harp is not produced through the vibration of the lamella, but rather is a result of the turbulence created in the air surrounding the sharp-edged arms of the frame as the lamella passes vigorously back and forth between them. Ledang asserts:

The phenomenon of turbulence occurs quite independent of the material from which the instrument is made, furnishing thus the general acoustical principle, by which the homogeneity in sound quality of different types of jaw’s harps may be explained.... Thus the sound spectrum is primarily created, not by the elastic lamella, but by the surrounding turbulent air....*The jaw’s harp should be classified, not as an idiophone, but as a free aerophone* (Ledang 1972, 102).

Thinking that this was a new discovery, Ledang wrote, “Such an important structural detail of great acoustical significance has, however, not been pointed out in any previous description of the jaw’s harp, known to the writer” (1972, 97). Ledang was unaware of the writings of Frederick Crane who had come to a similar conclusion several years earlier.

Crane arrived at this classification for basically the same reasons as Ledang, asserting that the Jew's harp "should be classed as a free-reed instrument" (1968, 66). He admits, however, that there is one main difference between the Jew's harp and other free-reed instruments; "its reed is not sufficiently affected by the air stream to cause it to vibrate; it must be plucked by the player's finger" (1968, 67). Thus, it was actually Crane who was the first to conclude that the sound of the Jew's harp cannot be traced to the vibration of the lamella alone. He wrote,

The tongue [lamella], vibrating at the rate of the first partial, disturbs the air in passing by the frame in such a way that it produces a rich complex tone. The spectrum of the Jew's-harp tone consists of the fundamental and all even-numbered harmonics to the very high ones (1968, 68).

During roughly the same time period, Jeremy Montagu also classified the Jew's harp as an aerophone of the "plucked free reeds" category, stating that the true definition of an aerophone is "an instrument which compels the air to break into regularly periodic vortices" (1971, 107). This definition closely parallels Crane's concept. Montagu and Crane place other similar instruments which have been difficult to classify (such as bull-roarers and sirens) in the category of aerophones as well.

In summary, since the early 1970s Ledang, Crane, and Montagu have argued for a change in the traditional classification of "Jew's harp" type instruments. The evidence they present demonstrates that the *khomus*, though it has historically been classified as an idiophone, should more precisely be classified as an aerophone.

Concept: Societal and contextual aspects of the *khomus* as identity marker for the Sakha

An important part of understanding the societal context of the *khomus* is to recognize the role of the master blacksmiths and metalworkers who make the instrument. The creation of a

khomus traditionally included overtones of spiritual power. *Khomus* makers (the metal workers of Sakha society) were believed to have spiritual power second only to the shamans. This was due to the Sakha belief in a connection between metals and the spirit world. Some Sakha believe that the large, elaborate silver ornaments that women traditionally wear at festivals and ethnic celebrations function as protection from evil spirits. For this reason, the blacksmith/metalworker who makes these musical instruments is believed by many Sakha to wield enormous spiritual power.

In modern times, the *khomus* has acquired a connection to healing that was probably not found historically. Balzer reports that in 1995, “Sakha experiments in group and individual therapy with the *khomus* had been launched by the International Khomus Center and expanded by two well-known and respected curers, Klavdia Maksimova and Piotr Sleptsov” (1996, 312). This can be understood as a natural part of the revival of Sakha traditional religion that has been on the rise since the onset of *glasnost*. This phenomenon, however, may not reflect accurately the traditional role of the *khomus*, but rather a syncretistic result of mixing newer extrasensory religious systems with traditional animism. Balzer says, “These experiments invite comparison with ‘new age’ shamanism in America and Europe” (1996, 312).

Even in a secular sense, however, the *khomus* functions as a national symbol for the Sakha. The *khomus* is ubiquitous in Sakha logos, posters, banners, advertisements and awards. In fact, the *khomus* is visible in virtually every place where musicality and/or Sakha ethnic identity is emphasized. In the past it was considered a rather uninspired instrument by the Soviets and its development was not encouraged; nevertheless its use continued. With the rebirth of Sakha nationalism, the *khomus* has become a powerful symbol of Sakha ethnic identity, as well as spiritual and musical values.

One of the most significant factors in this situation may be the sociological and historical dynamics existing between ethnic Russians and the Sakha. These dynamics are complex and not easily generalized, but one can examine the history of the last three centuries in Yakutia (as well as the events of the last fifteen years) and draw some tentative conclusions.

The Russian rule of Yakutia that began in the 17th century generated a mix of reactions among the Sakha. Many Sakha resent the fact that as Russia exploited the vast natural resources of Yakutia in the process of developing an industrialized society, they also created an ecological nightmare that poisoned the water, depleted wildlife populations, and severely restricted traditional subsistence living (Tishkov 1997, 71-72). The Sakha also resent the fact that during the Soviet era many of their children lost traditional skills and the ability to speak in their own language because they were taught only the Russian language and culture in the schools (Batalden 1997, 37). In addition, significant Sakha cultural expressions of identity (like the annual summer festival *Ysyakh*) were discouraged during the period of Soviet power (Balzer 1993, 238). Finally, members of the Sakha intelligentsia (writers, ethnographers, folklore specialists, dramatists, and revolutionary activists), as well as many religious leaders (shamans), were jailed and even killed for their “nationalistic” and “primitive” ideas (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 104).

On the other hand, some Sakha are grateful that Soviet power provided a higher standard of living than what was experienced before the dawn of the 20th century. Soviet rule brought hospitals, schools, modern homes with more conveniences, educational opportunities, and participation in the political life of the Republic of Sakha (Levin and Potapov 1963, 295-303). Nonetheless, even this minority of Sakha who remember communism with fondness have a

strong sense of ethnic identity. They, too, have participated in the remarkable rebirth of Sakha music and arts that began to develop during the disintegration of communism in Russia.

When Soviet power and repression ended, the natural reaction on the part of the Sakha was to begin a movement of celebration of their cultural and ethnic identity. This expressed itself in many ways – in politics, economics, education, religion, and especially in music and the arts. During more than a decade of living in the capital city of Yakutsk, I have observed first-hand the symbol of the *khomus* used in a variety of contexts throughout Sakha society to celebrate this renaissance of their distinct ethnic, spiritual, and artistic identity.

Behavior - Performance techniques on the *khomus*

Sakha *khomus* performance techniques can be divided into three distinct categories, according to Spiridon Shishigin, a Sakha *khomus* player and prizewinner of the First World Festival of Jew's Harpists. Shishigin titles these methods *traditional moderate* playing, *imitation*, and *improvisation* (2003, 35).

Traditional Moderate Playing

In what Shishigin calls *traditional moderate* playing (a better translation might be traditional “measured” playing), simplicity and expression of the content of the player’s emotional state are emphasized. Complex plucking motions and sound effects are not employed.

In this style, the tongue of the *khomus* is plucked in a manner that imitates the rhythm of a traditional Sakha tune while the player’s speech organs form the vowels of the words. This playing style has given rise to the term *speaking khomus*.

While taking lessons on the *khomus*, I was told by my teacher, Antonina Nikitina, that this type of speaking/playing can be used to communicate messages that would normally be

offensive to the listeners in simple speech mode. She found it enormously amusing that this subtle and clever use of the *khomus* provided for a polite, socially acceptable way of communicating confrontational and even mildly offensive messages in Sakha society, a culture known for its indirectness of speech.

The *traditional moderate* form of playing is also used to accompany the singing of *toyuk*, a widely-performed, highly-ornamented traditional song genre used on formal occasions and for dramatic performances. Normally the periods of singing and *khomus* playing are alternated, but Shishigin indicates that there are instances when a performer will sing and play the *khomus* at the same time. This is probably quite rare, as I have only recorded this type of playing on one occasion. Furthermore, at the time of recording, the performer told me that feedback from Sakha listeners indicated to her that simultaneous singing and playing was not normally done.

Imitation

Sakha *khomusisti* (*khomus* performers) bring the art of imitating sounds found in nature to a highly developed level of expertise. They can successfully imitate the sounds of melting snow as it drips in the spring, horse hooves racing to and fro at the summer festival *Ysyakh*, the moaning and whistling of the wind in the steppes, and many different types of bird sounds found in the wilds of Yakutia – larks, geese, cuckoos, woodpeckers – and the most revered of all animals to the Sakha – white storks.

This type of *khomus* performance is highly valued by Sakha people; it reflects their historical and deeply-felt connection to nature and the cycle of the seasons. The *khomus* is uniquely suited to imitation because of its broad range of harmonics and the ease with which these harmonics can be manipulated by a master *khomusist*.

Improvisation

Shishigin maintains that this type of playing is the most advanced, as it combines various elements of the above-mentioned playing techniques and weaves them into a story around a theme. For example, in Shishigin's performance of the work "Sing, My Khomus" (on his 1996 CD recording of the same title with Ivan Alekseev), he begins by playing a Sakha traditional melody, "Song about the Motherland", and develops it through a series of variations which then give way to the sounds of the coming of spring; melting ice dripping, the song of a lark, and the call of the cuckoo.

One of the most fascinating recorded examples of *khomus* playing is the duet performed by Shishigin and Alekseev titled "Conversation" on this same CD. It begins with a slow, thoughtful dialog between the two performers, followed by a duet with many examples of imitation – lark song, cuckoos, dripping rain, running water, and wild horses galloping on hard ground – all of this intermixed with the tunes of well-known Sakha songs outlined in the harmonics. It ends with the horses trotting away into the distance.

Listening to Shishigin and Alekseev play, one is struck by the broad range of sound and expression drawn from this tiny instrument. It is not surprising, therefore, that the growing use of the Sakha *khomus* in this Siberian republic represents in microcosm the entire renaissance of Sakha music and arts and the hope that the Sakha have for a bright future for their people. Shishigin says of the *khomus*, "Its magical music will remind you of spring, its tender song can relieve suffering and dispel sadness. The triumphant song of the *khomus* multiplies our joys and brings success" (2003, 15 – *translation by RPH*).

APPENDIX A:

Implications for missionaries

Benefits of *khomus* appreciation for missionaries

The central role of the *khomus* in Sakha culture and music creates implications for the missionary serving in Yakutia. For a missionary to increase his or her long-term effectiveness among Sakha people, learning about the *khomus* provides several benefits. First it contributes to the missionary's overall ability to truly enjoy the culture, providing a source of aesthetic enjoyment necessary to long-term well-being. Second, emic (insider) understandings of the *khomus* give insight into Sakha values and culture that may be difficult to obtain through other methods. The process of learning about the *khomus* demonstrates an appreciation for Sakha culture, opening the way for deeper relationships with Sakha people. Finally, it demonstrates to Sakha people a model of openness toward the use of the *khomus* by Christians that may provide a healthy balance to Russian and Ukrainian apathy toward this instrument.

The *khomus* in Christian Contexts

The *khomus*, as a recognized, powerful national symbol and an instrument that expresses the heart of Sakha culture, has much potential for use in Sakha Christian worship. Currently it is not frequently used in evangelical worship contexts, but neither has there been any particular ban on its use by Christian leaders. Its ubiquitous presence in Sakha society makes its virtual absence in the church seem rather odd, but this could be due to a number of issues unrelated to biblical appropriateness. For example, it is conceivable that most people have never thought that a national instrument like the *khomus* could be used in Christian contexts. Since it is not a Russian instrument and is not generally appreciated by Russians, the use of the *khomus* was not

modeled or in any way encouraged by the Russian missionaries that planted Sakha churches in Yakutia. If the *khomus* were to be accepted by the leaders of Sakha churches as a valid instrument for worship it could create a deep-level connection with the heart of many Sakha people.

The *khomus* also has potential for conveying the Christian message. Although it does not normally carry an extensive “text load,” the affective impact of the *khomus* is significant; it is clear that for many Sakha, the voice of the *khomus* speaks directly to their hearts. As a means of setting an atmosphere of reflection, gravity, and dignity, in the Sakha culture the *khomus* has no equal. Depending on the associations in the minds of the people, some groups might find it effective to use the *khomus* as a prelude to a service or as an accompaniment to the reading of Sakha Christian poetry. It might be effective in accompanying a Sakha drama or mime on some theme related to evangelism, discipleship, or worship.

It is not, however, the place of a Western missionary to decide the usefulness or appropriateness of one instrument over another. Conceivably the best strategy for discovering how to incorporate an instrument like the *khomus* or any other cultural form into the life of the church is to follow the principles of critical contextualization laid out by Paul Hiebert in his classic text, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Hiebert rejects the wholesale, thoughtless incorporation of all cultural forms into the church, but neither does he accept a wholesale rejection of culture. He instead proposes several steps for the careful contextualization of cultural forms (Hiebert 1985).

As applied to the *khomus*, these principles would be: 1) The missionary, in partnership with Sakha people, goes through a process of uncritically gathering information about the *khomus*; 2) Together they study biblical teachings about instruments in general; 3) Then the

missionary encourages the Sakha people to evaluate the *khomus* in light of biblical teaching about instruments; and 4) Sakha people can create a new contextualized Christian instrumental practice. This final step will sometimes involve infusing new Christian meanings into old instruments and cultural forms. If the steps for critical contextualization are followed carefully and the missionary carefully limits his participation in the decision-making aspects of these four steps, critical contextualization can take place, avoiding the pitfalls of syncretic belief systems.

Summary

The *khomus* is one of the foundational cultural forms of the Sakha, and deserves serious attention by the church. Its rich sound, expressive capabilities, and frequent use in non-shamanic settings makes it a likely candidate for effective music communication among the Sakha. The careful use of 'critical contextualization' as outlined above will help to reveal what role the *khomus* will have for future generations of Sakha Christians.

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