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MUSIC OF THE SAKHA PEOPLE
AND ITS USE IN THE CHURCH

SUBMITTED TO
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PART ONE
INTRODUCTION TO SAKHA MUSIC

The Sakha people (formerly known as “Yakut” people) of Siberia have for centuries enjoyed a rich musical heritage, a tradition that has continued to develop and expand right up to the present. Of primary importance are their distinctive solo song forms which can be traced into the distant past. While multi-voice singing and instrumental music existed, it was subordinate to solo song forms in the traditional music system (Alekseev 1969, 116).

This mix of musical styles and forms has begun to change since the advent of Soviet power. The use of the *buben* (shamanic frame drum) has declined, and the *kyryympa* (3-stringed handmade violin) has been replaced by the balalaika (Alekseev 1969, 116). In contrast, choral and ensemble singing has flourished, and the use of *khomus* (Jew’s harp) has seen a rebirth. In July of 1991, the Second International Jew’s Harp Conference was held in Yakutsk.

Dance is also an important form of self-expression for the Sakha, and their popular circle-dance, the *ohuokai*, is the most loved of the Sakha national dances.

In this paper, the writer will discuss the two main styles of Sakha music, *dieretii yrya* and *degeren yrya*, and give special attention to the significance of *olonkho*, the epic poem form that has for centuries expressed the oral history and folklore of the Sakha in a uniquely creative combination of music, poetry, and drama. *Ohuokai* (circle dance) will also be described and its significance discussed.

Finally, observations will be made in regard to the cultural and musical situation in the evangelical churches of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) at the date of this writing. The vital significance of the process of biblical contextualization of worship practices will be stressed. It is hoped that this paper will help missionaries understand the traditional Sakha musical system so

that they can better support Sakha Christians who seek to evaluate traditional music styles for contemporary church use.

PART TWO

DIERETII YRYA

The first song style to be discussed is *dieretii yrya*. This style is characterized as immetric (unmetered), exalted, solemn, ceremonial, drawn-out, smooth or flowing, and has structural and rhythmic freedom as well as significant modal distinctives. Songs of this style are characteristically abundant with *kylyhakh* - special falsetto grace notes that give the illusion of two voices singing (Alekseev 1969, 117). Other characteristics of *dieretii yrya* are its typically epic content (heroic, grand, majestic, and imposing) and its improvisatory form.

It is interesting to note that there are two geographic centers of Sakha *dieretii* song; the central region around the city of Yakutsk, and the Vilyuy River basin. These two regions have different performance practices for the song style *dieretii yrya*. In the Vilyuyski region, there is a characteristic distinctness of rhythmic pronunciation and a general lack of long, sung-out words. The Vilyuyski singer quickly and distinctly sets forth the contents of the song like a pronouncement (Alekseev 1969, 117-118).

In contrast, in the Lena River region around Yakutsk, *dieretii* is characterized by profuse *kylyhakh* ornamentation and sung-out words. The typical Lena area singer, in a considerably slower manner than the Vilyuyski singer, “wrings it all out” of the text (Alekseev 1969, 118).

The foundational, most characteristic genre of the *dieretii* song style is the *toyuk*, generally understood to refer to an extensive epic improvisation of both melody and text. It may tell a detailed story; it is often characterized by praise. Most of the *toyuk* type songs by tradition

begin with a majestic cry of “eeh!” or “*Dghie-buo*” (“Look here!”). *Toyuk* is characterized by highly colored, richly ornamented vocal cadenzas. Specialized singers, *ryhept*, of this genre like Sergei Zverev, Ekaterina Ivanova, and Ustin Nokhsorov over time perfected their art, and are widely respected and loved for their contribution to the preservation and renewal of the Sakha culture (Alekseev 1969, 126).

Other than the praise song (*toyuk*), there were relatively few other genres that were used of the song-style of *dieretii yrya* by the late 60’s and early 70’s, according to Sakha musicologist Eduard Alekseev. He reported that one could hear the occasional lullaby or table-song in this style, and lyric songs were sometimes sung in this manner. One could even hear an occasional example of a comic song in this style, but the brooding, mystical songs of *menerik yryata* to which were attributed healings by the shamans, had all but disappeared, as had the *algys*, a song sung in praise of the gods or spirits, sometimes described as a blessing (Alekseev 1969, 128). Because of the current revival of traditional Sakha religion, we can expect to see the resurgence of many of these genres that fell out of use during the repression of Communist times.

PART THREE

DEGEREN YRYA

Degeren yrya song style is rhythmical and lively and closely associated with the dance melodies of the Sakha. This song style is easier to sing, especially for those untrained in the fine art of *dieretii* style. The majority of everyday and lyrical songs are performed in the *degeren yrya* style and it includes many genres: Love songs, songs about nature, lullabies, play songs, work songs, *tuoisyy yryata* (chorus songs in which men and women address each other in turn), *tangalai yryata* (palatal songs), *khabarga yryata* (throat singing), comic songs, and closely

related to them - the *chabyrgakhi* (tongue twisters). This song style is being widely developed at the present time. Out of the foundations of *degeren* flowed the beginnings of a national choral style, as well as the modern Sakha popular song (Alekseev 1969, 118-120).

Ohuokai (circle dance) songs are a significant genre within the *degeren* style. One can clearly see the love of the Sakha for their circle dances. On every national holiday there are groups of Sakha people singing and dancing the *ohuokai* in the square in front of their musical theatre. Although the majority of the people at the event are usually older, college age or younger students will stand around and watch and may even participate in the *ohuokai*.

The *ohuokai* begins with a prescribed introduction; an appeal, a call to join (similar to the *toyuk*) which can be translated, "Hey! Look here!" This is followed by 10-20 minutes of call and response litany, led by the lead singer and echoed by all of the participants in the circle. As the group sings they link arms at the elbows and step left foot forward, right foot back (which causes the circle to slowly rotate to the left - in the direction of the sun).

The circle begins small and the steps are relatively slow. As people join the group, stepping in and linking arms with those on either side, the tempo begins to gradually increase, and the size of the circle expands. If the circle gets too big, it will divide into two concentric circles. The dance ends with an increased tempo and short jumping steps that are more energetic than the calm, simple stepping motion that began the *ohuokai*.

The short, energetic phrases sung by the soloist/caller are repeated, usually without changes, by the participants of the *ohuokai*. Occasionally the voices diverge and separate into harmony; sometimes by accident, but at other times deliberately (especially in the Olekma and Vilyuyski regions). This has raised questions about the existence of multi-part singing among the Sakha, which in the past was not thought to exist (Alekseev 1969, 121-122).

Alekseev points out that the musical resources of the style of *degeren* have become enriched in recent years. The range of most *degeren* songs in the past did not extend beyond a third or a fourth, but now it is not uncommon to hear a range of an octave or more. At the same time, pentatonic elements as well as whole-tone cadences and tetrachords (with their characteristic tri-tone interval) continue to be important influences in Sakha contemporary music (Alekseev 1969, 122; Krivoshapko n.d., 36).

It is also important to note the influence of Russian music. The Russians have been in Yakutia for over three and a half centuries, and the influence of their music is very strong. Russian settlers brought their folk songs and political exiles brought Russian revolutionary songs. These new sounds were adopted by the Sakha, and synthesized in the 1910's and 20's into a new form of Sakha popular song. It was also at this time that Sakha choral songs were first written (Alekseev 1969, 124).

PART FOUR

OLONKHO

One cannot speak on the subject of Sakha music with touching on the genre of *olonkho*, the heroic epic poems that combine both Sakha song styles into a synthetic genre that is the most beloved genre of Sakha oral folklore.

Heroic epics have been sung in various cultures for over 4000 years. The oldest known epic poem, the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, dates back to 2000 B.C. The bards of Homer continued this tradition in their poetic recounting of the events of Troy, and today epic poetry can be found in the Balkan countries, Russia, Afghanistan, Turkestan, and Arabia (Emsheimer 1991, 210).

Olonkho combines drama, lyric song, and a chanting-type of recitative to tell the stories of the great heroes and legends of the past. It was used in years past to entertain Sakha families during the long, dark winters of the Siberian North. *Olonkho* is an unaccompanied improvisational solo performance that contains an average of 10-20,000 lines of verse and takes several nights to perform. The very longest *olonkho* would take five to seven nights to perform (Pukhov n.d., 35). The “narration” (description of people, events, and places) of the story is generally performed in a rapid, rhythmic recitative-type manner (in the third person), while the direct speech of the characters in the story is sung more “song-like” and in first the person (Emsheimer 1991,159).

The professional singer of the *olonkho* is the *olonkhosut*. This is a person with unusual abilities. He must sing in a manner that expresses the various attributes of the characters (each character has its own leitmotif and special quality of intonation), remember the many *olonkhos* that are in his repertoire, and improvise and make up new ones as his recognized status as *olonkhosut* becomes established.

The number of *olonkhosuts* has greatly declined in recent years as the older ones have died and new ones have not been apprenticed. *Olonkho* itself has left its roots of the “home gathering” and now is performed almost exclusively in theatres as opera or simply recorded. The true extent of the decline has yet to be quantified but the trend is certainly visible.

PART FIVE

MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

It was the Russian-speaking missionaries from Ukraine, Byelorussia, and other regions of the former Soviet Union who, by and large, brought evangelical Christianity to the Republic of

Sakha (Yakutia) in the early 1990's. The population of most of the larger cities is mixed, with both Russian and Sakha people in varying percentages depending on the region. In the early 1990's some Sakha (and Russians as well) began to embrace evangelical Christianity. In a few rural villages the church began to reflect the predominance of Sakha in the community. Some of these services are now conducted in the Sakha language and Sakha pastors have begun to emerge.

Because of the multi-ethnic nature of most urban congregations, Russian pastors have begun to realize the importance of the inclusion of Sakha expressions of worship. Since 1995 there has been a significant increase in the use of Sakha language during prayer and the reading of scriptures. A weekly Sakha language home meeting with Bible study, prayer, and singing was begun by the Sakha members of one church. This group studied through the Gospels of Mark and Luke which had been translated into the Sakha language.

In the realm of music we see changes happening as well. A small collection of Russian hymns translated into Sakha is being compiled and enjoys considerable popularity among Sakha-speaking Christians. It is interesting to note that although these translated songs have Russian and American tunes, some are occasionally sung with the characteristically "Sakha" ornamented sound (*prizvuki*).

One church regularly sings a modern western-sounding praise song in three languages: Ukrainian, Russian, and Sakha. Since these are the three main nationalities of the church members, this is a significant picture of the acceptance the groups have for one another; singing praise to God in one another's languages.

A well-known *ohuokai* (round dance) tune was given Christian words by a Sakha pastor/musician and is sung on occasion, sometimes with dance included where space permits

(church picnics), sometimes without the dance, or a modified “line-dance” version (inside church buildings). In 1998, other than this one *ohuokai*, there were few other expressions of creative songwriting among the Sakha. In 1999, it was encouraging to see there were a couple of new songs written, putting Sakha poems to music. But despite the cultural importance and high value placed on their music by the Sakha, there has not been a natural outpouring of musical creativity accompanying the birth of the church in Yakutia. This suggests that something may be hindering the natural process of musical creative expression.

These hindrances may not be too difficult to circumvent. There may be a lack of confidence on the part of musicians that they can truly produce a song worthy of being sung by others in church. Sakha composers are highly respected and have usually reached a high degree of proficiency in their art; one may hypothesize that this has given rise to the feeling that only the professionals can do it right.

Furthermore, one must remember that the Sakha are only beginning to experiment with using their own language in the context of the Christian worship service; mainly to offer prayers, to read scripture, and to sing songs translated from Russian. They realize that in many local churches, at least half of the congregation does not understand the Sakha language at all, and that makes them slow to doom this non-Sakha half to incomprehension. That is why, when scripture is read, the reference is given so that Russians can follow along in their Bibles. When the hymns translated from Russian to Sakha are sung, the Russians can remember the words in their own language or follow along in the hymnbook, and thus benefit along with Sakha people. Sakha people may worry, “If I sing a new song in Sakha, am I being selfish?” This is a concern that may need to be addressed by the leadership of the churches.

One of the most significant factors in this situation may be the sociological dynamics existing between the Russian and Sakha people. 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 current events of the nineties, and draw some tentative conclusions.

The Russian “colonization” of Yakutia that began in the 17th century has generated a mix of reactions among the Sakha. There is, of course, resentment that as Soviet power began the process of exploiting the vast mineral wealth of Yakutia in order to create 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 Soviet power many of their children lost traditional skills and the ability to speak in their own language because the schools taught them only the Russian language and culture (Batalden 1997, 37). Many of their cultural expressions of identity (like the annual summer festival *ysyakh*) were discouraged during some periods of Soviet power (Balzer 1993, 238). Many 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, many of the Sakha still support the “party line” that Soviet power provided a higher standard of living than what they had enjoyed in the past. They have seen the advent of hospitals, schools, modern homes with more conveniences, education, and participation in the political life of the Republic of Sakha (Levin and Potapov 1963, 295-303).

Within the Christian community, there is deep affection for the Russian and Ukrainian missionaries who have sacrificed much to leave their jobs and homes in the comparatively

comfortable regions of Russia to come to Siberia and serve as missionaries. The Sakha response to these missionaries is by and large one of gratefulness and true respect. This enormous respect causes them in many cases to accept the “Russianized” form of Christianity without much thought of how to contextualize it. Because of this, one gets the general impression that, when it comes to forms adopted in church, Sakha culture should be avoided and the Russian culture embraced. This is rarely expressed verbally. However, because of the sensitivity of the Sakha Christians to this issue, even one comment of “This is *not* a Sakha church, it is a Russian church!” in response to a performance of the *ohuokai* during a service at one particular church was enough to inhibit its performance in that setting.

This is unfortunate because the decisions of which genre to use or not use should not be made on the basis of nationalism, but on the basis of the trans-cultural principles of God’s Word which should be expressed in a culturally unique way within the local cultural context. The Sakha culture provides a wealth of musical creativity. Sakha believers can draw from this while examining the Word of God and decide for themselves what forms are appropriate for their particular situation. At the same time, they must remember that the decisions for one church may not apply to other churches because of the huge differences between “Russianized” Sakha in urban centers versus traditional Sakha rural areas.

For example, the more the Sakha language is shared among congregational members, the more it naturally should find expression in the forms of worship within the service, including sermons, poems recited, songs, and the like. Also, the true heart music of the various church congregations may be at different places on the spectrum between Russian and traditional Sakha, naturally affecting the type and mix of songs that they prefer.

Thus, the development of heartfelt worship in the Sakha churches will require a large degree of flexibility, openness, acceptance of one another, and trust in one another. If the Russian and American missionaries will encourage this process of biblical contextualization and if Sakha believers feel empowered to make authentic cultural decisions for their own churches, then there is great hope that we will see churches that begin to reflect a more balanced approach to this issue. Depending on the outcome of their decisions, we may someday possibly see the advent of solo music in the style of *dieretii* by gifted and trained Sakha singers. We may see modern Sakha choral works on special holidays, special services where the stories of the Old Testament and the praises of God are sung as *toyuk*, performances of the new Christian *ohuokai* at cultural holiday gatherings, new scripture songs sung in *degeren* style, and even youth songs sung in Sakha popular style.

The importance of biblical contextualization in the Yakutian context is heightened by the recent backlash against the historical colonization, assimilation, and “Christianization” of the Sakha by Russians. There is a palpable movement of cultural renewal among the Sakha. Part of that movement is expressed in the common misconception, reinforced heavily by the Russian Orthodox Church, that “Christianity” is a Russian religion. To be Russian is to be Russian Orthodox. There is no concept whatsoever of “Sakha-ness” having any intersection with Christianity. So, Christianity is being rejected outright as a western and/or Russian religion, without being examined on its own trans-cultural merits. This is extremely unfortunate and is a trend that we dare not ignore or reinforce in the evangelical churches that are currently being planted in the Republic of Sakha.

Churches that use only western or Russian forms of expression can be written off as foreign. Let us, therefore, pray for and encourage the growth and development of culturally vital, biblically contextualized Sakha Christian churches.

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Sakha song styles and genres

1. **Song genres of the *dieretii* song style** (ornamented, free meter, not commonly associated with dance): All of these genres are sung solo by either gender. Since the ornamented style is difficult to master, usually only adults (not children) are able to sing it. These are normally sung unaccompanied unless it is by the *khomus* (Jew's harp), or for the shaman songs, which also sometimes make use of the *buben* (frame drum). Rate of information flow in *dieretii* is fairly quick due to very little repetition and emphasis on creativity and poetry of words. A combination of melisma and slow tempo helps keep the rate of information flow at a manageable level; there is little repetition, except for phrases that highlight the poetic form. New songs are composed fairly often in this song style, as the texts are often improvised in an ornamented style on limited tonal material (3 or 4 tones).

A. Praise song (*Toyuk*) – Sung at formal concerts, for recordings, at national festivals like *ysyakh* (summer solstice festival) to praise gods, the beauty of nature, love, welcome, fire-building, achievements of leaders and the Sakha people.

B. Blessing (*Algys*) – Also sung at formal concerts, for recordings, and at national festivals like *ysyakh* with the purpose of blessing the event or the people who are being honored at the event.

C. Healing song (*menerik yryata*) – Possibly (even probably) sung by shamans and other healers at the present time; more research is needed. Lyrical content, information flow, manner of composition, dance movements, and sonic style of this genre is unclear.

D. *Kepseen* is a genre that is not commonly heard, but which the singer uses to express in an improvisatory way what he or she is thinking. Preliminary research indicates that this is a genre that is used in intimate settings, between friends or in a small group.

2. **Song genres of the *degeren* song style** (less ornamented, rhythmic, often associated with dance) – distinguishing characteristics of these genres are being discussed in the most recent Russian-language ethnomusicological literature. Translations need to be done.

A. Love songs

B. Nature songs

C. Lullabies

D. Joke songs

E. Laments

F. Work songs

G. Antiphonal chorus singing between men/women at weddings (*toisyy yryata*)

H. Throat singing (*khabarga yryata*)

I. Comic songs and tongue twisters (*chabyrgakhi*)

J. Children's songs

K. Nasal-palatal singing (*tangalai yryrata*)

L. Modern national choral styles and popular songs – these genres, although not traditional, are nonetheless ubiquitous at the present time and signify “Sakha music” to many. They are sung by men and women, boys and girls of all ages, commonly accompanied by guitar, synthesizer, piano, drums, and orchestra as well as “Russian” instruments such as *bayan* (button accordion), mandolin, and balalaika. These new genres are commonly heard through the mass media and at public concerts for national and ethnic festivals. They are

often included on the program alongside more traditional genres. Lyrical content varies, but the form is often strophic (which is not a traditional Sakha form). As in most Sakha styles, the rate of information flow is high and there is little repetition, except for the repeated chorus sections. The songs of these genres are not improvisatory like many of the traditional genres. They are written, arranged, and published largely by Sakha composers, although there are some Russian composers who include Sakha folk tunes and other elements in their compositions (N.S. Berestov is a prime example). Dance sometimes accompanies these songs; there are dance ensembles that are largely dedicated to these genres (for example, the National Dance Theatre of the Republic of Sakha).

3. Genres which combines both *dieretii* and *degeren* styles:

A. Epic song poem (*olonkho*) -- A one-person epic poem performance comprised of 10-20,000 lines of drama, lyric song, and recitative. Largely improvised (although the story line is maintained), the singer creates a distinct intonation and *leitmotif* for each character in the drama. Traditionally performed in homes, in the last number of decades *olonkho* is mostly performed in recording studios and opera houses. It is only performed in entirety by a specialized singer of this genre, called *olonkhosut*. These “olonkhko specialists” are now virtually non-existent. Currently, *olonkho* is performed only in parts by professional singers who sing various individual songs, similar to the way opera singers perform arias out of their operatic contexts. The lyrical content of *olonkho* was historically to tell the legends of Sakha origins and the exploits of their heroes and gods; the rate of information flow in this narrative form is very high. It is normally performed without instrumental accompaniment and/or dance movements.

B. Round dance (*ohuokai*) – Singers/dancers of both genders stand in a circle, linking arms, and stepping forward with the left foot and back with the right foot; as they do this, the circle slowly moves to the left. The *ohuokai* is performed in three general sections; the first, which serves as an introduction, is sung in *dieretii*, the second and third sections are *degeren*.

Ohuokai singing is unaccompanied call and response; the words are improvised by the caller on standard *ohuokai* melodies in a highly formalized, creative manner on themes of nature, blessing, praise of gods and people, as well as thanksgiving. The rate of new information in the lyrics is somewhat slowed down due to the repetition of the call and response form, however the new information rate is still relatively high, as the caller does not repeat words other than to occasionally return to the phrase, “*Ohuokai, ehekei, ehekei, ohuokai.*”

The *ohuokai* is normally sung out of doors in prominent places like town squares, or at summer festival grounds at every national holiday for which there is decent outside weather. It is performed especially during the summer festival of *Ysyakh*, where there are several circles dancing at all times for a couple of days. If the caller is a good one, the *ohuokai* circle will grow in size as more people are drawn in by his mastery. Normal performance length of the typical *ohuokai* is from 30-60 minutes.

Ohuokai expresses ethnic solidarity and pride; it is thus not normally sung or danced by Russians, although foreigners are allowed to participate and other exceptions have been noted in special contexts (i.e. church celebrations where other kinds of unity are being expressed).

[Note: The division of Sakha music into the two main styles and their subdivisions into various genres can be seen in the works of two authors: 1) Eduard Alekseev’s “New trends in Yakut musical folklore” in Music of the peoples of Asia and Africa, and 2) A.S. Larionova’s Verbal and musical in Yakut *dieretii yrya* and *Degeren yrya*: Lyric song of the Yakut (for publication details, see the Sakha Music and Arts bibliography by R. Harris).]