

Horse Imagery in the Yakut Epic “Nurgun Botur the Swift”

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Abstract The paper focuses on the representation of the horse in *Nurgun Botur the Swift*, a Yakut heroic epic recorded by a writer and scientist Platon Oyunsky. The current research objectives are to consider the horse imagery in *Nurgun Botur the Swift* and identify the horse with the epic hero. The horse is an important element not only in the spiritual culture of the Yakuts but also in that of other ethnic groups. In the paper, the comparative, descriptive and historical methods, and the method of interpretation are applied in building and systematizing of materials and linguistic sources. The English version of *Nurgun Botur the Swift* is used as the basic research material. *Nurgun Botur the Swift* embodies the image of the horse as a true friend of the epic hero, Nurgun Botur, and overall, as the magnificent creature with the hyperbolic features. The Yakut epic storytellers traditionally adorn the heroic horse with the superb qualities such as unusual strength and endurance, beauty and intelligence. Therefore, the epic is filled with many archaic words and phrases, parallel and complex constructions; traditional poetic forms only emphasize the romanticized image of the epic horse. It is so because this mythological creature symbolizes the desire of the Yakuts for freedom, goodness and justice. Thus, the image of the horse is one of the most common in the Yakut heroic epic tales; the physical and mythical attributes of horse imagery convey complex nexus of symbolic meanings.

Key words Olonkho; heroic epic; folklore; epic text; horse imagery

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Introduction

The epic *Olonkho* is the oldest artifact of literature of the Yakuts (*Sakha* is the Yakuts' native name for themselves). The Yakuts are a Turkic ethnic group who mainly live in the Republic of Sakha (also known as Sakha Republic) situated in the Far East of the Russian Federation. *Olonkho* is considered the foundation and canon of Yakut folklore and culture. The term “olonkho” stands for the oral cultural tradition of the Yakuts that contains and later branches out to other few heroic epic tales.

Nurgun Botur the Swift (English transliteration of the original Yakut title — *Djuluruuiar Nyurgun Bootur*) was recorded by Platon A. Sleptsov-Oyunsky (1893—1939), a distinguished Yakut poet, a famous epic researcher and a founder of the modern Yakut literature. Platon Oyunsky was also an outstanding public and political figure. He reproduced *Nurgun Botur the Swift* in its full length at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s and made no changes to verse, style, archaic language and mythology. The epic consists of numerous legends about *boturs* (ancient warriors), deities of the Upper and Lower Worlds, good and evil spirits, demons, animals, including horses that are represented as divine beasts, on the one hand, and as evil creatures, on the other.

Olonkho also addresses contemporary events, such as the disintegration of nomadic society. The events in *Nurgun Botur the Swift* first unfold slowly, at a slower pace, but then they gradually intensify in scale and pace, and turn into a turbulent flow of diverse encounters and clashes. The horse, in the subordinate position, is the integral part of the progression of events in the plot.

The Yakut heroic epic *Olonkho* is gaining international recognition among the world's literary monuments, art masterpieces. It made a great contribution into the formation and development of Yakut written poetry. Popularity of *Nurgun Botur the Swift* is strongly supported by the fact that it is traditionally determined as the “encyclopedia of the Sakha people” and is the symbol of self-identity of the Yakuts. Therefore, the study of poetic style of *Olonkho* is one of the current events in modern national literary developments.

The study is theoretically and methodologically based on the works dealing with the characteristic features of the Yakut epic texts. Yakut national folklore and literature researchers such as I.V. Pukhov, G.U. Ergis, N.V. Emelyanov, etc. focus on the core contents of *olonkho* genre: poetic mythical imagery and plot's synthesis. The great literary legacy of Platon A. Oyunsky has been represented in the monograph written by Vasily A. Semenov, an unheralded Yakut philologist who worked at the Institute for Humanities Research for many years. Another Yakut linguist Yury I.

Vasiliev has researched the similes used in *Nurgun Botur the Swift*.

Nurgun Botur the Swift was translated into Russian by Vladimir V. Derzhavin in 1975, and into English by a group of translators from M.K. Ammosov North-Eastern Federal University (Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, the Russian Federation). The first English translation of *Nurgun Botur the Swift* was published in 2014 by Renaissance Books in London. The significant value of the English version is that the translation has been performed from the original Yakut text. *Nurgun Botur the Swift* is also translated into other modern languages, including French.

The Scientific Research Institute of Olonkho and the Institute for Humanities Research and Indigenous Studies of the North are responsible for studying the Yakut heroic epic in Sakha Republic. One should mention that in 2005 Olonkho was included by UNESCO in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Olonkho: Yakut Heroic Epic

Olonkho is a general term for the entire Yakut heroic epic that consists of many long legends. A famous Yakut linguist and literary critic Innokenty V. Pukhov called Olonkho “the pearl in the crown of the Yakut people’s literary art” (Pukhov, *Olonkho* 15). Olonkho is a work of fiction of grand scale, which usually consists of 10,000 to 30,000 verses (or more) in length. Traditionally, it is performed by *olonkhosuts* (Olonkho performers) during a span of seven nights. By synthesizing a variety of the existing folk plots, Yakut olonkhosuts in the past used to create a larger number of Olonkho couplets, but they were never recorded. As of today, there is no fixed evidential data to consult with to learn how many of the created and performed Olonkho pieces ever existed or were produced. It is an impossible task now and the greatest challenge for the researches in the field to reveal or to identify the exact number of the produced songs. There is only a place for a hypothetical claim, which can be excused with the learned fact that is the initial and generic plot structure of Olonkho can be more or less painlessly transferred and modified from one narrative to another. One could claim that the process of adaptation during the years of progress and modernization of the traditional Sakha literary and oral tradition caused possible shortening of some parts of the heroic epic tales and even an elimination of some. However, “interpenetrability” of the foundational core of the generic epic plotline that is responsible for similarity of the Olonkho plots remains. Moreover, this particular feature keeps sustainable, timeless, and unique.

The origin of Olonkho dates back approximately to the eighth—ninth centuries, to the times when the ancestors of the Sakha people lived in their former

hometown, the region of Lake Baikal, and were in close cultural, and socio-economic contact with the ancient ancestors of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples of Altai and the Sayans (Pukhov, *Olonkho* 30). The Kurykans, Yakut people’s ancestors, had contact with the ancient Turkic peoples during the sixth and eighth centuries. The Yakut epic belongs to the late tribal period and reflects patriarchal relations in the tribal community. Olonkho mythology depicts battle scenes with mythical creatures and monsters. See the example from *Nurgun Botur the Swift*:

In ancient times
 In warring, bloodthirsty times
 Before the world changed,
 Beyond the evil horizon
 Of the awful earlier years ... (Oyunsky 4)

Since the ancestors of the Yakuts had socio-economic and cultural contact with the Turkic and Mongolian peoples, Olonkho shares some common features with such epics as *Manas*, Üliiger, *the Mongolian Epic Cycle of Jangar* and others. First, it relates to the similarity in the structure of languages and vocabulary. There are common elements in the names of heroes: *khan* (a title for a ruler in Turkic and Mongolic languages), *mergen* — *bergen* (an Altaic word *mergen* means a hunter; a Yakut word *bergen* implies a brave fellow), *botur* (a hero, a warrior), etc.) (Pukhov, *On the genetic* 203). In addition, we can see some structural and compositional similarities between Olonkho and other epic tales.

A Russian archaeologist and ethnographer Alexey P. Okladnikov who devoted his life to the study of the ancient cultures of Siberia, speaks about the presence of “southern” features in the epic of Olonkho (257—77). The evidential presence of the “southern” atavistic features in Olonkho reflects the true national identity and specificity of the Sakha culture. Therefore, the system of symbols in the Yakut epic carries multi-layered information about the lifestyle, worldview, and psychology of the ancient Sakha people. The expressivity of Olonkho symbols requires thorough study due to the layered contextual field they are connected to or represent. Zoomorphic images, for example, one of those symbols and are of particular importance in Olonkho.

The recent hermeneutic analysis of archaic folklore texts has acquired particular relevance to the complex nature of the origin of the Sakha people and their customs. Therefore, the need to interpret the mythopoetic texts should arise from the reasoning of the allegorical and metaphorical moments in the song. As a Yakut

linguist Luiza L. Gabysheva claims that the provided imagery even of the material world of the Yakut epic tales are allegorical. “Even the presence of animals in the narratives contains the most ancient information of an esoteric character” (81).

The Cult of the Horse in Yakut Tradition

The cult of the horse and its idealization can be traced in many mythological systems of the peoples of the world. Horses appears throughout global mythic and epic traditions. They carry significant functional and symbolic value for humans, and convey remarkable beauty, physical stature, and dynamic movement. Equines appear in myths and epic tales both as monstrous creatures and as magical animals, for instance, in the form of winged horses.

Since the horse was important in everyday life and the household, it was also reflected in the spiritual culture and social life of the Yakuts, as it is seen particularly in the heroic epic tale. For example, in the old days the beauty of girls was compared to the beauty of horses. With a change in the aesthetic views of the Sakha people, such comparisons disappeared, but they are used in relation to a young and strong man. This annotation of the heightened aesthetic of the horse’s interior reveals that the ancient Yakuts considered horses to be animals of heavenly origin, which are patronized by the deity Jehegei. A Yakut anthropologist Vasily T. Petrov observes in his essay: “According to the figurative and mythological ideas of the Sakha people, there was a deity that gave the horse to people. This confirms the idea of the sustainability of the horse archetype” (139). Thus, the horse was considered a divine and sacred animal. Further on, Nadezhda R. Baizhanova (Oinotkinova) states: “The cult of the horse among the Turkic-speaking peoples of Siberia is most vividly represented by the Yakuts. The features of the ancient ritual cult, which partially or completely disappeared from the peoples of the Altai-Sayan region, have been preserved in the Sakha people” (102).

The horse is an important element not only in the material, but also in the spiritual culture of the ancient Turks. In Yakut heroic epic tales, the horse acts as an assistant to the hero. It is also endowed with the gift of speech, warns his master about the dangers and thereby helps him in difficult situations. It is interesting to note that one of the earlier German fairy tales also have this anthropomorphic feature of the horse.

This anthropomorphic and highly aestheticized image of the horse is quite frequently represented in *Olonkho*. As I indicate earlier, some scholars refer this type of the pristine and heightened image with the cult of the horse in many Turkic cultures, and in particular, in the epic tales of many Turkic and Mongolic peoples.

For example, a Russian historian Rakhil S. Lipets emphasizes that “the epic horse is the patron and leader of his host, surpassing him in the gift of foresight, speed of reaction in difficult situations, and having a strong will to subordinate the *botur* (the hero, the warrior) to himself when he shows weakness. Even in the sense of his duty, the horse sometimes stands higher than the epic hero” (124—25).

The traces of horse cults are also preserved in rituals and beliefs of the Sakha people. As many anthropological and ethnographic works indicate, the horse has a foundational function in the everyday life of the Yakuts. Some Yakut sayings and proverbs substantiate this claim: “Five troubles await a walking man, none is reserved for a man on a horse” (the original Yakut proverb — Сатыыны биэс эрэй тоһуйар, аттаахтан биир эрэй кутар), “If the good horse is glorified, the journey becomes famous” (the original Yakut proverb — Ахсым ат айанынан аатырарыгар дылы). During the Yakut national festival *Esekh*, people made offerings of the horsehair strands to *itchi* (spirits) of the valley. They also used the horsehair to decorate *chorons* (wedding wooden jugs), leather bags and huge buckets to keep trouble and sickness away. People tasted the legendary drink of the Yakut epic heroes — *kumys* made from fermented mare’s milk. The Yakuts tie horses to the *sergeh* (a traditional wooden post), which is considered sacred. Due to the established and sacred connection between the post and the horse, among the wealthy Sakha people was a custom, before moving to a new place they would dig out the *sergeh* and took it away with them. The *sergeh* decorated with rich carvings and tufts of ribbons can be found on mountain passes or at the crossroads. Nowadays, the *sergeh* is placed at the entrance to villages or inhabited localities and in memory of significant events.

This realistic and mythologized presence of the horse makes *Nurgun Botur the Swift* unique, and therefore, the best-known epic olonkho that consists of more than 36,000 verses and comprises nine songs (or parts). *Nurgun Botur the Swift* is often referred to as “northern Iliad” and “Sakha Odyssey”.

The story features the protagonist of wondrous powers and abilities, Nurgun Botur, who fights against dark forces and foreign invaders to protect the nation of those whose backs are followed by the sunrays. This epic was created and traditionally performed by the olonkho performers from the Boturus *ulus* (an administrative division of the Sakha Republic), Tatta Region. A Yakut researcher Vasily V. Illarionov states that the olonkho performers of *Nurgun Botur the Swift* belong to the famous “Tatta School of storytellers” (27). One should emphasize that Tatta Region located in Central Yakutia is considered the cradle of Yakut culture, and the homeland of famous olonkho performers, writers and poets.

According to Pyotr A. Sleptsov, Platon Oyunsky represented logical complete-

ness to the olonkho language. The scientist concludes that due to the painstaking and scrupulous research conducted by Platon A. Oyunsky “the spoken form of literary language has become exemplary” (12).

Horse Imagery in *Nurgun Botur the Swift*

This section of the article discusses the representation of the horse in the epic *Nurgun Botur the Swift*. The first chapter of this heroic epic (Song 1) opens with the narration of life of the Urankhai-Sakha people, an ancient name of the Yakuts, and the way they rely on and connect with horses:

Kun Jehegei Toyon, Kureh Jehegei Khotun
Were settled following a great decision
Of the highest deities
To increase unbridled horses and white furs,
To look after whole-hooved horses,
With long bushy manes,
Which graze on the meadows
And along the rivers. (Oyunsky 13)

This fragment provides especially acknowledged and ornate names of two deities — Kun Jehegei Toyon, the son of the God of Sun, patron of horses; and his wife — Kureh Jehegei Khotun.

The following stanza is devoted to the emphasized almost fantastic description of the warrior’s horse:

The butterfly-like white horse
As big as a rock,
Strong and sturdy,
And the bluish-grey horse
Galloped up to the heroes,
Raising the dust. (Oyunsky 253)

In this example we can see that Nurgun Botur’s younger brother called Urung Uolan rides a “butterfly-like white” horse. The horse of another mighty and powerful warrior called Kun Jiribineh is “bluish-grey”. For instance, Khatan Temerieh, the spirit of fire, also rides a “steel-grey horse”. This gradation of colour is symbolic and representational. The white and grey horses and horses with bright colours are

associated with brave and glorious warriors, deities and spirits of the highest rank. White in Olonkho typically means good, blessed and clean. For example, in Song 7 we can see the description of the white horse of Tuyarima Kuo, the Yakut epic heroine who represents the symbol of beauty:

And brought her
 Destined, sparkling salt-white horse
 Named Tunaly Joro (Oyunsky 317)

The wide and extensive use of ornate descriptions and various figures of speech is peculiar to epic tales. Even a cursory reading of Olonkho shows that its style is laden with similes, epithets, metaphors and other features of epic poetry. Here is the description of Nurgun Botur’s horse. The following simile such as “like a snow-storm” provides the sense of universal gargantuan importance of the horse:

Stood excited
 Bucking up,
 Snorting and neighing
 Stamping
 Its four stony spread hooves,
 Its tousled, scattered mane
 Soaring like a snowstorm,
 Its high, boat-like, fiery tail
 Beating and swishing the air... (Oyunsky 84-85)

Along with the *boturs* (warriors, or heroes), the horses obtain the roles and functions of the epic protagonists. The horses gain considerable span of affecting the promulgation of the narrative, being active participants in all the events in which the warriors are involved. The epic horses not only help and advise the heroes how to act but also rescue their defeated masters, carrying them out of the battlefield, and fulfill all their orders. In *Nurgun Botur the Swift* the horses show their fantastic abilities while they are near their master. Similarly, the epic heroes are strong and invincible while they remain on their horses.

The horse is a purely physical supporter of the warrior endowed with human speech and the gift of providence. The battle scenes also describe the connection between the hero and his horse — not only does the warrior fight in a battle, but his horse is also locked in it. For example, Nurgun Botur’s horse warns his master to be

careful before starting to chase Ehekh Kharbir, one of the *abaasy* (demons) from the Lower World, who abducted Nurgun Botur's sister — Aitalyn Kuo:

Annaha! Nay! Nay!
 Born to be the master
 Of my rounded croup,
 My intended companion,
 My sovereign!
 It looks like the time has come
 For the sun to fall...
 Born in the age of enmity
 Ehekh Kharbir, Three Shadows,
 If he reaches first
 His disgusting den
 He will quench his thirst with clots of blood,
 The door will open to welcome
 Endless mortal miseries
 And everlasting misfortunes... (Oyunsky 128)

The “butterfly-white horse” of the mighty warrior Urung Uolan also warns his master about the dangers of the Under World. It says that three daughters of *Ajarai* (demon) will disguise as three daughters of *Aiyy* (Supreme Deity) and lure Urung Uolan to their enchanted house. However, the naïve and credulous Urung Uolan stepped forward into their house:

Suddenly the bed broke in two,
 And he fell through the gap
 Into the Under World,
 Into the darkness... (Oyunsky 167)

Feeling his Master's upcoming demise, the “butterfly-white horse” leaped high towards the sky to ask for help from the *udagan* (female shaman) Aiyy Umsur. The horse begs the *udagan* to address the lord Aiyinga Sier Toyon, the Supreme Deity of the Upper World and the Universe, and to request the deity to save Urung Uolan. The *Udagan* Aiyy Umsur gets Aiyinga Sier Toyon's golden hair and rescues Urung Uolan.

Here is the horrifying description of Muus Kudulu, the Icy Ocean in the Under

World, where Urung Uolan and his horse are going to rescue the beautiful Tuyarima Kuo, who was carried off by evil beings. Urung Uolan’s horse provides the thorough description of the land, since it is an integral part of the natural world:

Muus Kudulu, the bottomless ocean
 Whose shores are unseen,
 Whose waters are untouched,
 And no man can reach its bottom.
 Its breakers polish
 The skulls of the dead warriors,
 Its waves wash ashore
 The bodies of disemboweled corpses,
 Its ripples roll off
 The dead young women,
 Its ice clods keep
 Numberless dead
 Who dared to cross it once ... (Oyunsky 164)

In *Nurgun Botur the Swift* the image of the epic hero’s horse corresponds to the image of his master. Therefore, Nurgun Botur’s horse has some fantastic features and is represented as a mighty beast:

Its temper becoming uncontrollable,
 Its conduct becoming unruly,
 Having squealed for a while,
 It leapt up
 Like a sonorous arrow
 That whistled loudly
 Like the wing strokes of a goldeneye
 In the two ears of the dear child,
 Whipping up
 Nine raging whirlwinds (Oyunsky 85)

Here is another description of Nurgun Botur’s supernatural and extraordinary horse:

With four round, iron hooves
 The size of a haystack covered with snow,

Kicking big, black stones
 The size of the belly of a cow,
 Causing them to scatter
 Like hailstones,
 With a seven-byilas-long
 Magnificent mane,
 With a three-byilas-long
 Flying forelock,
 With a nine-byilas-long
 Wavy tail with reddened ends,
 Flitting fast Like a falling star... (Oyunsky 124)

In the above lines from *Nurgun Botur the Swift* there is a Yakut word “byilas” which means the unit of length in the Yakut metric system, equal to approximately 2.5 metres. If we convert the traditional Yakut unit of length “byilas” to the metric system, we can realize that the epic horse is unbelievably huge.

The horse racing is fascinatingly described in Songs 6—7. It all starts when two *Ajarais* (demons) from the Upper World — Buhra Dokhsun and Uot Uhumu Tong Duhrai — have a terrible quarrel with one another trying to find out who deserves to marry the “fair-faced” Tuyarima Kuo. In order to stop “this useless quarrel”, the brave warrior Kun Jiribineh, Tuyarima Kuo’s elder brother, says that the one who wins all competitions and whose horse wins the race will have the right to marry his sister. Nurgun Botur also participates in the competitions (wrestling, running, and jumping). Using his magic, he turns himself into Sodalba Uol, a strong young man, and transforms his “swift fleet of foot black horse” into Sordaiy, a black young horse. Sordaiy runs in the race:

He flew swiftly,
 Jumped high,
 Stepped vigorously,
 His body stretched,
 His lungs widened,
 His breathing got deeper... (Oyunsky 297—98)

The demon called Buhra Dokhsun also gets his black horse involved in the race:

The Black Mangastai

Heaven Horse
 With ringing hooves
 Neighed shrilly
 And, being a swift-footed horse,
 Jerked and disappeared
 Like a puff of smoke
 From a smoking pipe! (Oyunsky 292)

The horses race over the mountains and forests, across the sky and around underground. They are described as extremely swift moving beasts. They have the same emotions and feelings as humans. For example, the Black Mangastai agonizes over his defeat in the race:

Anyaha-anyaha!
 Having left the place
 Where I belong
 I have let down
 My good name,
 Known on every road!
 Do they understand
 The bitterness of it or not?!
 Do they hear it or not?!...
 He said and ran up
 Towards the rising top
 Of the high skies.
 He flew up,
 Crying and neighing
 Like a ringing arrow... (Oyunsky 299—300)

In *Nurgun Botur the Swift* there are many symbols, archaic words and phrases, parallel and complex structures, fantastic images, traditional poetic forms. Its style is distinguished by the usage of various figures of speech (epithets, metaphors, similes, hyperboles). Almost in every long description, one can find not only individual similes, but also complex constructions — a chain of metaphoric similes. Sometimes similar syntactic constructions are headed by epithets characterizing and constituting the whole chain of epithets.

The description of the hero's horse is enhanced by the usage of complicated,

colorful and heavily ornate epithets. That could be explained by the fact that the characteristic of the horse is regarded as an integral part of the characterization of the hero himself: the more beautiful and powerful the hero's horse is, the stronger and more majestic the hero himself is. The constant list of epithets used in the description of the horse is the poetic tradition of Olonkho.

Repetition of certain lines occupies a significant portion of the epic text and contributes to the memorization of the text. It is very important because the length of *Nurgun Botur the Swift* averages 36,000 verses and the olonkho is performed orally. It is also of great compositional value. Repetitions are the strong points of the heroic tale that keep the text together and focus the attention of listeners on the most important places of the narration.

It should be noted that the translation of Yakut names, nouns, onomatopoeic words and interjections from the Yakut language into English is a specific problem. A Russian linguist and translation theorist Tamara Kazakova states that the semantic translation is focused on the text of the original and, as a rule, is applied in translation of literary texts of high artistic value for academic publications (33). A Yakut linguist Tamara Petrova (2010) agrees that the semantic translation contributes to the precise preservation of the national originality of the Yakut epic in the secondary texts (27).

The team of translators from North-Eastern Federal University has achieved the perfect English translation of *Nurgun Botur the Swift*. The translators ignored almost all the rules of transliteration, since the words transliterated according to these rules would be cumbersome or at best slow down the reading. Their goal was not to put off the English-speaking readers but to inspire them to go on reading this magnificent poem.

Conclusion

The epic horse is one of the most vivid and fascinating images of Olonkho. The description of properties and qualities of the horse is an innate characteristic feature of the Yakut heroic epic. The horses are endowed with fantastic properties — winged, proficient in human speech, capable to express human emotions. We can see a detailed description of strength, endurance, dauntless courage, dignity and beauty of the horse. That allows Olonkho performers to equalize the horse with the properties and qualities of the epic hero. One should emphasize that the horse is a continuation of the hero's powerful force.

In *Nurgun Botur the Swift* the inextricable link between the hero and his horse is clearly recognized. The horse is a wise, perspicacious, irreplaceable and devoted

friend of the warrior. There is a close relationship between the hero and his horse. The horse warns his master about the impending dangers and the disaster that might happen. Using the image of the horse makes it possible to more accurately and colorfully convey the psychological state of the heroes, their appearance and behaviour. Olonkho performers describe the epic horse as a divine messenger using sublime epithets, metaphors, similes, hyperboles, parallel and complex constructions, archaic words and phrases.

The heroic tales of the Sakha people tell about the deeds of the warriors. The horse prominently figures in the spiritual life and culture of the Yakuts. The heroic epic Olonkho is the top achievement of the oral poetry of the Sakha people. It is a precious legacy of the traditional culture of the Yakuts, which is still of great educational value and cognitive significance.

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