

BOOK REVIEW

NEW TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES

Tokmashov, Boris Ivanovich. *Қаан Оолақ: богатырское сказание кондомских шорцев* [Qaan Oolaq: a hero tale of the Kondoma Shors]. Novokuznetsk: Novokuznetsk printing centre, 2009. 148 pp. In Russian. ISBN 978-5-8441-0303-2

In 2009, a unique edition of Shors heroic epics came out as a book in a limited print run of 150 copies from a publisher in one of Kemerovo region's major towns (South of Western Siberia, Russia). It was unique before anything else because, at the moment it appeared, it was the first, over the last 70 or so years, publication of the Shors bogatyr epic tale that represented a poorly known *Kondoma* (after the Kondoma river) epic tradition. However, the circumstances around the emergence of the text itself are also of considerable interest, which makes us yet again go back to the discussion of the case of the epic "tradition".



But first a few words on the structure of the book.

The epic text is prefaced by a brief introduction telling us why this particular text was chosen and what the specific issues with its representation were. Boris Tokmashov edited the publication, and translated into Russian himself one of the epic tales that he had heard in his childhood from his brother Viktor Tokmashov (1914–1973), a renowned storyteller born in the village of Tagdagal (presently, the town of Osinniki). Since Shors epics were performed in a guttural singing style accompanied with the narration of sung fragments; and the storyteller Tokmashov was no exception to that tradition, the publishers broke the epic down into 183 fragments of unequal length, “guessing that the storyteller V. I. Tokmashov in the course of his own performance would unfold the story split in the same manner” (p. 5). As a result, a consistent 1800-line-long text emerged before the reader. The text is followed by comments and notes (p. 114–30) which will be of substantial interest to specialists because they reflect not just the folk etymology of characters' names and a loose interpretation of this or that image or motif in the tale, but indeed also Tokmashov's singular observations of the epic tradition of the Shors in particular and the Shors culture in general. The publication closes with supplements and appendices; and I would specifically single out among them, not photographs or bibliographic matter, which are standard for editions of the kind, but the brilliant biographies of a number of storytellers who had performed in Shors villages of the lower Kondoma river area in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, including those of the editor himself and his assistant.

The Shors are a small Turkic ethnic group¹ in the South of Western Siberia, which had been known in Russian sources under different names, from as early as the 17th

century, as hunters, fishers, and gatherers of the mountainous taiga area; and some of their groups had also been known as skilled iron makers. While the importance of the blacksmith trade declined two centuries ago, the Shors are still known for their unique heroic epics which link them to the world of neighbouring Turkic cultures of the steppe. Despite a fairly long history of recording their epics (for more detail, see: Funk 2005), we still know very little about the epic tradition in the lower Kondoma river area, even though there is every indication that it has been one of the more developed storytelling regions in the whole of Sayan-Altai in the last two centuries. As a matter of fact, before this publication of Boris Tokmashov's appeared, there were available but two lower Kondoma epic texts for scholars. Those were a short edition of the *Altyn-Taichy* tale, recorded by V. Radlov in 1861 (Radlov 1866: 342–49; in German translation, Radloff 1866: 366–72; in Russian translation, SGE 2013: 112–32); and a more or less complete recording of the *Kan Kes* epic, done by N. P. Dyrenkova in the 1930s, with an unspecified storyteller (Dyrenkova 1940: 24–71). It was only in 2010 that another small 683-line fragment of a long epic story performed by the lower Kondoma storyteller Stepan Torbokov ("Khan-Pergen, the Least Tall of All Khans") would be published (SGE 2010: 86–137) and about forty recordings of that storyteller would be located in various Russian archives (Funk 2010: 16–49). Should we recall that there have been published over sixty texts of Shors heroic epics² from another area – that of the lower Mras-su river – we realise that the importance of Tokmashov's publication should not be underestimated.

Another consequential detail that I would like to draw attention to is the history of the *Qaan Oolaq* epic, which might be of interest to anyone who is intrigued by the vexed issue of "tradition".

My own field observations over the life of Shors' epic tradition testify to the fact that the ways in which it is transmitted are not always predictable. Indeed, a significant role in the preservation and intergenerational transmission of that tradition has been played not just by the Shors themselves, or neighbouring Khakass, Telet, Kumandin, or Altai, but also by Russians and Germans; and what is more, often by people who were not practicing storytellers per se. The publication under review is in fact a case in point, for it came into being out of the friendship between a Russian adopted as a child into a Shor family (Leonid Petrovich Kozlasov, 1930–2008) and his Shor friend (Boris Ivanovich Tokmashov, b.1934). It so happened that Boris Tokmashov, whose elder brother was an outstanding storyteller and rival of the famous *kaichy* Stepan Torbokov, was not really much into listening to storytellers himself, while his Russian friend Leonid Kozlasov, on the contrary, could spend nights listening either to Torbokov or to Tokmashov. Decades passed, and *kaichy* Viktor Tokmashov (1914–1973) died, having left behind neither tape-recordings nor manuscripts of the epics performed. His younger brother, who had a background in physics, was perennially busy – first as a village school teacher, then as its principal, then as chairman of the village council, and later as head of an administrative unit in a Kemerovo region town. It was only upon his retirement that Boris Tokmashov realised just how valuable the tales of his brother must have been. Still, he was not able to put down in writing on his own all those voluminous epics with dozens of unfamiliar names and multitude of "epic ways", even though he had not forgotten his native language. In spring 2005, there came a moment when he set about visiting his native village in order to look for things forgotten. Nights spent at the house of his childhood friend Leonid Kozlasov brought back recollections of the past and gave him

what he was looking for. Kozlasov retold one of the epic stories, and Tokmashov wrote down its subject line, character names, and narrative formulas in his notepad.³ The rest was now just a matter of time. Four years later, the carcass of that story, which came from the repertoire of his brother, has turned into the full-blown traditional epic of *Qaan Oolaq*. However, since the epic was “told” to us by Boris Tokmashov, not by the *kaichy* Viktor, it is Boris Tokmashov that ought to be held as the “author” of the published version of the text. Yet the question about who it was that he took it over from still remains. To put it in more general terms, where was that epic tradition between the times when the “last” Kondoma storytellers passed away (Tokmashov in 1973, and Torbokov in 1980) and when the *Qaan Oolaq* epic as performed by non-storyteller Boris Tokmashov appeared in 2009? Does it mean that in order to (re)construct a heroic epic, it would suffice to know the main story line, character names, and the principles of building epic language formulas? If so, how could one argue that the tradition died or was interrupted on such-and-such day?

I will not go into discussing the peculiarities of recording and translating the epic text. There are pluses and minuses. The text sits rather far away from the literary norm; on the other hand, it does reflect the specific nuances of the Kondoma dialect of the Shor language. In a number of instances, the translation evades the complex vocabulary of the Shor original; and every once in a while there are instances of incorrect or awkward word usage. On the whole, one has to admit though, the translation is nearly as readable as the original, which is especially important for those Shors who do not have a good command of their native language, as it is, of course, for the lay public that can now immerse themselves into the fascinating world of ancient heroes.

I would like to wrap up with a sort of announcement of Boris Tokmashov’s forthcoming publication. In January 2008, his Russian friend Leonid Kozlasov relayed to him another story – *Qyr-Chaizan* – from the epic repertoire of Viktor Tokmashov. The reconstruction and translation of the epic text is not yet over; but one cannot help thinking that, even in the absence of proper storytellers, this seemingly fading tradition still keeps discovering the resources to persist.

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Notes

¹ For more detail on the history and culture of the Shors, see, for example: Kimeev 2006: 236–323.

² The largest collection of Shors epic texts in the Shor language (38 epic texts) is available online at: <http://corpora.iea.ras.ru>

³ The year that the book was published, I was introduced to Boris Tokmashov and learned the intricacies of how the story was reconstructed. The notepad with sketches of the story told by Leonid Kozlasov is still kept in Boris Tokmashov's private archive.

References

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REVIEW OF DYRENKOVA'S ARTICLES ON TURKIC PEOPLES OF SAYANO-ALTAI

Н. П. Дыренкова. Тюрки Саяно-Алтая. Статьи и этнографические материалы [N. P. Dyrenkova. *Turkic Peoples of Sayano-Altai. Articles and Ethnographic Material*] C. Schönig & L. R. Pavlinskaya (eds.). St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2012. 408 p. (Series “Kunstkamera – Archives”, Vol. VI) ISBN 978-5-02-08314-2

In 2012, the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) collaborated with the Institute of Turkic Studies, Free University of Berlin, on a volume in the *Kunstkamera-Archive* Series, which comprised a collection of scholarly works by Nadezhda Petrovna Dyrenkova (1899–1941), a renowned Soviet ethnographer, linguist,