

УДК 398.22(=512.157)
008:394(=512.157)

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TRANSLATION OF THE TERM “SAFEGUARDING” IN THE UNESCO CONVENTION ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE (2003) AND ITS EFFECT ON THE RESILIENCE OF THE OLONKHO EPIC TRADITION

Russian translation available at <https://gial.academia.edu/RobinPHarris>

Abstract. UNESCO’s definition of *safeguarding* emphasizes the importance of measures which foster sustainability for living traditions rather than merely the documentation and public promotion of traditions in their “frozen” (memorized) forms. Unfortunately, the English word *safeguarding* has no clear equivalent in Russian. The closest Russian translations of the term *safeguarding* relate to *preservation* and *protection* rather than to the broader values of enduring creativity and resilience as expressed in the full texts of the ICH Convention. This translation issue has led to a general misunderstanding of UNESCO’s goals for endangered traditions, affecting Yakutia’s Plan of Action for revitalizing olonkho in such areas as budgeting, strategic planning and effective ways to support tradition bearers.

According to UNESCO documents, an adequate definition of *safeguarding* will stress continuous re-creation, evolution, and transmission, not simple preservation. Without constant creativity giving life to an artistic genre, the core of its “genetic material” – the related knowledge, skills, and meanings – will wane. As a result, all that remains to be transmitted are the relatively static aspects of the tradition – even possibly limited to “relatives” of the original genre. In the case of olonkho, these related forms might include theatrical presentations, memorized scripts, movies, books, and other “distant relatives” of the solo genre performed by master olonkhosuts.

Emphasizing the importance of the ecological model of “resilience theory” and affirming its potential for informing the revitalization of dying traditions, this presentation proposes a clearer definition of the term *safeguarding* for Russian audiences, outlining ways in which Yakutia’s Plan of Action might better reflect the intention of UNESCO’s ICH convention. For example, part of UNESCO’s recommendation for safeguarding moribund traditions is the encouragement to create programs and systems to support “Living Human Treasures.” The standards for these master performers demand not only excellent artistry in performance but also the ability and dedication to pass along the cultural heritage to others. This core UNESCO goal of transmission has proven one of the most difficult aspects in olonkho revitalization, and as a primary factor involved in safeguarding, it deserves more attention in the revitalization process. For example, the modest number of officially recognized master olonkhosuts in the first Decade of Olonkho has in the last several years dwindled to zero. Adequately addressing the transmission aspect of Yakutia’s Action Plan will involve identifying new master olonkhosuts and providing ways for them to focus on transmitting the living tradition of olonkho to the next generations.

Keywords: epic, intangible cultural heritage, living human treasures, olonkho, performers, preservation, resilience, tradition bearers, translation, transmission, UNESCO.

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О переводе термина *safeguarding* в Конвенции ЮНЕСКО об охране нематериального культурного наследия (2003) и о жизнестойкости традиции олонхо

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Аннотация. В документах ЮНЕСКО, определение слова “safeguarding” акцентирует значимость мер, направленных на обеспечение устойчивого развития живых традиций, а не только деятельность по документальному описанию и общественному продвижению традиций в их устоявшихся формах. К сожалению, термин *safeguarding* не имеет адекватного эквивалента в русском языке. При попытках его перевода используются узкие понятия *хранение* и *защита*, в результате чего утрачиваются оттенки более важных ценностей, выраженных в тексте Конвенции об охране нематериального культурного наследия – ценностей, среди которых особую роль играют жизнеспособность творческого начала и устойчивая его передача из поколения в поколение. Данная проблема с переводом привела к общему недопониманию целей ЮНЕСКО по отношению к угасающим традициям, что в свою очередь повлияло на Государственную целевую программу Якутии по сохранению, изучению и распространению героического эпоса олонхо в части распределения бюджетных средств, стратегического планирования и эффективной поддержки носителей традиции.

Согласно документации ЮНЕСКО, полноценное понятие слова *safeguarding* подчеркивает непрерывное перевоплощение, эволюцию и передачу традиции, помимо ее сохранения. Без постоянного творчества в рамках живого культурного самовыражения, «генетический материал» традиции, включая соответствующие знания, навыки и смыслы, терпят ущерб. В результате в ходе культурной трансляции во времени передается статический материал – конкретные, затвердевшие формы, «дальние родственники» изначального явления. В эпосе олонхо эти «родственники» являют собой театральные презентации, зачитанные по памяти сюжеты, фильмы, книги и другие итерации традиционного сольного исполнения сказаний олонхо мастерами-олонхосутами.

Основываясь на экологическую модель теории резильянса (упругости) и утверждая способность этой теории содействовать возрождению угасающих традиций, в докладе предпринимается попытка адекватного понимания термина *safeguarding* и предлагаются меры, с помощью которых Государственная целевая программа Якутии по сохранению, изучению и распространению олонхо сможет точнее соответствовать рекомендациям Конвенции ЮНЕСКО по охране нематериального культурного наследия. К примеру, одна из рекомендаций ЮНЕСКО по возрождению исчезающих традиций заключается в продвижении программ и мер поддержки мастеров-носителей, которых ЮНЕСКО относит к категории “living human treasures” («живых человеческих сокровищ»). Высокие стандарты для подобных мастеров-исполнителей требуют не только совершенства в соответствующем жанре, но и способности передавать культурное наследие ученикам. Этот центральный принцип ЮНЕСКО по передаче наследия оказался слабым звеном в работе по возрождению эпоса олонхо, и, в качестве ключевого фактора в процессе “safeguarding”, заслуживает большего внимания. В ходе первой «Декады Олонхо» небольшое число исполнителей эпоса были официально признаны мастерами-олонхосутами. Однако к концу десятилетия ни одного из них уже не было в живых. Для того, чтобы адекватно отнестись к процессу передачи наследия, прописанному в Государственной целевой программе Якутии, предлагается найти и поддержать новых мастеров-олонхосутов и предоставить им средства и возможности для передачи живой традиции олонхо следующим поколениям.

Ключевые слова: эпос, живые человеческие сокровища, исполнители, нематериальное культурное наследие, носители, олонхо, перевод, передача, резильянс, сохранение, ЮНЕСКО.

Introduction

In an article published by UNESCO in 2002, Janet Blake writes: “The whole area of terminology in relation to this aspect of cultural heritage is a potential minefield and requires serious study in order to avoid falling into pitfalls that lead to unwelcome outcomes” [1, p. 16]. In my role as observer, documenter, and promoter of the olonkho revitalization process, I have come to believe that Blake’s concerns about terminology are well-grounded, in fact, as I prepared the final manuscript for my book on olonkho revitalization [2], it struck me that clear understandings of one term in particular – *safeguarding* – represents a difficult challenge in the Yakutian context.

Safeguarding in UNESCO documents

UNESCO's definition of *safeguarding* emphasizes the importance of measures which foster sustainability for living traditions rather than merely the documentation and public promotion of traditions in their "frozen" (memorized) forms. Unfortunately, the English word *safeguarding* has no clear equivalent in Russian. The closest Russian translations of the term *safeguarding* relate to *preservation* and *protection* rather than to the broader values of enduring creativity, resilience, and transmission, as expressed in the full texts of the Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). This translation issue has led to a general misunderstanding of UNESCO's goals for endangered traditions, affecting Yakutia's Plan of Action for revitalizing olonkho in such areas as budgeting, finding effective ways to support tradition bearers, and overall strategic planning.

An adequate definition of *safeguarding*, according to UNESCO documents, will stress continuous re-creation, evolution, and transmission, not simple preservation. A UNESCO article, "Safeguarding without Freezing," explains it well¹:

To be kept alive, intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another. There is a risk that certain elements of intangible cultural heritage could die out or disappear without help, but safeguarding does not mean fixing or freezing intangible cultural heritage in some pure or primordial form. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. Transmission – or communicating heritage from generation to generation – is emphasized in the Convention rather than the production of concrete manifestations such as dances, songs, musical instruments or crafts. Therefore, to a large extent, any safeguarding measure refers to strengthening and reinforcing the diverse and varied circumstances, tangible and intangible, that are necessary for the continuous evolution and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage, as well as for its transmission to future generations [3].

Without constant creativity giving life to an artistic genre, the core of its "genetic material" – the related knowledge, skills, and meanings – will wane. As a result, all that remains to be transmitted are the relatively static aspects of the tradition – even possibly limited to "relatives" of the original genre. In the case of olonkho, these related forms might include theatrical presentations, memorized scripts, movies, books, and other "distant relatives" of the solo genre performed by master olonkhosuts.

Safeguarding and resilience: the tension between stable and malleable

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes: "Change is intrinsic to culture, and measures intended to preserve, conserve, safeguard, and sustain particular cultural practices are caught between freezing the practice and addressing the inherently processual nature of culture" [4, p. 58-59]. I am convinced that she is correct, and furthermore, it is the interaction of both *stable* and *malleable* structures that brings dynamism to artistic traditions [5, p. 438]. Encouraging a healthy tension between the stable aspects of the olonkho tradition and the creative, processual aspects provides a significant challenge for Yakutia today, but that tension is key to the ongoing dynamism of the olonkho genre.

That stable-and-malleable quality can be summarized in the term *resilience*, "a system's capacity to recover its integrity, identity, and continuity when subjected to forces of disturbance" [6, p. 192]. Recently, the effects of Hurricane Harvey in the state of Texas, where I live, showed the importance of resilience for large trees. Sturdy, stiff trunks were not enough for these trees to endure the raging winds and torrential rain of that hurricane. When wind and water changed the environment, many trees lacking malleability – resilience – fell to the ground.

Note that resilience is not simply returning to a former condition – change is relentless and often permanent. Drawing from ecological models in his explanation of resilience theory, Philip Lake outlines the distinction between *resistance* and *resilience*: "The capacity to weather a disturbance without loss is defined as resistance, whereas resilience is the capacity to recover from a disturbance after incurring losses, which may be considerable" [7, p. 20]. Resilience theory acknowledges that fluctuations in the environment will impose changes in a system, sometimes undesired changes.

¹ In Blake's UNESCO-published paper of 102 pages, the term safeguard or safeguarding is mentioned 176 times. See: "Developing a New Standard-setting Instrument for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements for consideration." Paris: UNESCO (2002). URL: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001237/123744e.pdf>, accessed June 26, 2017.

Resilience theory, however, strives for adaptation as the system recovers from those disturbances, resulting in a subsequent state of “sufficient integrity to keep performing its core functions” [8, p. 14-16]. Keith Howard’s study of the Korean epic *p’ansori* and the ICH movement in Korea confirms the importance of this stable-malleable balance, concluding that “The two elements, preservation and creativity, go side-by-side, one validating the other, and one ensuring the maintenance of activity in the other. Preservation and creativity are, then, equally important elements in revival” [9, p. 152-153].

Safeguarding and the “Living Human Treasures” program

I believe that the application of resilience theory to the problem of sustainability in music cultures is key to helping a performance tradition to recover from the effects of society-wide change. With these principles in mind, I proposed that better terms for translating *safeguarding* might be found in terminology such as *podkrepyat’* (to reinforce, strengthen, sustain), *podpirat’* (to support, or prop up), *okazyvat’ podderzhku* (to provide support), or even better, *obezpechivat’ zhiznesposobnost’* (to provide for health or resilience). With these translations emphasizing the aspect of resilience, I would like to see measures undertaken by which Yakutia’s Plan of Action might better reflect the intention of UNESCO’s ICH convention. For example, part of UNESCO’s recommendation for safeguarding moribund traditions is the encouragement to create programs and systems to support “Living Human Treasures.” The standards for these master performers demand not only excellent artistry in performance but also the ability and dedication to pass along the cultural heritage to others [10]. Blake’s article published by UNESCO underscores this principle:

One of the most effective ways of safeguarding the intangible heritage is to conserve it by collecting, recording, and archiving. Even more effective would be to ensure that the bearers of that heritage continue to acquire further knowledge and skills and transmit them to future generations.... By identifying the bearers of this heritage and their ability to transmit the skills, techniques and knowledge to ‘apprentices’ as the focus of protection, it recognizes that its existence depends on the social and economic well-being of its holders and their way of life [1, p. 45].

This core UNESCO goal of transmission has proven one of the most difficult aspects in olonkho revitalization, and as a primary factor involved in safeguarding, it deserves more attention in the revitalization process. For example, the modest number of officially recognized master olonkhosuts in the first Decade of Olonkho has in the last several years dwindled to zero. Adequately addressing the transmission aspect of Yakutia’s Action Plan will involve identifying new master olonkhosuts and providing ways for them to focus on transmitting the resilient, living tradition of olonkho to the next generations.

According to UNESCO, both recognition and adequate funding play an important role in supporting the activities of these Living Human Treasures:

Besides public recognition, the [UNESCO] system includes measures for the provision of, for example, special grants/subsidies to designated Living Human Treasures, so that they can assume their responsibilities for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. These measures aim especially at:

1. The perpetuation and development of their knowledge and skills;
2. The transmission of their knowledge and skills to the younger generations through formal or non-formal training programmes;
3. Contributing to the documenting and recording of the intangible cultural heritage concerned (video or audio recording, publications, etc.);
4. Dissemination of their knowledge and skills;
5. Any additional duties entrusted to them [11, p. 4].

The importance of living tradition bearers cannot be underestimated. This principle is noted by many who study intangible cultural heritage (ICH), including Blake, who affirms that “it is only through its enactment by cultural practitioners that ICH has any current existence and by their active transmission that it can have any future existence” [12, p 65]. I conclude, therefore, that the recognition of only a few master olonkhosuts in the first Decade of Olonkho and the subsequent lack of any recognized master olonkhosuts is a setback for the transmission of the resilient, “living tradition” of olonkho. Adequately addressing the transmission aspect of Yakutia’s Action Plan will necessarily involve measures to identify and, if possible, increase the number of living “transmitters” and adequately compensating them so that they can focus on the task of transmission.

Conclusion

Epic traditions sometimes cease to function as living epics by being forgotten, or by being frozen in their written forms, like the Homeric epics. The natural malleability of epic traditions, however, prepares them well to flex with the stressors of societal change. This predisposition for resilience may explain how the oral epic of olonkho survived for so long. As Rene Louis observes,

[An epic tradition] passes from singer to singer and from audience to audience, to assume new forms according to the tasks and the profound tendencies of the eras which it traverses and the countries into which [it] spreads, above all in response to the sovereign imagination of the singers who adopt it as their own. Within the supple and accommodating framework of tradition these singers of epic themes, narrative schemas, and formulaic styles never stop improvising new details, new episodes, and creating countless 'variants' of the original work [13, p. 10].

Despite this natural resilience, oral epics can become brittle through a loss of either transmission or innovation. Supporting the malleable aspects of a performance tradition will keep it from becoming frozen, and in the face of unavoidable change, a malleable, living epic tradition will connect to people's identity and respond to contextual modifications through healthy, measured levels of innovation.

Although a focus on safeguarding ICH has resulted in many books and articles in the last ten years, I believe that continued scholarship focused on a case study such as olonkho revitalization – especially in relation to such broadly relevant factors such as transmission, innovation, and resilience – will provide insights and recommendations for those working toward reviving other dying traditions. The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), through its herculean efforts to revitalize its masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage, has provided us with this remarkable case study, an example of music revival with promising implications for the world-wide scholarship of epic traditions.

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