

**BETWEEN INDIGENEITY AND NATIONALITY: THE POLITICS OF CULTURE  
AND NATURE IN RUSSIA'S DIAMOND PROVINCE**

by

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## **Abstract**

Despite a half century of rapid, state-sponsored industrialization in the region, only with its more recent, abrupt exposure to global capitalism has Siberia become a hotly contested site of debates over both indigenous rights and natural resource extraction. The Sakha Republic (Yakutia), a Northeastern Siberian region twice the size of Alaska, is now a particularly crucial site of contestation, boasting diamond reserves that produce about 25% of the world's diamonds. The region is also home to a sizeable, highly educated indigenous population, the Sakha, who comprise over 45% of the Republic's residents. Sakha activists have been engaged in a sustained project of cultural revival that has drawn upon globally circulating representations of indigeneity to contest environmental destruction, assert political control over their lands and resources, and to challenge socio-economic marginalization. However, in post-Soviet Siberia, like elsewhere in Asia, distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous are not straightforward, and articulations of indigenous identity are fraught with complications. With a population over 400,000, the Sakha are in fact considered too numerous to fit within the official Russian category for indigenous peoples—the “small-numbered peoples of the North,” and many Sakha are themselves ambivalent about the label “indigenous,” seeing their own culture as more advanced than that of their neighboring indigenes. This dissertation examines the social processes that link globally circulating images and practices of indigeneity with Sakha cultural politics, and argues that articulations of indigenous identity are not only contingent and heterogeneous, but are also partial and uneven. In this context, indigeneity coexists alongside other kinds of identity, especially ethnonationalism. Analysis builds on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Sakha Republic, including participant observation in 2 cities, semi-structured interviews and life history interviews with Sakha and non-Sakha residents, and regional newspaper analysis.

## **Preface**

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## Note on Transliteration

Transliteration of Russian words follows a modified Library of Congress system. Modifications include Ъ=I, Ц=Ts, Я=Ia, Ю=Iu, and Ё=E. Soft signs and hard signs are transliterated with one and two apostrophes, respectively. In addition, commonly held Western spellings of proper nouns are used, such as *Yakutia* rather than *Iakutia*, or *Yeltsin* rather than *El'tsyn*. Russian words are placed in italics when they appear in the text.

Transliteration of Sakha words also follows the Library of Congress system for Russian. Additional letters not found in the Russian alphabet are transcribed as follows: Ы=Gh, Ҥ=Ng, Ө=O, Һ=H, Ү=Yu. Sakha words are placed in italics and underlined. Sakha words, which have no English translation and are used repeatedly throughout the text (e.g. *Yhyakh*, and *Olonkho*) are placed in italics and underlined the first time they appear, but are in normal text thereafter. These are also defined in the glossary below.

## Glossary

Note: I have included Sakha terms used throughout the dissertation here. Russian words are defined in text.

**Abaahy:** Evil spirits.

**Aiyy:** Literally, “creation.” It is used variously in relation to the Sakha traditional religion in reference to the “good” deities, who reside in the sky in contrast to the abaahy spirits of the lower world. The entire polytheistic belief system of is often referred to as the aiyy teachings, and those who follow this belief system, the aiyy people.

**Alaad’i:** Sakha fried bread or pancakes.

**Alaas:** A forest clearing, often with a lake in the center, where pre-Soviet homesteads were typically located.

**Algys:** A sung blessing or prayer in the Sakha traditional religion.

**Algyschit:** A person who performs the algys.

**Archy:** Cleansing. Contemporary practitioners of Sakha religion perform a rite of cleansing prior to entering important and/or holy places.

**Badraan:** Mud.

**Balaghan:** Traditional Sakha dwelling made from wooden poles in a trapezoidal shape and covered with sod. In the present, these are used as barns for cattle.

**Bypakh:** A slightly alcoholic drink made from fermented cow’s milk drunk in the present as a cheaper alternative to kymys.

**Choron:** 3-legged wooden chalice, used especially in Yhyakh and other ritual ceremonies for serving kymys.

**Iteghel:** Belief or religion.

**Khomus:** The Sakha jaw harp, considered the Sakha “national instrument.”

**Khoton:** Barn for cows.

**Kyuorchek:** Whipped cream, made without sugar and hand whipped with a special wooden utensil.

**Kymys:** Fermented mare’s milk.

**Nasleg (nehilie):** A subdivision of an ulus.

**Nyurguhuun:** Snow drops; white, yellow or purple flowers that poke out of the ground in early spring.

**Ohuokai:** Sakha circle dance, in which a lead singer improvises a rhythmical cadence (toiuk) and the other participants repeat each line.

**Olonkho:** Sakha epic poetry.

**Oiuun:** Shaman.

**Serge:** An elaborately carved post for hitching-horses with deep cultural and ritual significance.

**Toion:** Sakha nobility. Often used in the present in relation to Sakha elite, both as a term of respect and as a term of critique.

**Toiuk:** A rhythmical cadence sung especially during ohuokai, often during olonkho as well.

**Tuhulghe:** Round festival area at Yhyakh, marked out by birch saplings, which are strung together by a string decorated with small, multi-colored bits of cloth.

**Tyuoibe:** Hay meadow; distant/remote place; or settlement.

**Ulus:** Territorial division of the Sakha Republic, like a county.

**Yhyakh:** Sakha summer festival.

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*For Viktoria and Nikita, may your lives  
always be filled with light and joy.*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite a half-century of rapid, state-sponsored industrialization in the region, Siberia has only recently emerged in the post-Soviet period as a crucial site of contestation over both indigenous rights and natural resource extraction. The Sakha Republic (Yakutia), an Eastern Siberian<sup>1</sup> region twice the size of Alaska (Figure 1), has been a particularly crucial site of contestation, boasting diamond reserves that produce almost 25% of the world's diamonds, in addition to significant reserves of timber, gold, oil, natural gas, and a range of other valuable minerals (see Tichotsky 2000, Kempton 1996). It is also home to a sizeable, highly educated indigenous population, the Sakha, who comprise over 45% of the total residents in the region.<sup>2</sup> However, in post-Soviet Siberia, like elsewhere in Asia (Barnes, et. al. 1995, T Li 2000), distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous are not straightforward and articulations of indigenous identities are neither natural nor inevitable, being contingent upon a variety of intersecting global and local processes and power configurations (For example, see Koester 2005). Indeed, with a population of over 400,000, the Sakha are considered too numerous to fit within the official Russian category of "indigenous," confined to groups numbering less than 50,000—the "small numbered peoples of the north" (cf. Donahoe et al. 2008). And yet, like other indigenous groups, Sakha have largely been excluded from the profits of the state-controlled diamond industry and they have also suffered disproportionately from ecological destruction due to resource extraction (Crate 2006, Balzer 2006). Furthermore, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sakha activists have been engaged in a sustained project of cultural revival that, like indigenous cultural movements elsewhere, has drawn upon positive images and associations of global indigeneity to challenge Soviet and Russian state assimilationism.

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<sup>1</sup> Administratively speaking, the Sakha Republic is currently part of the Russian Far East Federal District, and therefore could be seen to belong to the Russian Far East rather than Siberia, which has its own Federal District. However, "Siberia" as a general term has long been used to refer to all of Eastern Russia and people in the Sakha Republic regularly spoke of themselves as living in Siberia. Furthermore, the other areas of the Far East (Chukotka, Kamchatka, etc.) have a distinct set of climatic and geopolitical characteristics associated with their location on Russia's eastern borders. As such, in this dissertation, I refer to the Sakha Republic as part of Siberia.

<sup>2</sup> Population statistics are from the 2002 Russian census (Sakha (Yakutia) Stat 2005).



**Figure 1: Map of the Russian Federation, showing the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)**

This dissertation examines the relationship between post-Soviet Sakha cultural politics, and a global politics of indigeneity. A burgeoning anthropological literature on indigeneity has highlighted the increasing salience of indigenous identities in international political arenas and in various local struggles all over the world (see especially, De la Cadena and Starn 2007a; Niezen 2003). Transnational links between indigenous groups provide opportunities for collaborative organizing to address common concerns, including cultural and economic marginalization, environmental destruction, loss of control over lands and resources, and self-determination/sovereignty struggles (Niezen 2003; Tsing 2007). At the same time, a set of images associated with indigenous peoples has circulated globally, inviting generalizations about indigenous cultures, especially in relation to ecological wisdom, timeless cultures, and spirituality (Yeh 2007). Indigenous activists have often embraced such essentializing images, articulating them as positive identity markers that challenge older stereotypes of savagery, naiveté, and primitivity (Warren and Jackson 2002a). Despite the pitfalls of reproducing essentialized identities (Conklin 1997), these images have successfully engendered broad sympathy from dominant national and international populations for particular indigenous struggles (Warren and Jackson 2002b; Ramos 1998; T Li 2003; Turner 1994). Supporters have also argued that these images help to



reverse disillusion and apathy within indigenous communities themselves through assertions of ethnic pride (Warren and Jackson 2002b; Graburn 1998).

At the same time, theorists of indigeneity have argued against seeing articulations of indigenous identity solely in terms of political strategy. They point to the fluid and “transactional” nature of all forms of identity, arguing that particular indigeneities must be understood within particular contexts even as they stand in conversation with globally circulating discourses (Clifford 2001; De la Cadena and Starn 2007b). De la Cadena and Starn (2007a), in particular, have emphasized the heterogeneity of indigenous experience, following Stuart Hall in arguing that indigeneity is “without guarantees.” While comparisons can be drawn between groups identifying as indigenous, there are no necessary conditions for the articulation of indigenous identity, nor inevitable outcomes of indigenous politics.

One particular example concerns the relationship between indigeneity and nationalism. An extensive body of literature on nations and nationalism has described the nation-state as one of the fundamental organizing principles of the contemporary world (Anderson 1983, Eriksen 1993, Malkki 1995, among others). This world order is reinforced by historically constituted beliefs about the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of nations, which allow the members of nations to imagine primordial bonds rooted in both culture and kinship—Benedict Anderson’s (1983) “deep, horizontal comradeship.” A number of theorists of indigeneity, however, have suggested that indigenous movements and the emerging transnational identity politics associated with global indigeneity represent a radical challenge to the nation-state as the primary locus of political identity and belonging (Niezen 2003, Eriksen 1993). They point to the transnational linkages formed among sub-state indigenous groups as themselves a kind of extra-national organizing, and to the lack of aspirations for independent statehood on the part of most indigenous groups as indicative of an alternative kind of identity politics. At the same time, as Biolsi (1994) argues, the language of national sovereignty has been central to indigenous movements all over the world, and especially in North America where Indian tribes and tribal unions consider themselves to be sovereign nations and retain the trappings of statehood, even if existing power relations subordinate them to the US government. As he points out, the hegemony of the nation as an organizing principle of social life remains relatively intact. Gupta (1992) suggests that nationalism coexists with “other forms of imagining community, other mechanisms for positioning

subjects, other bases of identity” (74). Similarly, indigeneity as a form of transnational identity can challenge particular nationalisms, but it does not necessarily disrupt “the national order of things” (cf. Malkki 1995).

In post-Soviet Siberia, the ethnographic focus of this dissertation, I argue that emerging articulations of indigeneity associated in part with natural resource politics can be seen in conjunction with historically constituted ideas about national-territorial belonging. Rather than replacing or challenging national identity, indigenous identity coexists with national identity and can even be seen to supplement it. That is to say that transnationally circulating discourses of indigeneity resonate in Siberia, especially in relation to struggles over natural resources, cultural stewardship, and sovereignty, but they are not necessarily mobilized in opposition to the idea of the nation-state. Indeed, the idea of the nation-state persists as a guiding ideal for Sakha cultural activists in ways that echo American Indian aspirations for sovereignty but also differ in significant ways, specifically in activists’ rejection of statehood defined solely in terms of ethnic identity. Ultimately, indigeneity like nationalism can be seen as partial and heterogeneous. It engages with globally circulating discourses, and yet is also deeply conditioned by local politics and relations of difference.

In the chapters that follow, I examine the social processes that link globally circulating images and practices of indigenesness with Sakha cultural politics, and consider the ways in which articulations of indigenous identity are not only contingent and heterogeneous, but are also partial and uneven. I argue that indigeneity can be seen as an aspiring universal that, like other universals, operates in specific encounters and interactions, what Anna Tsing calls *frictions*: “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnections across difference” (Tsing 2005, 4). That is to say that indigeneity is not simply a mantle to be taken on, or thrown off; rather it is a complex process of recognition and negotiation as diverse individuals and groups encounter one another and find common, yet always unstable ground for communication and collaboration. Indigeneity is a kind of global model and an idea that travels through transnational links and associations and encompasses diverse peoples and places. In examining it, however, we must look at the specific locations and worldly encounters in which it emerges and where it stumbles. As Anna Tsing (2005) reminds us, friction both impedes and facilitates motion. This dissertation looks at the

frictions of indigeneity in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), examining the uptake of images and discourses of indigeneity and also its contradictions and incongruities.

### **Sakha Indigeneity: Global Discourses, Local articulations**

In the English language literature on the Sakha, they are often described as “indigenous” Siberians by virtue of the fact that they are one of the many ethnic groups living in Siberia prior to Russian colonial expansion in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the Russian language literature and in everyday discourses within the Sakha Republic, however, Sakha “indigeneity” is not as clear-cut. As I point out above, the Sakha are not part of Russia’s relatively vocal “indigenous peoples’ movement,” and the Russian term most often used in translations of indigenous, “small-numbered peoples of the North,” (*malochislennyye narody*) does not apply to the Sakha. On the surface, there appears to be simple reasons for this: they are a much larger group than those involved in Russia’s indigenous peoples’ movement, they have “their own” territory, and they have historically aspired to a kind of territorially-based statehood. In short, they could just as easily be seen as an “ethnic minority” as an indigenous group. And yet, the similarity of Sakha to other indigenous groups and many of the ways in which Sakha identity is articulated in the present suggest a closer relationship with global discourses of indigeneity. Like other indigenous groups, the Sakha have “territorial precedence” on their current territory, strong attachment to their homeland, and suffer from cultural and economic marginalization in relation to a dominant national population (Merlan 2009; De la Cadena and Starn 2007b). Furthermore, media images regularly depict Sakha as children of nature and highlight their “exotic” and colorful folkloric traditions in contrast to dominant state-led processes of “modernization.” One might argue, as Emily Yeh (2007) does for Tibetans, that Sakha identity can be seen in terms of an “indigenous formation” despite complications in relation to the specific terminology of indigeneity. By an indigenous formation, Yeh refers to a set of self-representations that echo those of indigenous groups worldwide, specifically those related to ecological wisdom, spirituality and ancient cultural tradition. These kinds of associations resonate strongly with Sakha and are reinforced in regional media images, through international recognition of

Sakha “cultural heritage,” and through local efforts to assert a positive value for Sakha cultural identity. In addition, Sakha political aspirations have variously echoed those of other indigenous groups regarding respect for collective rights to land and resources, recognition of cultural difference, and the acknowledgement of rights to self-determination. In this way, global discourses of indigeneity invite the Sakha to be “interpellated” by them even as local politics and relational identities present complications (Castree 2004, 153; cf. Yeh 2007, 70).

This dissertation attempts to sort through the complicated relationship of post-Soviet Sakha to the discourses of global indigeneity. Can the Sakha be considered indigenous? Should the Sakha be considered indigenous? If so, in what contexts? What are the implications of indigenous identity for longer term political aspirations? And what does this tell us about the politics of indigeneity globally? How do indigenous and ethnic identities intersect with other social identities like gender and class? While I ask these questions, I do so with the recognition that no straightforward answers are possible, and that being (and becoming) indigenous is always only a possibility (Li 2000). Furthermore, indigenous identity is necessarily partial as a range of competing constructions and representations produce awkward and uneven identity articulations in specific contexts. That is to say that no group’s identity fully aligns with a global or universal model of indigenousness, because indigenousness as global discourse and force only operates in specific encounters. As Anna Tsing writes, “generalization to the universal [is] an aspiration, an always unfinished achievement, rather than the confirmation of a pre-formed law...universal aspirations must travel across distances and differences” (2005, 7).

Questions surrounding Sakha indigeneity are important in light of the recent visibility of the international indigenous peoples’ movement, both in scholarly literature and in the realm of international legal convention. In the past few decades, a transnational alliance of groups identifying as indigenous has mobilized to assert a set of universal rights for indigenous peoples, now codified in the recently ratified UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The signatories to this document recognize the rights of the world’s indigenous peoples to land and resources (article 26), cultural difference (article 4), and self-determination (article 3), among other things, while preserving the territorial integrity and national unity of the encompassing nation-states (United Nations 2007a). There are 143 signatories to the declaration; notably, four countries (the US, Canada, Australia and New

Zealand) initially voted against it, and eleven countries, including the Russian Federation abstained. In explaining its abstention, the Russian delegate upheld Russia's commitment to the notion of "indigenous rights," but cited concerns about rights to land and resources as presently articulated by the document (United Nations 2007b), reflecting Russia's reluctance to accede rights to resource extraction on the part of sub-state groups.

One of the problems facing the indigenous peoples' movement, however, is defining just who is and who is not indigenous, and therefore possessive of these rights. As Niezen (2003) points out, an acceptable legal definition of indigenesness has not been forthcoming, and anyways would be problematic in light of diverse histories of colonization and the multiple and fluid, "transactional" nature of indigenous identity (Clifford 1988; B Miller 2003). For this reason, the UN Working Group on Indigenous Affairs officially accepts groups' self-definitions as indigenous. Even so, indigenous identity is not a simple matter of choice on the part of individual ethnic groups, or their leaders. To be effective, this identity must be recognized and legitimated by some audience, whether it is other indigenous groups, international environmental, other advocacy organizations, or, most crucially, the states in which groups are incorporated (Tsing 2007). This brings us into the realm of representation and discourse, raising questions about how indigenous identities come to be claimed and how they are legitimated, processes that involve both indigenous actors and their audiences. As De la Cadena and Starn point out, indigeneity is "a relational field of governance, subjectivities and knowledge that involves us all—indigenous and non-indigenous—in the making/remaking of its structures of power and imagination" (2007a, 3).

In conjunction with the visibility of indigenous activism, the politics surrounding claims to indigenous identity have been the focus of considerable scholarly attention over the past two decades. Anthropologists, sociologists, and others have attempted to sort out how and when the label of "indigenous" comes to adhere to certain groups. They have examined instances in which groups deploy claims to indigenous identity in relation to political goals, and the ways in which this identity "sticks" through outside recognition (Castree 2004; Hathaway 2010; Li 2000).

Generally speaking, these studies have highlighted a set of characteristics commonly shared by indigenous groups, although they caution that these are neither exclusive, nor necessary conditions for identification and recognition as indigenous. Niezen, for example,

points to: original/prior occupancy, maintenance of cultural difference, and cultural/ethnic marginalization in relation to a dominant national population (2003, 19). He also points to a set of shared attachments claimed by indigenous activists to “some form of subsistence economy, to a territory or homeland that predates the arrival of settlers and surveyors, to a spiritual system that predates the arrival of missionaries, and to a language that expresses everything that is important and distinct about their place in the universe” (2003, 23). Other scholars have described a set of related associations that do not define, but often accompany indigeness in popular imaginations worldwide. Indigenous peoples, for example, are supposed to embody ideals of environmental stewardship, connectedness with nature, spirituality, egalitarianism, and ancient culture (cf. Yeh 2007). As a host of literature on “strategic essentialism” has pointed out, indigenous groups have successfully taken long-standing negative stereotypes of primitiveness, naïveté, and savagery and turned them into positive attributes, and have thus attracted the support of a variety of international advocacy organizations, including environmental organizations and human rights agencies (Warren and Jackson 2002b; Conklin 1997; Turner 1991). The 2007 ratification of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples can be seen as the culmination of this activism, in which indigenous groups have garnered worldwide recognition of and sympathy for their grievances and aspirations as distinct from those of other ethnic minorities.

Even so, defining indigenous identity is far from straightforward. This set of ideas is not an overarching definition, and controversy over the idea of indigeness continues. Even as tribal groups in Asia and Africa are actively articulating an indigenous identity and gaining international recognition as indigenous, state governments in countries like China and Indonesia refuse to recognize them as such based on official assertions that all citizens of their countries are equally indigenous (e.g. Hathaway 2010; Li 2003). A handful of prominent anthropologists have also criticized the indigenous peoples’ movement for its reliance on essentialized notions of identity and belonging. Adam Kuper (2003), for example, argues that what is theoretically a relative term, has become an absolute term charged with moral zeal that essentializes and reduces complexity and that the category “indigenous” recreates problematic dichotomies that reinforce stereotypical notions of heredity and blood (see also, Beteille 1998). Defenders of indigenous rights have responded with vehement rebuttals of their own. Ramos (2003b) and Warren and Jackson (2002a) among others have

argued that Kuper's position reflects the colonial standpoint of anthropologists and other academics reluctant to accede to self-definitions of marginal peoples. They have pointed to indigeneity as a flexible and contingent identity that has arisen in response to a very particular set of conditions that severely restrict possibilities for political action in other veins. Indigenous identity, they have suggested, reflects less the conscious choice of marginalized groups and more the identity categories imposed upon them by colonial states.

These debates point to the multiplicity of meanings of "indigenous." As Bruce Miller (2003) argues, indigeneity is both a global phenomenon connected to world-issues, and a localized one, taking on distinctive characteristics dependent on particular state histories of colonization and incorporation. It is not one thing but a shifting set of practices unfolding within particular social contexts. Following Li (2000), I see the articulation of indigenous identity as only partially the result of local agency: the identities available to communities are necessarily conditioned by fields of power and categories imposed from the outside, and furthermore, the images and symbols employed are typically drawn from historically sedimented "repertoires of meaning" (Li 2000, 151). This dissertation seeks to understand the relationship between local articulations of an indigenous identity and the global processes they intersect, asking how a Sakha indigeneity is constituted in relation to international indigenous organizing and in relation to globally circulating discourses of indigeneity. Furthermore, what is particular about Sakha engagement with these processes? How has their historical and structural position vis-à-vis the diamond industry and the Soviet and Post-Soviet state shaped the Sakha experience of and engagement with indigeneity?

Tania Li (2000) uses Stuart Hall's (1996) notion of "articulation" as both enunciation and contingent joining together in order to explain why one group of Indonesian farmers articulated an indigenous identity, while a similar group did not, despite sharing common self-representations that might lend themselves to an indigenous identity. She argues that both had a discourse of indigeneity available to them, what she calls the "tribal slot," but only one was involved in a struggle over natural resources. Due to the widespread association of indigeneity and resource struggles, this group of farmers was able to mobilize international support for their cause through the articulation of an explicitly indigenous identity. For this reason, she argues that indigeneity and resource politics go together. Tsing (2007) also echoes this in pointing out that "groups who have organized under the indigenous banner

have done so in part because they have been left out of the benefits of national development” (2007, 53). In a similar way, one might argue that Sakha involvement in struggles over natural resources vis-à-vis the Russian diamond industry might make for fertile ground for the assertion of an indigenous identity, and for the establishment of transnational links with other indigenous groups. As I explore in more detail in chapter 8, resource development has provided the backdrop to much of Sakha political activity over the last two decades. However, the “tribal slot” is not always available in unambiguous ways, and the Sakha case does not easily map onto either of Li’s cases. Indeed, the Sakha field of “slots” has been additionally shaped by Soviet ideologies of ethnic and national development and by a post-Soviet Sakha ethno-nationalist politics that was not exclusively “indigenous” but rather negotiated a range of discursive options for legitimating claims to local and regional territorial sovereignty.

Over the past few decades, a kind of indigenous identity can be said to have emerged among Sakha. Certainly, the English-language literature on the Sakha freely uses the term “indigenous” in relation to them. Two of the most prominent anthropologists working in the Sakha Republic, Susan Crate and Marjorie Balzer, regularly use the term indigenous, although they also recognize the local complexities of Sakha articulations of indigeneity (Balzer 2003; Crate 2006). In addition, many of my interlocutors in the Sakha Republic would often draw comparisons between their own predicament and that of other indigenous peoples, and activists have even established cultural exchanges with native groups in North America and elsewhere. The discursive links are facilitated by descriptions of Sakha in UNESCO documents and in other international and domestic forums that clearly resonate as “indigenous formations,” in that they highlight Sakha ecological wisdom, spirituality, and ancient cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, in Russian and in Sakha vernaculars, the idea of indigenousness does not translate easily in relation to the Sakha, and does not do precisely the same work that it does for indigenous groups elsewhere in the world. First, the direct Russian translation of “indigenous” “*korennoi*” has a much less specific meaning than does the English term, and can be applied equally to all the native peoples of Russia, including Russians themselves (Sokolovskiy 2007). Secondly, the category of “small-numbered peoples,” “*malochislennyye narody*” operates in Russia in ways similar to the term “indigenous” in international contexts,



but it excludes the Sakha. Russia's indigenous peoples' organization, for example, is called in English the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East (RAIPON), but the direct translation from the Russian would be: "Association of the Indigenous Small-numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation." Just as the vernacular concept of "masyarakat adat" has served as the Indonesian translation of indigenous (Tsing 2007; Li 2003) and "adivasi" has for groups in India (Baviskar 2007), "*malochislennyye narody*" serves as the most precise translation for "indigenous peoples" in the Russian context. As I point out above, this category officially excludes the Sakha from recognition as one of Russia's indigenous people due to their population of almost 400,000 people, which far exceeds the 50,000 person cut-off for recognition as one of the small-numbered peoples (Donahoe et al. 2008; Sokolovskiy 2007). As such, as in the case of the Tibetans (Yeh 2007), there is no vernacular term for the Sakha that does the work of indigeness in international contexts. This is not merely a semantic issue either: the Sakha are not recognized under Russian legal statutes dealing with indigenous peoples, and their exclusion from RAIPON has meant that the Sakha activists have not been directly involved in transnational organizing with other indigenous groups, either within Russia or beyond its borders.

As I begin to discuss above, Sakha collective identity has long been articulated almost exclusively in terms of ethnonational belonging. Sakha ethnonational identity both echoes international frameworks of national-territorial rootedness, and has its own particular contours shaped by Soviet nationalities' policies. Since at least the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural difference in Russia has been framed through a discourse of Soviet "nationalities." Stalin, for example, famously defined a nation as "a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture" (1994, 20). Soviet administrators not only assumed an inherent link between nationalities and territory, but sought explicitly to draw political and administrative boundaries around nations in order to bring about complete coincidence between nations and their territories. Therefore, in theory, "national" territories like the Sakha Republic (then, the Yakut ASSR), provided the framework for ethnic (national) self-determination. Over the course of the 1920s and 30s, a discrete set of officially sanctioned nationalities was cemented through a Central Party-led process of definition in

which ethnographers and ethnographic knowledge played a significant role (Hirsch 2005). By the end of the 1930s, nationality came to be a permanent identity, stamped into passports and passed onto children. While Soviet ideas of nationality owed much to internationally circulating beliefs about nationhood, early Soviet administrators went much farther than most states in seeking to bring about relatively homogenous national territories. Official understandings of nationhood and ethnicity evolved over time and later Soviet administrators came to be far more hostile to ethnic identity articulations, but the notion of the USSR as a Union of distinct nations with their own territories persisted up to and after the collapse. Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that official Soviet “ethnic particularism” resulted in the break-up of the Soviet Union along national-territorial lines (Slezkine 1994a).

In conjunction with this official policy of ethnoterritorial federalism, the Soviet government, beginning in the 1930s, declared “the national question” resolved. That is to say, that because all ethnic groups were supposedly granted “their own” territories and self governance, there could be no more interethnic tensions. As I explore in more detail in chapter 5, an official narrative of “friendship of peoples” emerged as a means to continue to acknowledge ethnic diversity, but to restrict expressions of national identity to those that supported Soviet unity. The Mongolian scholar Uradyn Bulag points to a similar narrative of “amity between peoples” that has governed interethnic relations in the People’s Republic of China. He argues that this narrative serves as a “hegemonic management device to maneuver in the context of China’s diversity” (Bulag 2002, 12; cf. Yeh 2007, 71). Likewise, official Soviet narratives celebrated ethnic difference through colorful folkloric displays in order to emphasize the always-already existing unity and friendship of the peoples of the USSR, but rejected any forms of cultural difference that would threaten or cast doubt upon this unity. The only acceptable expressions of cultural difference were articulated through an idiom of Soviet nationalities and served to uphold a narrative of peoples happily united in brotherly friendship.

It is important to note as well that despite this ideology of national unity, all nationalities were not equal or at least not equivalent under Soviet law. The category of nationality encompassed a range of ethnic formations that were defined on a continuum of backward to advanced, consistent with Marxist-Leninist evolutionary timelines. For early Bolsheviks, the more advanced a group, the more capable they were of self-government, and

those groups perceived as more advanced were accordingly granted a greater degree of autonomy. This resulted in a hierarchy of ethnically-based territories with the Union Republics (e.g. Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia itself) granted the greatest degree of autonomy, and the small-numbered peoples, like the reindeer-herding Yukagir and Even granted the least degree of autonomy in the form of much smaller autonomous districts. These autonomous districts were often subordinated to autonomous republics, which were in turn subordinated to the Union Republics in a system of nesting hierarchies. This meant that the Yakut ASSR, as an autonomous republic, had no representation at the level of the USSR, but was represented in the government of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR). At the same time, the system was highly centralized and the so-called “autonomous” regions had little control over regional policy. Ethnic hierarchies followed territorial hierarchies. Russians were seen unequivocally as the most advanced group, and considered the “elder brother” to all other nations. As the dominant nationality, they were also the only nationality without “their own” territory; the entire Soviet Union came to operate discursively as their homeland (Slezkine 1994a). Pastoral groups like the Sakha occupied a kind of middle ground—perceived as less advanced than the national populations of the Ukraine, Belarus, and Uzbekistan, but less backward than the small numbered peoples of the North. Their relative position of privilege in relation to the small-numbered peoples in Soviet development hierarchies has partially conditioned their exclusion from Russia’s indigenous peoples’ movement in the Post-Soviet period (Köhler and Wessendorf 2002).

As the Soviet Union was unraveling from 1990-91, the Union Republics (e.g. Uzbekistan, Estonia, Ukraine, and, significantly, Russia, among others) declared sovereignty, establishing independent nation-states. Within the Russian Federation, the ethnically-based autonomous republics, including the Yakut ASSR, quickly followed suit with their own declarations of sovereignty. Unlike the Union Republics, however, their leaders by-and-large envisioned a continuing federal relationship with Moscow rather than complete secession. In the Sakha Republic, sovereignty was legitimated through a discourse of cultural self-determination, but it was officially articulated in terms of the “multinational people” of the Republic. That is to say that Sakha ethnicity was symbolically powerful in legitimating sovereignty, but official discourse emphasized a civic-territorial identity that encompassed all residents. At the time of the declaration, the Sakha were far from the majority ethnic group,

constituting only around one-third of the population in 1989, and so any overt claims to ethnic sovereignty would have been intensely contested by the majority Russian population. As I explore in chapter 5, this population was already uncomfortable by what they perceived as a rising Sakha nationalism. In the long run, Sakha claims to sovereignty have been entirely defeated as the central government has reasserted control, and the word “sovereignty” has been stricken from the Constitution. Rumors also circulate that the federal government intends to dissolve the ethnic republics altogether. This would leave larger federal districts (*okrugs*), created in 2000, as the primary sub-federal administrative entities.

As I explore in chapter 3, Sakha claims to sovereignty were both like and unlike the sovereignty claims of indigenous groups elsewhere in the world. They were similar in the sense that they were legitimated through a discourse of cultural self-determination and did not claim complete secession from the encompassing state. They were unlike other indigenous claims in that sovereignty was articulated in terms of a civic-territorial, rather than rooted solely in terms of ethnic/cultural self-determination. This calls attention to the tensions between notions of state sovereignty and cultural sovereignty at stake in indigenous claims. As Brown (2007) argues, one of the problems with indigenous articulations of sovereignty rights lies in the reliance on bounded communities tied to territory, and often ignores the realities of everyday life, in which indigenous and non-indigenous are not clearly distinguishable. Likewise, Lambert (2007) also points to the practical challenges for Choctaw sovereignty that rests on a citizenry defined by bloodlines. Sakha claims to sovereignty have used the language of cultural “self-determination,” but have actively avoided the sticky complications associated with ethnically-based sovereignty claims.

Sakha activists have at times sought to articulate an explicitly indigenous identity and to be recognized as such by indigenous political organizations. For example, in the early 1990s, Sakha representatives sought to attend initial meetings of RAIPON and to articulate their concerns with those of the small-numbered peoples (Murashko 2002). While their bid for inclusion in RAIPON was ultimately rebuffed, it suggests a recognition of the strategic importance of indigenous identity on the part of Sakha activists. Furthermore, as I explore in more detail in chapter 8, a fledgling environmental movement in the 1990s mobilized the language of global indigeneity in relation to struggles with the diamond industry. Finally, even where they have not invoked indigenous rights explicitly, throughout the 1990s, Sakha

activists relied on self-representations as indigenous (“indigenous formations”) to mobilize claims about sovereignty, human rights, national inclusion, environmental stewardship and recognition of cultural difference, all of which have been central to the international indigenous peoples’ movement.

This dissertation explores the various ways in which Sakha have and have not embraced an identity as indigenous since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the process, I seek to shed light on the heterogeneity of indigenous identity and to disrupt binary assumptions about the dichotomy between indigenous and non-indigenous. I follow the work of Li (2000) and De la Cadena and Starn (2007), who recognize that articulations of indigenous identity are neither natural nor inevitable. I add to this observation that articulations of indigenous and other identities are also often partial, emerging among some segments of a group at certain times and in certain contexts, while absent and/or rejected among others. De la Cadena and Starn point out that indigeneity has multiple meanings, refers to heterogeneous ideologies, and produces varied demands. Indigeneity also presents numerous stumbling blocks as groups wrestle with the possibilities and constraints of assuming an indigenous identity. Individuals pick and choose from its vast repertoire of meaning, and are also “hailed” by indigeneity in partial and heterogeneous ways.

### **Indigeneity in Practice**

The above discussion highlights the ways that indigenous and other kinds of identity emerge in large fields of difference and sameness (de la Cadena and Starn 2007). Mary Louise Pratt points out that becoming indigenous requires “the recognition that someone else arrived in a place and found them or their ancestors ‘already’ there” (2007, 398), and in this sense is dependent upon a primary distinction between settler and native. Nevertheless, as Pratt also observes, “indigenous” is only one among a range of identities claimed by indigenous groups and individuals that differentiate them from settler and other indigenous groups alike. In the Americas, New Zealand and Australia, the distinction between native and settler is a long standing, deeply sedimented relation. Elsewhere in the world, it is not so simple. As Nyamnjoh (2007) points out for Botswana, indigeneity is claimed not only by

“first peoples,” but by a range of other ethnic communities as well. Likewise, indigeneity in Russia is complicated by distinctions among indigenous communities that challenge a simple dichotomy between settler and native. The small-numbered peoples living in the Sakha Republic, for example, have argued that Sakha themselves represent a colonial population, arriving before the Russians but yet taking land that previously belonged to them.

As the above discussion might suggest, the Soviet state rejected the notion of indigeneness altogether, and instead privileged conceptions of nationhood and also a supranational Soviet identity, which some Soviet scholars came to articulate in terms of an emerging ethnonation, or “superethnos.” The emergence of this superethnos was facilitated by the supposed “friendship of peoples” that bound the different groups together. In this framework, Russian and other “settlers” were not colonizers, but rather “brotherly” peoples, facilitating local development or the expansion of collective Soviet power. Nevertheless, a distinction between Russians as “incomers” (*priezhie*) and all other groups as “locals” (*mestnyie*) has persisted in everyday imaginations, and has shaped understandings of interethnic relations as predicated primarily upon colonization of the East by Russians. In his work on Russian settler communities in Chukotka, Niobe Thompson (2009) describes settler senses of belonging in place and seeks to disrupt assumed dichotomies between settlers and natives. His discussion, however, points to the deep sedimentation of this dichotomy in local imaginations as settlers came to be seen as emissaries of Soviet modernity, bringing civilization to the wild East. The dichotomy between settler and native was reinforced in practice by Soviet policies that privileged settlers working in extractive industry through a system of incentives designed to attract immigrants to work in the harsh conditions of the North. This system of incentives also included extensive travel benefits that allowed settlers to travel back and forth from the “mainland” of Western Russia, and thereby maintain their ties to Western Russia. While the collapse of the Soviet Union destroyed this incentive system and in some ways allowed for the development of indigenous forms of belonging among settler communities, the distinction between settler and native has persisted as one of the most salient lines of difference throughout the North.

De la Cadena and Starn (2007) also note that there are tensions of difference and sameness in colonizer frameworks of indigeneity in relation to colonized peoples. Colonial governments throughout the world have used a kind of “evolutionary yardstick” to classify

native populations, and this became both imaginative and material practice. De La Cadena and Starn point to the example of Togo, in which the urban Ewe in the South appeared more civilized than the Northern Kabre, and so received missionary and educational attention, where the Kabre were conscripted for forced labor. This material and imaginative practice resulted in internal tensions that continue to shape Togo politics today. In a similar way, pre-Soviet, Russian colonial practice distinguished between “wandering,” “nomadic” and “settled” groups as representing distinct evolutionary stages (Slezkine 1994b). The “nomadic” Sakha appeared as relatively more civilized than the “wandering” Even or Yukagir, and, like the Ewe received greater missionary and educational attention than their reindeer-herding counterparts. Almost the same evolutionary yardstick was used by Soviet administrators, who reinterpreted it through a Marxist framework of historical development from tribal to feudal to capitalist societies. These distinctions continue to frame perceptions of ethnic difference in Russia.

Across the world, different ideological systems have recreated dichotomies between indigenous and colonizer along similar lines of primitive vs. civilized and have therefore shaped the emergence of a global indigeneity despite vast differences in historical experience. Parallel assimilation projects in Latin American, the US, and French colonies have all been predicated upon a distinction between indigenous peoples as “backward, rural and illiterate” versus modernity, urbanization and literacy as endpoints of development and progress (de la Cadena and Starn 2007, 8). Likewise in Muslim and Hindu contexts, indigenous “animists” were seen as backward others without a world religion. In various contexts, Marxists have also branded indigenous practices as “archaic” forms of false consciousness that obstructed class unity and revolution. Because of these parallel projects, indigenous peoples have found common cause in contesting assimilationism in all its guises, resulting in an assertion of the *right* to cultural difference. Diversity is recast as a positive goal rather than as an impediment to progress. Further, the possibility of multiple modernities and goals for development has been posed.

This movement has been complicated by the simultaneous emergence of multiculturalism as a strategy of management, containment and capitalist expansion without real change to racial hierarchy and economic inequality (Hale 2006). Hale points to this as a product of the end of the Cold War and the triumph of Neoliberalism, but Soviet narratives of

ethnic diversity suggest ways that multiculturalism as a management devise has not only served Neoliberalism, but also socialist state control. Partly because of the extensive use of multiculturalism (“friendship of peoples”) as official discourse during the Soviet Union, indigenous Siberians were poised to adopt neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism with the Soviet Union’s collapse. Although these were interpreted through a framework of Soviet multiculturalism, not simply taken at face value, but rather vernacularized. I return to issues of multiculturalism in chapter 5.

With the collapse of the USSR, native Siberian groups came to recognize themselves in the discourses of the international indigenous peoples’ movement. While an explicitly “indigenous” identity had not been articulated previously, the discursive frameworks of Soviet multiculturalism and assimilationism provided effective parallels with Euroamerican frameworks. Intellectuals belonging to the “small numbered peoples of the North,” wasted little time in making connections and establishing alliances with international indigenous organizations. David Koester (2005), for example, tells the story of a group of Itelmen, who sought UN assistance in the 1990s, predicated on notions of indigenous rights. He argues that in this case, the adoption of an explicitly indigenous identity was made possible by the ethno-territorial policies of the Soviet Union that created institutional forms and supported public means of expressing native identity. Itelmen indigeneity, he suggests, was a process of recognition rather than invention, and in subsequent interactions, global concepts were “vernacularized” and not simply adopted. Patty Gray (2005) depicts a similar process by which native groups in Chukotka mobilized networks established in conjunction with the Soviet state to articulate a kind of indigenous identity. She also emphasizes the incomplete nature of this articulation even among members of the small-numbered peoples of the North, in that a politicized indigenous identity seems to have taken hold only amongst a small group of urban intellectuals, rather than broadly among rural-dwelling indigenes, and even then has been relatively ineffective in challenging the Russian state.

Sakha indigenous identity is similarly complicated, and made even more challenging by their relatively privileged position in relation to the small-numbered peoples, and their position as “titular” nationality of an autonomous region. Nevertheless, there has been a similar process of “recognition” and vernacularization of the concept of indigeness among Sakha intellectuals and among Sakha more broadly. As the Russian Federation



dissolves Republic sovereignty and threatens to dissolve ethno-territorial administrative units altogether, we could see a strengthening of this recognition and a stronger articulation of indigeneity among Sakha. At the same time, increasing taboos on overt expressions of ethnic solidarity vis-à-vis the state for potentially separatist groups like the Sakha may constrain the possibilities for indigenous identity even further. In the chapters that follow, I discuss different aspects of Sakha indigeneity, the possibilities and constraints that shape these articulations. First, I introduce the study and my primary field site, Nyurba, a small, predominantly Sakha town in Russia's diamond province.

### **A Siberian Frontier Town**



**Figure 2: Nyurba's Lenin Square, decorated with flags in preparation for May 1<sup>st</sup> (Labor Day) celebrations**

The town of Nyurba sits quietly on the left bank of the Viliui River. No bridges stretch across the kilometer-wide river, preventing the town from expanding easily into the birch forests and marshes on the right bank. Along the river bank, the most important buildings in town—the town hall, the courthouse, and the headquarters of the diamond industry, ALROSA-Nyurba—look across Lenin Street on either side of Lenin Square. Lenin Square is a typical small-town Soviet relic, a dusty expanse watched over by the requisite statue of Lenin (Figure 2). The rest of the town lies to the north, a collection of predominantly wooden houses, lining streets with names like Soviet, October and Komsomol, representative of the still marked legacy of the region's Soviet past. The streets

themselves are rough, unpaved, and covered in potholes that force the increasing number of fragile, yet stylish “*inomarky*” (foreign cars), to slow down to almost walking pace in places. These streets and their potholes (Figure 3) were a kind of obsession for residents in their conversations with me, emblematic of the town’s remoteness and wildness—people seemed both shamed and yet somehow proud as they asked me repeatedly, “Do you have such roads in America?” They were justifiably incredulous when I tried to convince them that there are remote places in America with bad roads. I am not sure the rocky, rural roads of my native Virginia compare.

I arrived in Nyurba for my third and longest visit in April 2008, when the snows had melted but the river was still frozen. In preparation for the Nyurba springtime, the Sakha woman sitting next to me on the plane taught me the Sakha word for mud—*badraan*, which fast became part of my permanent vocabulary. This was the worst time of year in Nyurba, she explained, when the river was still frozen but the snows had melted, and everyone had to walk around in rubber galoshes. My host mother bought me a pair of galoshes soon after my arrival and I learned to imitate the locals by carrying my normal shoes in my shoulder bag. Despite the muddy roads (Figure 3 below), my friend Evdokia\* insisted upon my arrival that we seek out the first signs of summer, and I enthusiastically joined her on long rambling walks to the far edges of town. Outside of town, the *badraan* was hardly noticeable under the layers of fallen leaves and plant matter that carpeted the forest floor. Evdokia excitedly pointed out the first flowers of spring, snowdrops (*pod snezhniki*) or *n’urguhun* in Sakha language, which peek out from the cold ground before any other signs of spring. The weather changed rapidly in the coming weeks, and each new day brought additional signs of summer. Evdokia diligently pointed out each and encouraged me to record them in my ever-present notepad—the first spring bird, *sylgy chyychaakh*, the first visible buds on the birch trees, and the gusts of wind that presaged the momentous *ledokhod*, when the ice would break up on the river and be carried away by the currents in a matter of days.

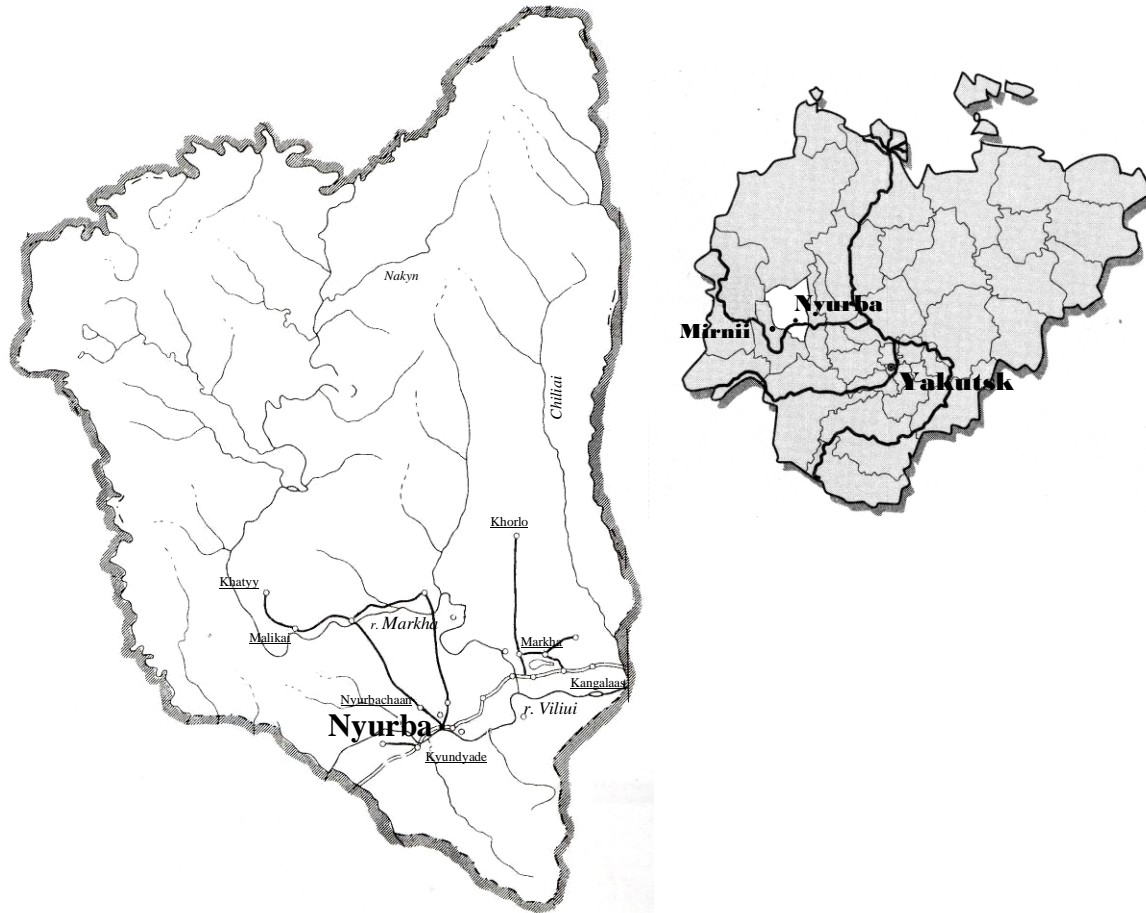


**Figure 3: Navigating the muddy streets of Nyurba**

I spent the following six months living in the town of Nyurba, one of the few predominantly Sakha “cities” in the Sakha Republic. The town is technically called a city (*gorod*) according to official categories, but whenever I would use the term, residents would laugh, pointing out the cows that wander the streets, the lack of paved roads and indoor plumbing. They suggested that it was really just a large village, rather than a true city. At the same time, as I explore in more detail in chapter 2, Nyurba has been at the center of industrial development in Russia’s diamond province, having hosted the Amakinskaia geologic survey, which led the search for diamonds in the Viliui basin until the early 1990s. As a result of Amakinskaia, Nyurba grew rapidly along with the diamond industry, reaching a peak population of almost 13,000 in 1989 (Sakha (Yakutia) Stat 2004). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the geologic survey disbanded and the town has shrunk steadily since then.

More recently, a Nyurba branch of the state-owned diamond mining conglomerate, ALROSA (*Almazii-Rossii-Sakha*—diamond of Russia and Sakha) was established after the mid-1990s discovery of two new mines in the north of the Nyurba *ulus*. While the mines are located on the Nakyn river (see Figure 4 below), which is quite far from the town (at least a 2 hour journey by car), the administration of the new branch, ALROSA-Nyurba, is housed in the town of Nyurba. The diamond company has already begun changing the face of the town, providing funds for a new school building and medical clinic, arguably bringing in much needed economic development. However, this has benefitted the population in uneven ways,

as reflected in a separate region of houses create for the specialists and other workers brought in to work the mines, engendering a new ethnicized spatial layout for the town. Residents have reacted in mixed ways, some arguing that diamonds bring money and jobs to the region and others, already feeling the unevenness of development, arguing that the majority of indigenous residents suffer the environmental impacts but remain excluded from the gains.



**Figure 4: Map of the Sakha Republic and Nyurba Ulus (modified from Ivanov 2006)**

This dissertation explores the ways that global discourses of indigeneity intersect with Sakha cultural politics, both in the Nyurba ulus and in the Sakha Republic more generally. Methodologically speaking, I situate my research within the “interpretive approach” to social scientific research which has questioned the assumptions of scientific positivism, especially with regard to human social behavior (e.g. Rabinow and Sullivan 1979). Rabinow and Sullivan write, “Culture, the shared meanings, practices, and symbols that constitute the

human world, does not present itself neutrally or with one voice. It is always multivocal and overdetermined, and both the observer and the observed are always enmeshed in it” (1979, 6). That is to say that there is no privileged position for the researcher outside of what he/she studies. They point to the hermeneutic circle in which inquiry itself is embedded within a particular set of meanings: “We are always in a cultural world, amidst a ‘web of signification we ourselves have spun” (1979, 6). As such, an interpretive approach rejects the idea that linear or other models of behavior or practice are locatable, but rather looks for meaning and to situate behavior within both historical and political context.

As an interpretive study, this dissertation has not sought a model for indigeneity, but rather to understand the multiple ways that discourses and practices of indigeneity circulate in the Sakha Republic. I began my research with a broad set of questions about the links between the global indigenous movement and Sakha cultural politics, but these evolved quickly as I spent more time in the region. I began by looking for emergent forms of indigeneity, and for ways in which Sakha cultural activists saw themselves in conversation with the global indigenous movement. I learned quickly, however, that while many Sakha cultural leaders saw their own history as similar to that of other indigenous groups, they were largely disconnected from and, indeed unaware of the transnational alliances and networks forged between other indigenous groups. In addition, the question of global indigenous identity was far removed from the daily experience of life in Nyurba. There was ample interest and discussion, however, about the impacts of contemporary process of “globalization” on Sakha culture. People actively debated the degree to which Sakha ought to embrace global cultural forms, and my very presence there as an American also helped to spark these debates. For many, I was a harbinger of globalization, especially as I was the first American or even foreigner that many had ever seen in person. In conversations with Nyurba residents, I came to frame my research questions in terms of “globalization” and its impacts on Sakha culture.

It is this process that Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) refer to as a kind tacking back and forth between theory and observation that characterizes ethnographic fieldwork. As a research practice, ethnography cannot be rigidly planned, but rather involves constant improvisation and revision of research frameworks. Furthermore, the pace of research is uneven, characterized by moments of intense activity and long periods of waiting and passive

observation. When I arrived in Nyurba for long term fieldwork, I initially struggled to fit myself into the daily life of the town, and most people I met had little understanding of what it was that I was doing there. I spent much of the first weeks reading about the town history at the library and at home, and also just helping around the house with the family who hosted me in Nyurba. I would occasionally take long walks with Evdokia, who I had gotten to know in earlier trips. I began to make connections with a broader circle of people by visiting the town museum, where I would sit in the one room library perusing the old manuscripts and books about Sakha culture and Nyurba history, and also chatting with the museum employees. The museum director, Boris Borisov,\* and his brother, Victor Borisov\* (real names), were passionate advocates of Sakha cultural revival and were virtual encyclopedias of information about everything related to Nyurba and Sakha history more generally. Through the museum, I was able to meet a wide range of people involved in Sakha cultural revival and other aspects of public life in Nyurba, who would regularly pass through the museum.

With the arrival of summer in late June, many Nyurba residents took vacation leave in order to work in their gardens, take trips to the forest for mushrooms and berries, and to cut hay. The family I lived with did not own cattle but they did have a large garden and were avid mushroom and berry gatherers. As such, I often accompanied the women of the household to the forest, learning about the different kinds of mushrooms and berries that grew near Nyurba, and in the garden, helping to plant seeds and turn soil for potatoes. In June, I accepted an invitation from a group of English teachers to help run the English camp at the school near where I was living. Each morning, for three weeks, I taught fourth-ninth grade children English, especially through songs and games. In the process, the children also helped to teach me Sakha language, and also about the lives of adolescents in Nyurba as we compared them with those in America. After the camp was over, I was invited to a more distant village, Malikai (Figure 4) to help with their English camp. This provided me with the opportunity to tour another area of Nyurba, and also to visit the remote village of Khatyy (Figure 4), where there was a widely renowned ethnographic museum.

In late summer, I also started working more closely with the regional “administration of culture,” the government agency that oversees cultural programming in the town of Nyurba and the surrounding villages, including museums, libraries, theaters, the music

school, and cultural performances at the “house of culture.” In an effort to help me with my research, the administration provided me with the use of their car in order to visit nearby villages. In these visits, I was often accompanied by Svetlana Gerasimovna, a Sakha woman in her fifties who was writing a book about “ethno-pedagogy,” i.e. traditional child-rearing practices, and wanted to interview elderly women from the villages. She accompanied me to conduct her own research and also aided extensively with introductions and in translating interviews conducted in Sakha language.

Prior to my 2008 trip to Nyurba, I had spent six months in Yakutsk, the capital city of the Sakha Republic, during which time I had studied Sakha language. One of the goals I set for myself in coming to Nyurba was to speak Sakha language as much as possible, a decision which had fairly profound consequences for my interactions with residents, most of whom were bilingual Sakha and Russian speakers. Choosing to speak Sakha, despite a lack of fluency, meant that I was significantly hampered in many of my interactions; I was much slower in establishing rapport with many people and was often prevented from probing deeply into many of the issues that interested me in conversations. In addition, it was often exhausting and days that otherwise might have been even more productive ended up being cut short due to fatigue. Nevertheless, the fact that I chose to struggle with the language rather than revert to Russian, a language I know well, opened many doors for me. Sakha residents were honored that I chose to learn the language, and especially in villages, where Russian is rarely spoken, they were more comfortable to speak their native language in interviews. In a number of cases, people sought me out because I was a foreigner who could speak their language. Furthermore, as I developed greater fluency, I was able to understand more and more of the conversations that surrounded me and also those that took place in the public sphere, which were usually in Sakha language. Although many of my interviews did take place in Sakha language, a significant number were also carried out in Russian with those who were equally comfortable in both languages. This allowed me to probe further into complex questions about identity, culture, and history.

Ultimately, this dissertation draws on 18 months of ethnographic research conducted in the Sakha Republic from 2005 to 2008 (see Figure 6 below). During this time, I spent ten months in the capital city of Yakutsk and eight months in the Nyurba *ulus*. I also traveled to the city of Mirnii for short trips, once in 2005 and once in 2008 (Figure 5 and Figure 6

below). In both Yakutsk and Nyurba, I kept daily field-notes of conversations and observations as residents enthusiastically led me around, proudly showing off their rich cultural heritage. In Yakutsk, I met with various governmental officials, university professors, leading cultural figures, and activists involved in the cultural revival movement. I also took classes in Sakha language and Sakha ethnography at Yakutsk State University, and met with students in the department of Sakha language and culture.

#### Research Sites

**Yakutsk:** Capital city of the Republic, population: approx. 400,000. It is also the educational and cultural center of the Republic.

**Nyurba ulus:** One of 18 administrative subdivisions of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). It is located in the Viliui River basin in the Western Sakha Republic, where almost all of the Republic's diamond deposits have been found. It is primarily an agricultural region populated by Sakha.

**Nyurba (town):** Administrative center of the Nyurba ulus, population: approx. 10,000. Predominately Sakha population with a significant incomer presence due to the history of diamond-related industry in the region.

**Mirnii:** The diamond mining center of the Republic, population: approx. 50,000.

**Figure 5: Research sites**

#### Timeline of Research

- February-May, 2005: Three months of MA research in the Sakha Republic
  - February-March, 2005: Yakutsk
  - March-May, 2005: Nyurba + 2 week trip Mirnii in April
- May-August, 2007: Three months of Pre-dissertation research in Yakutsk + 1 week trip to Nyurba
- January-Dec, 2008: 12 months of dissertation research in the Sakha Republic
  - January-April: Yakutsk
  - April-November: Nyurba
  - November-December: Yakutsk

**Figure 6: Timeline of research**



In Nyurba, I lived in town with a Sakha family and participated in everyday activities, working in gardens, accompanying friends to the forest, taking care of cows, cutting hay, cooking dinner and watching television. I also worked closely with the town's administration of culture,<sup>3</sup> observing and aiding in the organization of cultural events and discussing strategies to cope with coming administrative changes. I visited various local institutions, including grade schools, preschools and the local technical college, factories and farms, the Nyurba medical clinic, and village "houses of culture" where various cultural events were held. I attended town meetings and conferences, festivals, parades, and other public events. I spoke with local politicians and government representatives from various agencies, employees of the administration of culture, locally recognized "experts" on Sakha history and culture, residents celebrated as the "bearers of culture," and young "specialists" working in the town and involved in activities of the administration of "youth politics."

My analysis specifically grows out of 14 months' worth of daily field-notes, and a set of 35 formal interviews with Nyurba residents involved in the sphere of "culture" (teachers, artists, librarians, museum curators, employees of the administration of culture, and others), as well as many informal conversations with a range of Nyurba residents. I also draw on an analysis of regional newspapers published over the past ten years, and secondary historical and literary sources written in Sakha and Russia languages. Using this data, I analyze the significance of contemporary Sakha cultural revival efforts in the context of intensified resource extraction, state centralization, and globalization, discussing the ways that new discourses of indigeneity interact with historical modes that both facilitate and subvert Sakha marginalization.

One challenge that I encountered in writing this dissertation was in deciding whether or not to use pseudonyms in referring to interviewees and other acquaintances. In designing the study, I had planned to use pseudonyms in all cases, with the exception of public figures, whose particular identity was necessary in order contextualize their commentary. However, when I explained that I would use pseudonyms to refer to them in my work, many of my collaborators, interviewees, acquaintances, and colleagues insisted that I use their real names. This was especially the case for those who considered themselves and were considered by

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<sup>3</sup> The administration of culture is the governmental agency that coordinates cultural activity, programming and events in the ulus. Included under its jurisdiction are: libraries, museums, theaters, the music and art school, and all public festivals.

others to be local “experts” on history and culture. As I made inquiries in Nyurba, I found myself consistently directed to a handful of people, mostly middle-aged and elderly men, who were particularly respected for their knowledge about local history and culture. While some of them, like the historian Gerasim Vasiliev\*, had received scholarly degrees (in his case a correspondence “candidate’s” degree in history) and regularly published in scholarly venues, most had no formal degrees. Some, like Ivan Tankarov,\* the director of the Khatyy village museum, had little formal education at all and did not speak Russian. My relationships with many of these individuals were not framed as between an anthropologist and her “informants,” but as between a student and a teacher, or as I learned more about Sakha culture and language, as between colleagues. As such, my interviews with them, were each unique, “expert interviews,” distinct from the life history interviews and semi-structured interviews I conducted with others. As such, I have used their real names. I also use the real names of most of my interviewees who asked to be named. I use pseudonyms for a handful of interviewees, who did not specifically request to be named and to refer to informal observations and conversations. Throughout the text, I mark real names with an asterisk (e.g. Gerasim Vasiliev\*) on their first mention.

## **The Chapters**

In this dissertation, I attempt to chart the shifting meanings and emphases of specifically Sakha senses of national and ethnic identity, especially in relation to international discourses of indigeneity. In doing so, I examine civic rituals, religious movements, political discourses and beauty pageants. I highlight the workings of ethnicity, race, gender and religion and their construction through historical process in the production of contemporary, post-Soviet Sakha identities.

The second chapter looks at the concrete experience of indigeneity in the Sakha countryside, and considers the ways that Sakha living in Nyurba interpret their present day marginality through a past dominated by Soviet led industrialization. For rural Sakha, the withdrawal of the state in the post-Soviet period appears as a process of de-modernization, as once vibrant industries have declined and neoliberal economic policies make industrial agricultural almost impossible. In this context, Sakha have come to rely on traditional

subsistence practices in order to survive. For many, this process has appeared to reinforce the links between Sakha identity and marginality, especially as the settler population of the region declines. In this context, however, a number of Sakha have sought to assign new value to these practices. Through conscious projects of cultural preservation and vitalization, local activists have asserted claims to “ethnic worth” as a means of coping with and even combating economic and social marginalization. At the same time, new frameworks of Neoliberalism are presenting new challenges, and state socialism is being reimagined in terms of the possibilities for indigenous modernity and cultural worth that it offered.

The third chapter examines the links between indigenous discourses of sovereignty and the post-Soviet movement for sovereignty in the Sakha Republic, especially during the 1990s. In some ways, Sakha claims to ethnoterritorial sovereignty more closely resembled ethnonational movements in places like Quebec, Canada. At the same time, Sakha sovereignty advocates embraced images of indigeneity in asserting their rights to sovereignty, in part through active folkloric and spiritual revival. I argue that the Sakha case points to the overlapping discourses of ethnonational and indigenous identity articulations, suggesting ways that Sakha cultural politics are embedded within international discourses of nationhood and indigeneity. I also highlight the tension between the official declarations of civic-territorial identity and discourses of cultural self-determination. In the long-run, the Russian state has exploited this tension in reasserting centralized control. In recent years, any articulation of ethnic self-determination is cast as a pernicious nationalism and a request for special rights that threatens Russian national unity.

If the second and third chapters look at indigenous challenges to hegemonic state discourses, the fourth chapter highlights the variation within indigenous voices, turning to elderly Sakha embrace of Soviet discourses, and especially Stalinism. In examining elderly memories of Stalin, I argue that colonization is not simply a matter of colonial domination and indigenous resistance. Indeed, discourses of colonizers come to be actively embraced by the colonized. As the vast literature on subjectification has demonstrated, power works not through direct application, but through framing a system of incentives and the conditions for action (Foucault 2000). It is not a constraining force, but rather a productive force that produces certain kinds of subjects and actions. We can see this at work in the ways that elderly Sakha embrace the figure of Stalin and with him, their identity as Soviet subjects. At

the same time, as Li (1999) points out, the rationalities of rule do not have uniform results, nor are they always coherent and consistent, resulting in a variety of strategies, identities, etc. Stalinism was effective in producing a generation of loyal subjects, but in the long-run, subsequent generations of Sakha have questioned the differential ways that ethnic groups were incorporated by these discourses.

The fifth chapter examines tensions of indigeneity and ethnicity in light of multiculturalist discourses of national unity that are increasingly dominant in Russia. I show the ways that Russian state discourses of multiculturalism draw on both Soviet discourses and neoliberal discourses of multiculturalism. I draw on the work of Elizabeth Povinelli (1998) and Charles Hale (2006) to argue that both Marxist and neoliberal versions of multiculturalism ostensibly embrace diversity, but ultimately function as a hegemonic strategy of management that allows the state to contain and control that diversity. At the same time, as de la Cadena (2000) suggests, subaltern actors often work within these categories, but insert liveable meanings through dialogic struggle. Like indigenous intellectuals in Peru, Sakha intellectuals use the terms defined by the state, in this case cosmopolitanism, internationalism and friendship of peoples, but seek to insert alternative political meanings. Nevertheless, these meanings are increasingly restrictive as the state asserts more power, and it is difficult to distinguish Sakha political goals from those of the Russian state.

Chapter six broaches the complex terrain of gender and also race in a discussion of Sakha beauty pageants. In a context of increasing hegemony of state multiculturalist discourses, beauty pageants help to index ethnic diversity through a display of women of different phenotypes. At the same time, they also reveal fragmentation in the national imagination. They seem to insist that women of different ethnic backgrounds can compete on one stage according to trans-ethnic standards of beauty. Nevertheless, one particular phenotype is chosen to represent the collectivity at both the Republic level and at the national level. In this way, the contests point to the nested hierarchies that participate and often compete in the definition of essential femininity and collective identity. Ultimately, the contests highlight the confluence of gender, race and nation as the bodies of young women come to represent the nation in terms of a particular racialized community in post-Soviet

beauty contests. Contests over national identity are played out on pageant stages as judges and spectators navigate post-Soviet discourses of ethno-territorial belonging.

Finally, in chapter 7, I return to the theme of indigeneity in looking at the ways that discourses of indigenous harmony with the environment have circulated in the post-Soviet Sakha Republic. Once again, we can see indigeneity as a kind of positioning, in which a range of actors draw on different kinds of images and rhetorics in asserting collective identity vis-à-vis the diamond and other extractive industries.

## Chapter 2: Tradition and Tractors—Cultural Revitalization and Indigenous Marginality in the Sakha Countryside



Figure 7: Akhmed surveys his hay stacks

On a sunny day in August 2008, I rode with Akhmed Dmitriev\* and his ten-year old son out to their hayfields in their bright orange Soviet-era car. The trip took almost two hours, across unmaintained forest roads overgrown with grasses and shrubs. The car was an indispensable tool that allowed them to return home regularly during haying season. Even so, he and his sons would often stay at the pastures, where they have a small shelter and a hole dug into the ground for storing meat and milk nearer to the permafrost. When we arrived at the hay fields, his older sons were already out cutting hay. Three recently killed ducks hung on a tree outside the shelter. Akhmed and his younger son proudly showed me around the camp, including the rabbit traps they had set up around the fields and the rifles they kept handy in case a duck happened by. He explained that even his youngest son was an accomplished hunter. Akhmed also showed me a series of wooden haying tools, almost all of which he had made himself, and carefully repeated the Sakha terms for each so that I could jot them down.

As he showed me around the fields, Akhmed gave me a crash course in traditional hay harvesting, which takes place during the two month period from July to August. Cutting hay by hand, as Akhmed and his sons do, involves swinging a heavy iron scythe at grass more than half as tall as a person, with a rhythmic circular swing. The grass initially is left to lie where it falls. Once it dries—typically after two non-rainy days—the hay is gathered into small half-spherical piles, shaped as such so that any rain will run off the sides rather than soaking the dried grasses. These piles are then brought together into one large pile, which is fenced off to keep roaming cows and horses from prematurely eating the winter reserves (Figure 7). Akhmed explained that each full-sized cow eats around two-three tons of hay a winter. This means that a family like the Dmitrievs must gather more than twelve tons of hay to feed their six cows. As such, each day of the two-month hay season is crucial, especially since unexpected rain can delay gathering. Sakha villages often appear empty in the summertime as almost all the able-bodied men are gone to the fields, which are usually located many miles from the villages. In one village nearer to the diamond mines, people explained that some fields are so far that some villagers hitch rides in helicopters headed to the mines. There, the men construct temporary villages, called *sayaalyk*, and stay there all summer in an echo of the semi-nomadic (“transhumant”) lifestyle of their ancestors.

Akhmed was clearly proud of his family and their adherence to traditional subsistence practices. He and others attributed his family’s success in large part to their adherence to a traditional lifestyle. Not only were he and his wife able to feed their large family through subsistence farming, but their children were self-confident and successful in school. Even as they went on to college in the city, for example, their knowledge of Sakha tradition provided a strong sense of identity and self-worth. Akhmed, like other Sakha cultural revival advocates, insisted that cattle farming and hunting/gathering were quintessentially Sakha practices, fundamental to Sakha national identity, and that these practices provided a crucial foundation for the development of Sakha youth in the present. In this way, Sakha cultural tradition emerges as an importance source of both economic self-sufficiency, and psychological well-being, especially in relation to the current poverty and social problems afflicting the Sakha countryside. At the same time, Akhmed also impressed upon me the difficulty of “traditional” cattle farming as we walked around the hay fields. “If I had the money,” he said, “I’d buy a tractor;” or, even more telling, “During the Soviet period, this

was all done with machines."<sup>4</sup> Similar sentiments are expressed by many rural Sakha, especially young people, who often dream of moving to the city and escaping the difficulties of contemporary rural life. These sentiments offer a glimpse of some of the tensions surrounding attempts to assign new value to traditional subsistence practices, in which pride in cultural tradition and indigenous identity is often confounded by desire for “modern” comforts and conveniences. That is to say that quintessentially Sakha practices are a source of economic survival and cultural pride, but they are also inextricably linked with contemporary forms of marginality, more often the result of necessity than conscious choice.

Comprising the so-called “fourth-world,” indigenous peoples occupy a structural position at multiple margins of the global economy. As I explore in the introduction to this dissertation, indigeneity as a transnational identity and subject position is conditioned by a set of material and imaginative practices that posit Euroamerican modernity as the end point of development and progress and indigeneity as its opposite (de la Cadena and Starn 2007a). As Johannes Fabian (2002) has famously argued, indigenous cultural difference has long been assumed to represent a previous stage of historical time, a condition of pre-modernity, and this assumption has conditioned their uneven structural incorporation into the global economy. Despite centuries of interactions with settler communities and states, indigenous peoples are still imagined as occupying a space external to, and, in fact, *prior to* Euroamerican modernity. As a result, present-day forms of indigenous marginality appear as problems of achronicity, and are often construed as a result of their *exclusion* from processes of development and “modernization” associated with state expansion, not as an integral part of these processes. Cowlishaw (2003), for example, points to the ways that contemporary violence in Australian aboriginal communities is often equated with historical forms of aboriginal violence; as a result, the links between ongoing forms of state oppression and contemporary violence are elided. Similar claims circulate amongst Russians in the Sakha Republic to explain contemporary forms of violence in Sakha communities, despite the fact that the violence that plagues rural communities is only a very recent phenomenon.

Indigenous activists in Australia, the Sakha Republic, and elsewhere in the world, have sought to counter these discourses by asserting the positive value of indigenous cultural

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<sup>4</sup> These are not direct quotes, but paraphrases from the notes I took during our conversation.



tradition, both as rich and beautiful culture and as a potential source of economic and social independence. This also allows them to externalize their “problems” as deriving from outside sources. Like Akhmed in the above vignette, activists in various local contexts throughout the world point to the ways that traditional subsistence practices help to provide economic security in contrast to the volatility of the labor market (Nadasdy 2003; O’Neil and Elias 1997), and they also highlight a distinct indigenous culture that provides a sense of psychological self-worth in opposition to present-day forms of socioeconomic marginalization (Rogers 1999; Warren and Jackson 2002b). At the same time, contemporary reliance on traditional subsistence is also seen as the product of marginality, and is therefore bound up in emerging class distinctions. As Gordillo (2004) has suggested in the case of the Toba of Argentina, indigeneity is also a kind of ethnicized class identity; traditional subsistence is both the result of poverty, and represents collective strength and resilience. In the interplay of marginality and cultural revival, the opposition between “primitive” and “civilized” is reworked and reimagined (see also, de la Cadena 2000).

In Nyurba and Siberia more broadly, the relationship between discourses of indigeneity and modernity is shaped in large part by the history of Soviet-led industrial development, in which the indigenous population took an active role. As we shall see, the encounter with global capitalism in Siberia was not experienced as a moment of development and modernization, but rather as a kind *de*-modernization, in which the state withdrew and left behind the ruins of a once vibrant industrial economy. In the present, Sakha marginality is seen in relation to a recent past in which Sakha were central participants in processes of Soviet-led “modernization,” and Sakha subsistence practices themselves underwent a form of modernization through the introduction of industrial agricultural techniques. The contemporary “return” to pre-industrial modes of subsistence turns the teleology of modern progress on its head as increased reliance on traditional practices are seen in terms of a temporal reversal, i.e. global capitalism as a period of post-development rather than pre-development. Some Sakha cultural activists have turned this into a critique of modernity itself, arguing that present-day social problems represent the limits of modernization. In these discourses, cultural revival emerges as an aspiration for balance, a means to bring together tradition and modernity, difference and homogeneity, ecological health and industrial development. In the process, however, it also reproduces these oppositions.

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between indigenous marginality and cultural revitalization in the Nyurba ulus. First, I examine the specific forms of marginality that affect contemporary Sakha, and give rise to increased reliance on traditional subsistence strategies. Then, I look to the ways that cultural revival advocates seek to reframe Sakha tradition in terms of resiliency and sustainability against the inevitable limits of “modernization.” Sakha cultural revival can be seen in conversation with the “grammar of analogous contrasts” that opposes indigeneity and modernity—both proceeding from and contesting indigenous marginality.

## **2.1 “Demodernization”**

A host of post-Soviet ethnographic studies have sufficiently unseated widespread assumptions of “liberation” that was supposed to have followed the collapse of the Soviet Union (Berdahl 1999; Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002; Verdery 1996, among others). Drawing on material collected during the particularly turbulent 1990s, ethnographers have pointed to the profound experiences of trauma, dislocation and disruption that followed the collapse of state socialism both in the center (Shevchenko 2009; Ries 2002; Rivkin-Fish 2005) and on the periphery (D Anderson 2000; Bloch and Kendall 2004; Rethmann 2001). While liberal economists celebrated the triumph of capitalist modernity, the so-called “transition” to a market economy was experienced by many across Russia not as a moment of progress, but rather as a kind of “de-modernization” due to the withdrawal of state structures and supports and subsequent industrial collapse (see also, Humphrey 1998). This was felt with particular intensity throughout the Russian North, where the system of northern subsidies that sustained a network of industrial towns and their surrounding villages collapsed. Many of the communities that had come to depend on these subsidies found themselves newly isolated (see also, Thompson 2009). Simultaneously, the extensive system of state and collective farms that had organized agriculture and other kinds of food production throughout the North also unraveled, unable to remain profitable without state supports. Much of the settler population returned to western Russia, but those who remained behind, including a

substantial native population, struggled with the aftereffects of economic collapse, including crumbling infrastructure, high unemployment, and exorbitant inflation. Throughout the Russian North, dependence on traditional modes of subsistence, including reindeer herding, cattle/horse husbandry, and hunting/gathering increased as local populations found themselves cut off from systems of industrialized food production (see also, Pika and Grant 1999).

In the Nyurba ulus, the biggest blow to the regional economy was the departure of the Amakinskaia Expedition, the geologic survey that had operated out of the town of Nyurba since the 1950s. As the starting point for all diamond exploration in the Viliui River basin, Nyurba had emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century as a bustling cosmopolitan town with a growing, ethnically-mixed population of native Sakha and settlers, or “incomers” (*priezhie*), who worked for Amakinskaia and related industries, including transportation, shipping, and construction. The town was connected by air, land, and water to the industrial centers of Siberia. Residents, both incomer and native, regularly traveled to other parts of the USSR for vacation and for study. The Amakinskaia expedition transferred out of Nyurba in 1992, and took with it a significant portion of the non-Sakha “incomer” population. The departure was also followed by the collapse of transportation, construction, shipping, and agricultural industries. Almost overnight, it seemed, Nyurba was transformed from a frontier of Soviet industrialization into a remote, provincial town with crumbling infrastructure and high unemployment. Production plummeted, factories closed, and airlines and buses cut services to the region and within it.

One of the most vivid indicators of the contrast between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras is the decline in mobility both within the Nyurba ulus, and from Nyurba to other regions of Russia and the former USSR. There are now far fewer flights into and out of Nyurba than there were during the Soviet era, when regular flights ferried Nyurba residents to the villages, and also to other Siberian centers like Irkutsk and Khabarovsk. In the present, rising transportation costs make flying even to Yakutsk (not to mention Moscow) prohibitively expensive. In 2008, for example, a round trip plane ticket from Nyurba to Yakutsk cost almost as much as a round-trip ticket from Moscow to New York City. For people from the villages, who must reach Nyurba first, it becomes even more difficult, especially in the spring and fall when the rivers are not navigable and the muddy roads often impassable by

car. I was told the story of an elderly man, for example, who walked all day to reach the Nyurba medical clinic in town from one of the more distant villages as the river was not navigable and the roads un-passable. Today's transportation options stand in stark contrast to the mobility possible during the Soviet Union, when cheap flights allowed Nyurba residents to take regular vacations on the Black Sea or in central Russia. Increasingly, the high costs of transportation mean that despite the two months of vacation-leave most Nyurba residents receive, few are able to travel outside of the ulus.<sup>5</sup> This underscores the ways that the expansion of global capitalism not only integrates places and peoples, compressing space and time (Harvey 1989), but it also creates distance and new forms of provinciality as once connected places fall away from the corridors of high-speed travel.

An additional ramification of post-Soviet "demodernization" has been a noticeable demographic shift as the town of Nyurba comes to appear more firmly "Sakha." Statistically, the Russian population dropped from around 14% of the population in 1989 to around 10% in 2002, while the Sakha population rose from approximately 80% to almost 90% (Sakha (Yakutia) Stat 2005). This shift was further enhanced by the increased usage of Sakha language in public events, such that many festivals, concerts, and other events are now carried out entirely in Sakha language, where Russian was the primary language of public space in the past. For this reason, the shift was experienced as even more pronounced than the statistics suggest. For example, Vasilii Mikhailovich,\* a Sakha man in his seventies, insisted that the incomer population was more than half the population of Nyurba during the Soviet era, while there are almost none now. His wife, Luanna Vasilievna\* also confirmed this impression: "Before, if you went anywhere, to the cafeteria, to the port...everywhere, only Russian women sat there, and now it's all local women there. All the salespeople were incomers, now they are all our girls." At this same time, this shift has also been accompanied by the increasing segregation of incomer and local residents as most incomers are housed in new, ALROSA-built housing on the edge of town. Previously, Russians had lived interspersed throughout the town. One Sakha family that I came to know well often described the Russian families that used to live on their street. They explained that their children would

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<sup>5</sup> In a rare exception, one young mother, Lena, and her family won a contest for successful young families and was able to travel with her husband and pre-teen son to the Black Sea. Such contests are a common way for the local government to promote family life and reward exemplary young couples.

play together, and the Russian children would learn Sakha language this way. Now, however, there are only Sakha living on their street, and it appears that fewer of the Russian residents of Nyurba understand Sakha language—a fact that is cause for considerable resentment among local Sakha.

Like elsewhere in the Russian North, the broader industrial collapse was accompanied by agricultural decline as state and collective farms had been tasked with providing food to the expanding industrial population. With neither state subsidies nor a significant consumer base, large state farms struggled to remain viable. Many dissolved altogether, distributing their assets amongst former employees; others, like the state farm Nyurba, reorganized into non-state cooperatives and continue operations in a much reduced form. Neither former state farms, nor the newly privatized individual farms have been particularly successful, especially due to increasing competition from cheaper, imported meat and dairy products. American chicken legs (thigh and drumstick),<sup>6</sup> for example, were a famously cheap source of meat in 2008 and farmers I spoke with complained that people would buy these instead of the more expensive locally-raised beef. As elsewhere in Russia, in the villages of Nyurba, visitors can still see the crumbling barns and empty greenhouses that stand like skeletons, bearing witness to the former importance of collective farming in the region (Figure 8). For many, like Akhmed in the opening vignette, farming has become more of a subsistence strategy than a significant source of income (cf. Crate 2003). This is additionally enhanced by difficulties in obtaining access to tractors and other mechanized equipment. As such, farmers, who previously operated tractors and other mechanized equipment as employees on state farms, now often cut hay by hand, using home-made tools modeled on those hanging in museums.

Susan Crate (2006) describes this new economy as the “cows and kin” model of subsistence, where Sakha in both urban and rural areas rely on subsistence activities, either their own or those of relatives, in order to provide their basic food needs. As I begin to suggest above, this new economy is a kind of mixed blessing, simultaneously providing a modicum of economic security and also representative of contemporary Sakha

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<sup>6</sup> Called “Bush’s legs” after the first President Bush, American chicken legs (thigh and drumstick) first appeared in Russia in 1992-3 as part of US charity efforts following the Soviet Union’s collapse. For this reason, they have long been a symbol of American imperialism (see also, Bloch 2004, 8) and have been the object of periodic trade disputes between Russia and the US (see, for example, Schwirtz 2010). In 2010, Russia temporarily banned American chicken altogether.



**Figure 8: Abandoned barns in the village of Kyundyade**

marginalization. Partly because of the difficulties associated with rural life, urban migration has accelerated as young people seek both education and wage labor opportunities in cities like Mirnii and Yakutsk. These urban migrants, however, often retain close links with relatives in the countryside, who provide food and other forms of assistance, like childcare (young parents often send small children to stay with their parents and grandparents in the villages). And yet, despite these forms of reciprocity, there is a growing tension between rural and urban Sakha as rural Sakha (and new urban migrants) are increasingly stigmatized as uncouth and backward by longer-term urbanites (see also, Argounova-Low 2007a). These new forms of class distinction complicate attempts on the part of cultural leaders to reframe traditional subsistence practices as a source of cultural pride by reinforcing the binaries that link rurality and backwardness vis-à-vis urbanity and modernity.

The contemporary forms of marginality experienced by rural Sakha and other indigenous Siberian communities have come to resemble those of indigenous groups in other places. Anthropologists working with indigenous communities in all continents have documented similar forms of poverty, instability, and exclusion from the gains of capitalist development and they have argued that this marginality partially constitutes their subject position as indigenous.<sup>7</sup> That is to say that indigenous communities have been incorporated into the global economy as the “fourth world,” imagined as the final preserve of pre-

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<sup>7</sup> See Cattelino (2009) on the complications that arise from indigenous wealth. She argues that contemporary frameworks of indigenous rights as rooted in their poverty and marginality present a catch-22: indigenous rights to land and resources are posed as a solution to endemic forms of poverty, but once poverty is eliminated, these rights are called into question.

modernity; their marginality both proceeds from and helps to justify ongoing processes of exclusion and discrimination. Time and again, the expansion of global capitalism increases the flow of consumer goods into a region and produces novel forms of integration through dependency on these goods and the wage labor needed to obtain them. On the frontiers of global capitalism, however, stable employment opportunities are few and far between. New forms of consumption are confounded by new forms of inequality. In Nyurba, traditional modes of subsistence, like hunting and gathering, and also subsistence cattle rearing provide a significant source of food security that has helped rural communities to survive in the face of marginality. At the same time, indigenous poverty comes to be naturalized as settlers and industry simultaneously abandon the region and the newly de-modernized countryside appears increasingly “Sakha.” Sedimented binaries between indigeneity and modernity are reinforced.

The post-Soviet decline seems to frustrate the dominant logic of modernity, progress, and globalization, which prophesies increasing connections between places and the increasing integration of remote places into the folds of the global economy (Harvey 1989). While television and the internet bring a constant stream of images and news from far-away places, and stores are stocked with goods from around the globe, many Nyurba residents feel more disconnected from the world than they did in the past. The presence of these images and goods only seems to reinforce this sense of distance as many residents can only dream about owning the new commodities. A common post-Soviet quip I heard went something like this: “during the Soviet period, we had plenty of money, but nothing to buy; now, there is plenty of stuff to buy, but no money.” For this reason, Sakha philosopher (and Nyurba native), Ksenofont Utkin, argues that the world is not facing a “crisis of civilization, but rather its historical dead-end” (2004, 200), emphasizing the apparent emptiness of the promises of “modern progress.” This idea resonates with many Nyurba residents, who have watched their once growing, cosmopolitan town turn into a kind of rural backwater. For long-time residents this has been a difficult process, especially when they contrast their present difficulties with memories of past progress. Elderly Sakha, in particular, look back to the Soviet period with nostalgia and are effusive in their descriptions of the region’s former industrial glory and of the achievements of collective farms. In the following subsection, I

examine some of the specific memories of Soviet-led development in Nyurba in contrast with the present-day marginality.

### 2.1.1 The Vigorous Development of Nyurba

As I point out in the introduction, the town of Nyurba is today officially designated as a “city” (*gorod*), a designation that is met with irony by residents. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the town’s population has continued to decline, decreasing almost 20% since 1989, largely due to the outmigration of settlers.<sup>8</sup> For long time residents, the town seems to have shrunk drastically. Many contrasted the current tranquility of the town with the noise and activity of the past. Vasilii Mikhailovich, introduced above, for example, was a former driver for the geologic survey and vividly described the difference between Nyurba in the Soviet period and now:

SH: Could you tell me about some of the changes in Nyurba since your childhood?

VM: This was [the time of] the vigorous [*burnoe*] development of Nyurba. This was closely connected with diamond exploration. There was a mass influx of specialists from the west, geologists. Nyurba was the center of the diamond industry. [...] The very center of the geological prospecting expedition was here during Soviet rule. The most intensive study anywhere of diamond deposits and the robust [*sil’noe*] development of geologic prospecting were connected with this. This was also connected with aviation, which was very well-developed here. There was a helicopter base, which provisioned all of Siberia. And the gas industry, everything was serviced by these helicopters [...] and not only helicopters, but also airplanes flew out of that base. There were a lot of workers in the aviation industry too. The expedition had a huge workforce—service personnel. Therefore, all kinds of people came here, more than the native people. More than half the population was incomers here, Russians.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the most recent statistics published on the website of the government of the Sakha Republic, the population of Nyurba was approximately 9,600 in 2010 (<http://sakha.gov.ru/node/12057>, accessed 4/20/11). This is down from 12,024 in 1989, and 10,309 in 2002 (Sakha (Yakutia) Stat 2004).



SH: This was before...?

VM: This was during the Soviet Union. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, the search teams immediately ceased their work. And in connection with this, aviation also stopped. You see? Now already it's quiet. Before, there would be three or four helicopters at a time. Voom, noise. They fly there, and there. Take off, arrive. [...] It was like that before. Simply noise. Noise. Now you see how it's just quiet. Before, people didn't even pay attention to the airplanes. Now you see one fly and [everyone says] oh it's probably going to Nakyn, or maybe to Mirnii.

SH: But before it was constant noise...

VM: During the Soviet Union. That was an interesting place to live. You see?

As we talked, Vasilii Mikhailovich periodically stopped as if to listen, pointing out the utter quiet of the town. For him, the lack of noise symbolized economic decline. Like many Nyurba residents, Vasilii Mikhailovich remembered the noise and activity of the past as exciting, indicative of the growth and progress engendered by the Soviet state. He enjoyed meeting people from different places; he pointed out multiple times that he was the only Yakut on his prospecting team. Other Sakha are happier with the quiet and tranquility of the present and also with the more "Sakha" face of the town, but almost everyone who remembered the town before Perestroika expressed similar regret for the town's decline as an industrial center.

Vasilii Mikhailovich was born in 1939, the son of poor Sakha peasants (*kholkhozniki*), who struggled to feed him after the difficult years of World War II. As a child, he lived primarily in a residential school, or *internat*, where he was fed and clothed, and where he was able to get a basic education. Because of this experience, Vasilii Mikhailovich was deeply grateful to the Soviet state. As he put it, "Fortunately, it was the Stalin era...I am deeply grateful to the leaders of that time that there was an internat." Where residential schools in North America have been the object of considerable criticism by indigenous leaders for their role in projects of forced assimilation and for their mistreatment of indigenous youth (Nadasdy 2003, 41-48), Siberian residential schools are often

remembered nostalgically, as an example of the care extended by the Soviet state to its most vulnerable citizens (Bloch 2004). Indeed, as Bloch (2005) emphasizes, this care contrasts sharply with the lack of state support for rural communities in the present. Like the elderly Evenki women Bloch interviewed, Vasiliï Mikhailovich remembered his experience in the internat fondly; for him, the residential school was not significant as a means of forced assimilation, but rather as relief from the hardship of rural life. Furthermore, the experience allowed Vasiliï Mikhailovich to learn Russian far better than some of his contemporaries who went to school in the village. He was proud enough of this fact that he insisted upon conducting our interview in Russian, and repeatedly highlighted his ability to speak Russian fluently in our conversation. At the same time, unlike North American native children who often lost the ability to speak their native language through attending residential schools, Vasiliï Mikhailovich still speaks Sakha language as his primary language. For him, learning Russian and attending the internat opened new possibilities, but did not cut him off from his roots. This is not to deny the fact that many Sakha do feel that Soviet-led Russification and subsequent processes of industrialization did cut them off from their roots, but many, especially those who passed their childhoods in the Stalin era (pre-1953) maintain a strong allegiance to the Soviet state and insist that Soviet and Sakha identity were not at odds.

After attending school for five years, Vasiliï Mikhailovich took a driving course in Nyurba and went to work for the Amakinskaia expedition. For him, the arrival of Amakinskaia was a fantastic moment of progress, and it marked the beginning of “vigorous development” in Nyurba. Other elderly Nyurba residents echoed similar sentiments in relation to Amakinskaia. Galina Petrovna, a retired English teacher in her late sixties, recalled the “arrival of the Russians” in Nyurba as a kind of enlightenment. She described how sophisticated the new settlers seemed, and how all the Sakha youth looked up to them and emulated them. She herself only wanted to speak Russian as a teenager. After being involved in education and experiencing the declining use of Sakha language, Galina Petrovna is now an outspoken advocate of Sakha language education. She is also critical of the impact of Soviet-led industrialization on Sakha culture. Nevertheless, she credits the arrival of Amakinskaia with inspiring her to study Russian and then English, and to leave Nyurba in order to attend college in central Russia. In this way, Amakinskaia broadened her horizons, and helped to shape her own process of growth and education.

A great many Nyurba residents, especially those born in the Stalin era, like Vasilii Mikhailovich, remain committed communists and are intensely nostalgic for the Soviet period, which they remember as an exciting time of growth and optimism (I return to this idea in chapter 4). They remember the post-World War II era as a time of constantly increasing living standards as electricity, cars, aviation, radio and television made their way to the most remote villages. Even those who are now more critical of the Soviet system like Galina Petrovna, find themselves looking back to the late Soviet period with nostalgia in relation to the post-Soviet realities of economic and social marginalization. Despite the myriad inequalities that characterized relations between the settler and indigenous populations, the diamond industry brought extensive state investment in the region's infrastructure. In addition, the socialist state ensured that everyone could have a job, that orphans, the elderly, and the disabled would be cared for, and that basic needs like housing, clothing, and food would be met. On top of this, the town of Nyurba was growing exponentially from the 1950s until the late 1980s with constantly expanding industry and transportation links with other industrial centers of the USSR. For many local residents, the decades from the 1950s to the 1980s appeared as a rapid process of modernization, fulfilling the promises of the Soviet state regarding increasing living standards, geographical and cultural integration, and technological advancement. The collapse of the USSR and the subsequent economic decline were therefore experienced as a kind of de-modernization, as if development suddenly halted and the whole region took a step backward.

At the same time, there is much ambivalence about the progressiveness of Soviet industrialization, even amongst those who celebrated it. For example, I was told on a number of occasions the story of Ivan Telen'kov,\* the former head of the Nyurba state farm head, who was widely celebrated as a leader and visionary. In the 1950s, he led a project that drained the nearby Kochai Lake to create more hay pastures, an accomplishment that was celebrated as a fantastic feat of engineering. Later in life, however, Telen'kov lost his memory and went mad. Many people with whom I spoke in Nyurba attributed his madness to his interference with nature, hinting that the spirit of the lake took its revenge on him. As Vasilii Mikhailovich explained, "Yakuts say this: To drain a big lake is a huge sin, because a lake also has its own soul. For this reason, it took vengeance on him. In old age he lost his mind, this Telen'kov. Very great person, very talented individual." Telen'kov was celebrated

for his role in promoting industrialization (and “modernization”) through the irrigation project, but his story often serves as a kind of warning about the potentially dangerous consequences of interfering with nature. Like Vasilii Mikhailovich, the same individuals would tell both sides of this story, pointing to the complicated relationship of contemporary Nyurba residents to Soviet-led industrialization. Furthermore, as I explore in the following section, the unraveling of censorship restrictions in the post-Soviet period led to series of revelations in the early 1990s about the disastrous ecological consequences of diamond-related development in the region. This has led to a widespread wariness on the part of many Sakha regarding industrial development, and has also facilitated attempts to revalue traditional subsistence practices. In the present, Sakha tradition is both seen as an unfortunate consequence of “de-modernization,” and as sustainable practice and ecological wisdom vis-à-vis the destructiveness of Russian-led development.

## **2.2 “People are More Valuable than Diamonds”**

In the early 1990s, new diamond deposits with jewelry-grade stones were discovered in the north of the Nyurba ulus. This led to the creation of a Nyurba branch of the diamond industry, ALROSA-Nyurba in 1997. As many explained to me, residents were hopeful that ALROSA-Nyurba would bring a new wave of diamond-related development and give new life to the region as a diamond mining center. Reports suggested that the new pipes would be some of the most lucrative in Yakutia, and agreements signed with the ulus administration promised that ten percent of the revenues would go directly to the ulus (NN Alekseev 2006). In the long run, the pipes have proved to be some of the most lucrative in the world (Kurnev and Neustroev 2009). However, the expected economic development has not been forthcoming. The population of Nyurba appears to have stabilized—the official population remained approximately the same from 2008 to 2010,<sup>9</sup> and the economic volatility of the 1990s has given way to a kind of stability as residents grow accustomed to the realities of low wages and high unemployment. Nevertheless, most of the jobs created through

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<sup>9</sup> <http://sakha.gov.ru/node/12057>, accessed 4/20/11.

ALROSA-Nyurba have gone to new immigrants, the majority of whom live in the growing settlement of Nakyn adjacent to the mines, which they can reach by helicopter from Mirnii (avoiding the town Nyurba altogether). Furthermore, according to local residents, the diamond industry does not purchase local beef, but rather imports American chicken legs, or beef and fish from other parts of Russia where it is cheaper to produce. Likewise, the promised investment in the region has not been realized at least in the minds of residents. Many insisted that every resident was personally supposed to have received money from the diamond industry, but that they have received nothing. Further, the Viliui regions' share in the company has dwindled from 10% in the 1990s to less than 2% in the present (Kisileva 2007).

Nyurba residents are extraordinarily skeptical about the benefit of the diamond industry to the region. Stories circulate about the incredible profits produced at Nakyn, and this further cements the widespread sense of cynicism regarding the industry. For example, one Sakha man in his late fifties, Dmitrii, told me one day that the supply of diamonds at Nakyn is vast, but that none of the money trickles down to the people:

There are not just small diamonds, but big, jewelry diamonds that bring the most amount of profit, but the region does not receive any of that. All that they write about it is nonsense. The ten percent is no longer even given to the government, or if it is, that money simply disappears. Sure, they have built some buildings...a hospital, a few schools, but what is that compared to destroying the ecology of the region and the health of the residents? Every person should have received some compensation, personally, for the harm it is doing, but no one receives anything.

For many Nyurba residents, the repeated insistence by ALROSA that the company is “socially responsible” (*sotsial'naia otvestvennaia*) is simply unbelievable. Representatives of ALROSA-Nyurba insist that the company invests a significant amount of money in social infrastructure. The former head of the company, for example, explained that ALROSA money has built at least one “object” a year in the Nyurba region since 2000, including a number of schools and a new medical clinic. When ALROSA itself was created, a social investment fund, called SAPI, was also formed to channel funds toward social projects (Yakovleva and Alabaster 2003). Politicians still tout the success of these projects, yet

residents have responded cynically. Some, like Dmitrii, insist that very little of the money reportedly invested in social infrastructure actually ends up in these projects. Others insist that this money is almost nothing in relation to the huge profits reported by the company. As Grisha, a thirty-something Sakha man working in the sphere of culture, explained:

Although we live in a very rich country, we are simultaneously very poor. I would like to note this. For example, they mine diamonds here, in the Nyurba ulus. And every day in offices of ALROSA-Nyurba, they count two million dollars. The income, err...percentage from this going to Nyurba is only 600 million rubles. I consider this a drop in the sea. And roads are falling apart, the infrastructure is very poor.<sup>10</sup>

Generally speaking, it becomes difficult to evaluate the impact of the diamond industry. The daily experience of Nyurba residents is one of struggle. With no plumbing, no filtration system, poorly maintained roads and a host of social problems, like crime and alcoholism, that are seen as directly related to local poverty and unemployment, residents react to the diamond industry's insistence that "people are more valuable than diamonds" with skepticism. Development in Nyurba appears to be elusive, something that occurs far away, and impossible to access. Many echo Grisha in pointing out that they live in a rich country, but are very poor.

In addition to issues of economic inequality, the presence of the diamond industry raises concerns about environmental degradation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, residents were shocked to learn for the first time about the disastrous impacts of diamond-related development on the ecology of the Viliui region. Post-Soviet environmental assessments have documented a wide range of past environmental offenses connected with the development of the diamond industry that have had serious repercussions for the ecology and health of the region (Crate 2009; Pavlov and Afanas'eva 1997; Yakovleva and Alabaster 2003). Grisha explained these to me in our interview, continuing on from his statement quoted above:

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<sup>10</sup> At 28 rubles to the dollar in 2008, that would mean that the percentage earned by the Nyurba ulus would be around 20 million dollars. In 2008, ALROSA-Nyurba reportedly produced \$678 million worth of diamonds (Kurnev and Neustroev 2009). Kurnev and Neustrov claim that ALROSA-Nyurba contributes almost half of its annual income to the local budget in the form of taxes and dividends from its 10% stake in the company.

In relation to ecology, a lot of harm was done during the Soviet era. There were the atomic explosions [...] in the headwaters of the Markha River. And a whole lot of poisonous substances were released into the Viliui River because of the flooding of an entire forest in order to build the hydroelectric station. They didn't cut the forest down, but simply flooded a whole section of it, a very large section with villages. They evacuated the people and flooded it. This substance...because of this, the river has been very polluted for a very long time, for thirty years. The rotting trees emit a poisonous substance, what is it called? Phenol, yes?

As Grisha explains, the creation of water reservoirs for the Viliui hydroelectric station from 1969-1973 resulted in high levels of phenol contamination from decomposing trees. Furthermore, until 1986, the diamond industry disposed wastewater by pouring it directly into the watershed, releasing a number of contaminants, including thallium and heavy metals, like iron, copper and lead (Crate 2009). According to Petrova and Kolosova (2000), drinking water contamination has led to various health disorders, including immunological problems, and decreased liver function among residents of the Viliui region. In addition, a series of underground nuclear tests were conducted by the Soviet government in the 1960s and 70s, in part for the creation of diamond industry holding ponds (Crate 2009). At least two of these resulted in catastrophic levels of above-ground radiation contamination. According to Susan Crate (2009), this is one of the most serious nuclear accidents in history, and plutonium levels in the soil in 1990 approximated those in Belarus and the Ukraine after Chernobyl.

Not surprisingly, these revelations produced significant public outcry, and also fueled doubts about the progressiveness of state-sponsored industrialization. The diamond industry along with the government of the Sakha Republic promised to address the environmental concerns in part through the creation of a non-governmental foundation, called Sakhaalmazproinvest, or SAPI, financed by ALROSA, which would address socio-economic and environmental problems in the areas affected by diamond mining (Yakovleva and Alabaster 2003). In the long-run, however, SAPI has been beset by various mismanagement problems and has been replaced by a fund directly under the control of the Republic government. Furthermore, Yakovleva and Alabaster (2003) point out that most of the funds have actually been spent in oil and gas development rather than in environmental rehabilitation or protection. Crate (2009) also underscores the long-standing plea for effective

water filtration system on the part of the region's residents, which has not been met. In my own fieldwork, Nyurba residents also repeatedly complained that there was no water filtration system in the Sakha dominated areas of Nyurba, including the town, while Russian settlements, including Nakyn and other diamond-mining towns, did have water-filtration systems or imported bottled water.

In the present, ALROSA-Nyurba insists that the newest mines use no chemicals in processing the diamond ore and that the Nyurba mines are some of the cleanest in the world. Ecological reports released by the government indicate that fish stocks in the river are increasing and that the levels of cancer are no higher in the Viliui region than elsewhere. In an interview with me, the head of the Nyurba ulus, Vladimir Prokop'ev, acknowledged that diamond development carried out during the Soviet Union was catastrophically harmful for the region, but insisted that the ecology of the region is quickly righting itself: "I went fly fishing last weekend, for example, and there were so many fish...I can see [the return] with my own eyes." When I asked Dmitrii later about this, he responded dismissively, "What fish? I haven't seen them..." For many Nyurba residents, the reports in the media do not correspond to their daily perceptions. However, without access to independent ecological assessments, there is little they can do. An overwhelming sense of cynicism seems to pervade the issue of environmental protection, especially in relation to the diamond industry as local influence wanes and the federal government has taken control. I return to the issue of ecological activism and Sakha identity in chapter 8, but here I emphasize the multiple ways in which diamond-related development has led to additional forms of socio-economic marginalization even as the industry proclaims its motto: "people are more valuable than diamonds."

### **2.3 New System of Labor Payments**

While I was living in Nyurba in 2008, the town's administration was preparing to implement the New System of Labor Payments (NSOT), a federal law intended to introduce market-based principles into the administration of social sectors of government, especially educational and cultural affairs. Compensation for teachers, librarians, health care workers,



and artists employed by the government would now be based on educational levels and performance levels rather than on tenure of service. Performance levels would be defined quantitatively and, in some cases, by the number of people served. The Russian government drew inspiration for the new system from European and North American models of accountability in government administration (professors and students at Yakutsk State University, for example, spoke of the impending shift to the “European” university system). Indeed, we can see parallels with the current emphasis in US public discourse on “accountability” in education, especially following the introduction of No Child Left Behind, where professional qualifications and quantitative “performance” indicators (i.e. student test scores) are coming to be emphasized over tenure and more qualitative measures of performance.

The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is indicative of the general sense of despondency with which many residents have responded to these new reforms:

As I was reading today, Valya came in. After chatting for a few minutes like always, she threw me 2 pieces of paper and commented, nonchalantly, “Beginning July 1<sup>st</sup> I’ve been fired.” She spoke so matter-of-factly, that I didn’t immediately understand the import of what she was saying. But it soon became clear that this was a totally unexpected, potentially catastrophic problem. Apparently, they have a new director at the medical center where she works who has decided to lay off everyone without medical education. Valya, who has no formal medical training, falls into this category despite having worked at the clinic for 21 years. Furthermore, as she argued, her duties don’t involve anything that requires medical training—she sits at the reception desk, provides soap and toilet paper, and that’s just about it. Her opinion is that the director simply wants to be able to hire her relatives in their place. Despite the news, Valya’s mood was surprisingly calm, and she seemed to take everything in stride. I asked, “Aren’t you in shock?” She laughed bitterly, “Yes, I’m in shock, but what can I do?” and shrugged her shoulders.

Valya was one of the early victims of economic restructuring attendant with the introduction of NSOT. When I asked her later what she would do, she answered simply, “look for another job, I guess.” She took a paid vacation during June and July and was then re-hired by the clinic, but now worked in the coat check with a significantly diminished salary that was far

from a living wage. Fortunately, her husband worked as an electrician at the airport and, with the help of produce from their gardens and buckets of berries and mushrooms gathered that summer, they were able to make ends meet.

Valya's story was typical as state institutions were restructured in the name of accountability. Throughout Russia, this program of neoliberal reform replaced measures like tenure of service with quantitative measures of supposed "quality." However, as Marilyn Strathern (2000) argues, these measures undermine trust in the experiential and implicit knowledge of experts; tacit knowledge and skills that cannot be conveyed through concise reports and centrally-defined performance indicators are disregarded. In the post-Soviet context, this ends up reinforcing a widespread and overwhelming sense of irrelevancy attendant with neoliberal reforms, represented by the common lament, "we are not necessary" (*nam ne nuzhny*). This stands in stark contrast to the Soviet economy, in which labor was in short supply and managers angled to get more workers (cf. Verdery 1996, 22-23). Involuntary unemployment was non-existent as everyone who wanted to work was guaranteed a job. The most recent wave of reforms has increased the sense of irrelevancy that has been fundamental to the experience of post-socialism as people struggle to cope with the realities of unemployment.

In Nyurba villages, where few salaried jobs exist outside of government positions, many feared that the new system would bring about a reduction in the number of government jobs and hasten the decline of villages. The fate of village schools was of particular concern as teachers would be compensated based on the number of pupils they taught. In many villages, teacher-student ratio was already small. Teachers that I spoke with in villages and in Nyurba prophesied that the new system of compensation would mean that teacher salaries in villages would plummet and that schools in the smallest villages would not be viable at all and would close. Grisha explained it to me this way: when schools close, young families with children will not stay. Villages with no children have no future. For many of my interlocutors, the New System of Labor Payments portended a new period of rural decline. This also threatened efforts to revitalize and revalue traditional subsistence practices as the basis for a renewed Sakha cultural autonomy.

## 2.4 Cultural Rights and Neoliberalism

The apparent weakening of the state, of course, is not unique to post-Soviet Russia, but is one of the central features of the current neoliberal era of global capitalism. From South America to Southeast Asia, states are decentralizing governmental functions and dismantling state-run social safety nets in the name of promoting competition and efficiency. At the same time, as Charles Hale (2005) has pointed out, Neoliberalism is not only about economic reform, but also encompasses a broader political doctrine that promotes individual liberties and basic human rights. In some ways, the devolution of control by state governments has produced political opportunities for indigenous groups, who have taken advantage of new multiculturalist discourses to assert rights to cultural difference (e.g. LT Smith 2007). International organs of Neoliberalism, including the World Bank, the IMF and the InterAmerican Human Rights Court have upheld these rights, often in opposition to reluctant state governments. Nevertheless, as Hale further argues, neoliberal multiculturalism has had deeply ambivalent results for indigenous groups, effectively “driving a wedge between cultural rights and the assertion of the control over resources necessary for those rights to be realized” (Hale 2005, 13). That is to say that indigenous groups have had some success in opposing particular assimilationist projects and in land claims, but these successes have had the paradoxical effect of further entangling indigenous groups in socioeconomic relations with nation-states and undermining economic independence (see also, Nadasdy 2003). In many cases, as Hale argues, these successes have served to reinforce racial and ethnic hierarchies and to naturalize indigenous poverty in terms of cultural difference.

In post-Soviet Russia, market liberalization was also accompanied by the assertion of cultural rights as the Soviet narrative of gradual “merging” (*slianie*) of ethnic groups was effectively contradicted by the seemingly sudden proliferation of ethno-national movements after perestroika. In Russia, autonomous regions like the Sakha Republic declared sovereignty using the language of multiculturalism and cultural rights. As I explore in more detail in the following chapter, Sakha cultural activists were initially optimistic about new opportunities for “independent cultural development” following the declaration of sovereignty. As we have seen, however, the simultaneous introduction of market reforms, including the abolition of price controls and the liberalization of markets, seriously

undermined much of the regional economy, especially in rural areas where the bulk of the Sakha population was concentrated. As such, the expected period of Sakha “cultural flourishing” did not come to pass, despite important symbolic victories like the declaration of Sakha language as a state language equal to Russian and the revival of the summer solstice festival Yhyakh. In 2008, many residents of Nyurba insisted that participation in Sakha cultural traditions in fact declined in the 1990s, even as political freedoms for the expression of identity expanded. In the long run, regional sovereignty has also been gradually eroded as the Russian Federal government reasserts control over resources; these political freedoms have also been increasingly circumscribed despite continued lip-service to the idea of multiculturalism on the part of federal politicians. I return to this last point chapter 5.

In theory, post-Soviet political liberalization expanded opportunities for the expression of Sakha cultural identity. At the same time, as I argue above, economic liberalization led to new forms of socioeconomic marginalization that have disproportionately affected Sakha communities. As a result, like Hale argues for indigenous groups in Latin America, Sakha lack the economic resources necessary to exercise new cultural rights. Increased marginalization appears to go hand in hand with the exercise of Sakha cultural rights, and this has the effect of reinforcing stereotypes of Sakha backwardness. That is to say, Sakha marginality is naturalized, appearing to stem from inherent cultural deficits as opposed to being the result of particular economic and political relations. Neoliberal ideologies of equal opportunity and meritocracy further help to efface the political roots of Sakha marginality by insisting upon the achievement of a level economic playing field. Sakha cultural leaders, however, have sought to contest the naturalization of Sakha marginality by insisting upon the viability of Sakha cultural practices in the present. They have argued that Sakha marginality is not the result of inherent cultural deficits, but rather stems in part from the disintegration of cultural tradition. While the source of this disintegration is contested—some insist that it began with the assimilationist agenda of the Soviet Union, others with the advent of perestroika and market reforms—advocates of cultural revival generally agree that contemporary marginality can be ameliorated through the revival of “ethnic consciousness” (*natsional’noe samosoznanie*) and the revitalization of cultural tradition.

In this way, they echo the struggles of indigenous groups across the circumpolar North to combat the effects of socioeconomic marginalization through a revaluation of tradition and identity. A recent collaborative project on the part of anthropologists and Dane-zaa people in British Columbia, for example, created a virtual museum of Dane-zaa cultural practices and language.<sup>11</sup> As Patrick Moore explains, “The project reflects the priorities of the Doig River First Nation, including their desire to assert their cultural practices and rights in response to extensive oil and gas development in the region” (2008). Similarly Nelson Graburn describes the ways in which Inuit museums have reimagined their distant past in terms of a “golden age” of Inuit culture vis-à-vis the recent past, characterized by “loss of autonomy, loss of traditional culture, introduction of white diseases, alcohol drugs, and an inherently unfair monetary economy” (1998, 28). In this way, they seek to disentangle the effects of marginality from indigenous identity, and reassert senses of self-worth. Marginality and its attendant social problems appear to result from cultural *loss*, rather than being integral to identity.

In the following subsections, I describe contemporary cultural revival efforts in Nyurba. In a context of despondency and cynicism, a segment of active Nyurba residents in conjunction with the Nyurba administration of culture, strive to revive and celebrate local tradition as a means of asserting the value of Sakha identity. Like Akhmed in the opening vignette, they are intensely proud of their cultural heritage, and see Sakha cultural tradition as a potential way to combat the pervasive despondency and cynicism that leads to high rates of alcoholism and violent crime. The employees of the Nyurba museum work on their exhibits, and also write articles and collect oral histories from the region’s residents. Nyurba folklorist Rosalia Nikolaevna heads a folklore ensemble that performs traditional ceremonies, songs, and dances. The Nyurba theater troupe regularly performs adaptations of Sakha legends and folktales, as do amateur groups in the town and outlying villages. Professional and amateur organizations all work together to organize various festivals throughout the year, culminating in the summer festival of *Yhyakh*, which is always begun with an elaborate opening ceremony that includes a reproduction of a shamanic ritual and various national dances. All of this is painstakingly documented by the administration’s seemingly ubiquitous archivist, a

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich/english/index.html>

small man in his mid-70s, who discreetly slips in and out of folkloric performances with his ever-present video camera, recording all of the festivities for posterity.<sup>12</sup> In the following subsections, I briefly describe two such efforts: the preschool Bichik, which orients its curriculum around the Sakha epic poetry tradition, the *Olonkho*; and the Center for Children's Arts led by a tireless pedagogue who insists upon the relevance and necessity of locally-rooted knowledge and tradition.

#### 2.4.1 Bichik: the Olonkho Pre-School

From early on in my fieldwork, Sakha acquaintances in Nyurba encouraged me to visit a pre-school in a village immediately adjacent to the town of Nyurba. The pre-school, Bichik ("design" or "painting" in Sakha language) was well-known in the Nyurba ulus and had a long waiting list of parents hoping to send their children there, largely because of its innovative curriculum centered around the *Olonkho*, the Sakha epic poetry tradition that is now recognized by UNESCO as a masterpiece of world intangible heritage. The *Olonkho* itself traditionally was performed as a kind of improvised story-telling. Like other epic poetry traditions—the Finnish *Kalavala*, or Kyrgyz *Manas*—the action takes places in mythological time, and revolves around the exploits of warrior-heroes, called in Sakha language *Botuur*. In pre-Soviet times, a traveling bard, or "*olonkhosut*," would be invited by individual families to entertain them during the long winter nights. Many people told me that such bards would often perform for days at a time, stopping only briefly to sleep and eat. In return, they would be provided with food and shelter. When performing, the *olonkhosut* sits cross-legged with hands clasped on his/her<sup>13</sup> knees. The story is narrated in a fast-paced, chant-like cadence, while the dialogue between characters is sung in unique singing style called *toiuk* that originates deep in the diaphragm. Both the narration and singing styles require considerable strength and many years of practice in order to master. The language of the

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<sup>12</sup> All of his recordings are housed in a small office in the administration of culture. He played for me a number of old videos and recordings of Yhyakh and other cultural events from the Soviet era and the early 1990s. As far as I could tell, few people use these in the present with the possible exception of the archivist himself, who has written a handful of books about the history of folklore in the Nyurba ulus.

<sup>13</sup> In the past, *olonkhosuts* were almost always male. In the present, however, it is performed equally by men and women.

Olonkho is also unique, involving a particular kind of poetic syntax and vocabulary. In the present, there are only a handful of “true” olonkhosuts remaining, i.e. those who compose their own Olonkho.<sup>14</sup> Most Olonkho performances today are memorized versions of the epic recorded by folklorists in the early twentieth century.

I visited the pre-school one day in early June and was met by the school’s director, Tamara Leonidovna,\* an energetic woman in her forties or fifties, who (to my surprise) had light brown, wavy hair and light-colored eyes; I had spoken to her on the phone in Sakha language and expected her to look quintessentially Sakha with straight black hair and almond eyes. I learned later, however, that while her father was Russian, she was primarily raised by her Sakha mother and as such, she spoke Sakha language as her native language and fully identified as Sakha. This was a relatively common phenomenon in Nyurba, and underscores the fluidity of identity. The day I was visiting the school was a holiday and so most of the 120 children who attended the pre-school had stayed at home. Nevertheless, at Tamara Leonidovna’s request, a few curious parents sent their children so that they could meet the American guest, and perform a short Olonkho skit for me. A few of the other teachers, or “care-givers” (*vospitateli*) were also there to help show me around and explain the goals of the program.

Bichik has operated since 1989, when political liberalization allowed for the establishment of programs that focused exclusively on national identity, without a strong socialist counterpart. Tamara Leonidovna explained that Bichik’s program was centered on the Olonkho as the axle around which the rest of Sakha culture and worldview revolved. She described their goal as “the assimilation by the children of their ancestors’ highest values, their worldview, perception, and their attitude toward life.” Through teaching the Olonkho at this age, the school hoped the children would come to “acknowledge their national identity.” Tamara Leonidovna told me the story of one girl who had studied at their school, but had gone on to lose interest in Sakha culture. She was mostly interested in Russian music or American culture, and she went to England in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade to study. When she was

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<sup>14</sup> The reasons for this are varied. Many people told me that the Olonkho was outlawed during the late Soviet era, although I was never able to confirm this for certain. There were certainly state-sanctioned Olonkho performers at various points during the Soviet period and many people told me about seeing performances of the Olonkho as children. It seems likely that the epic tradition was variously evaluated by different administrations in different places and times, and that without the traditional economy/social milieu in which it emerged, there was little incentive to invest resources in learning it.

there, however, she began to remember all that she had learned in preschool and even performed parts of her traditional culture for her friends there. Her mother then came to Tamara Leonidovna and thanked her for the experience that she had provided for her daughter so that she was able to return to her culture, so to speak. In this way, the school hopes to provide a foundation for children rooted in their “native culture” (*rodnaia kul'tura*), such that even as they encounter other cultural influences, they will retain a strong sense of rootedness and identity.

Children attend the school from age two-and-a-half to age seven, the age at which children begin elementary school. In the classroom, the Bichik teachers use various materials to both teach the children plots of recorded Olonkho and to encourage them to create their own. For instance, they showed me a series of illustrations that they would present to the children, who would then create story lines associated with them. The children would also draw their own pictures as they imagined the characters they heard about. As Tamara Leonidovna explained, this also helped to develop their language skills, enrich their vocabulary, and develop their creative faculties. She also explained that the teachers have no explicit “curriculum,” but rather teach through improvisation. The children are given complete freedom to do whatever they want, she said, and so they wander through the various rooms, playing with the dolls and working with the teachers as they like.

Tamara Leonidovna also explained that through the children, they help to teach parents as well, many of whom know little about their native culture. The language of the Olonkho is especially valuable for them as it contains a rich vocabulary that has been largely lost in day-to-day conversation, especially due to the influence of Russian. Her commitment to this program is rooted in her own experience of culture loss. She remembers, for example, her mother singing bits and pieces of Olonkho in her childhood. However, at that time, she explained, there was Russification in the schools: all the textbooks and materials after fifth grade were only in Russian and national culture was not taught at all. As such, she and the others in her generation lost much of their connection with their ancestors. What was left, however, they remember and now they have the opportunity to develop it. The teachers all teach from their own experience, she explained. They don't want to academicize the subject matter, but rather to allow the ideas and values to develop in the subconscious realm, so that “it is right in the blood of their heart.” She and the other teachers hope to transfer the bits and



pieces of culture that they remember from their own childhoods in an organic way, not as facts and information, but as a way of being in the world.

In this way, Tamara Leonidovna and the other teachers at Bichik hope to instill a variety of moral values associated with Sakha traditional worldview. One room was dedicated to nature. Tamara Leonidovna explained that Piotr Martynov, a locally famous ecologist who died some years before, used to come and work with the children. She pointed out that the children did not simply learn the different biomes, what kinds of plants and animals are found where, but the values associated with nature and one's native surroundings. They learn various rituals and customs for interacting with the environment so that respect for nature would be in their subconscious. She emphasized that they were not teaching the children a "religion" (*religiia*), but rather a "belief system" (*verovanie*). In this way, she echoed the assertions of many spiritual revival advocates who distinguished Sakha polytheistic spiritual traditions from "religions" like Christianity, Judaism or Islam, suggesting that Sakha spirituality was less about specific dogmas and more about a way of being in the world, something that was in the blood and which connected them to their ancestors and their surroundings. For this reason, she also emphasized the importance of traditional foods, which she contrasted with the unhealthy diets of the present. In this, she echoed a widespread belief in the healing power and healthiness of Sakha foods described above.

Finally, Tamara Leonidovna highlighted their efforts to fight "xenophobia and closed mindedness," and to teach the children to learn early to accept and respect difference. She showed me one room, where they had a giant map of the world, which they used to teach the children about other places and other peoples. They first learn about their culture and then go outward from there, learning about America (especially Native Americans—"because they are like us"), and a few countries in Africa, England—because that is the center of world culture and home to the world language—and some other places. They also had a room with a scale model of the galaxy, showing all the planets, to begin to teach the children about outer space.

Ultimately, Tamara Leonidovna was trying to instill in the children a sense of identity and belonging to the local landscape. She brought together ecological aspects as well as the cultural philosophy of the Olonkho in order to emphasize this connection with the ancestors.

At the same time, she also wanted to preempt the possibility of any kind of xenophobia. As I explore in the following chapter, Sakha cultural revival has been accompanied by accusations on the part of Russians of tending toward chauvinism. That is to say that local Russians often feel that Sakha cultural pride is not simply an affirmation of identity but is aggressive and denigrating of others, especially Russians. By contrast, Tamara Leonidovna emphasized that cultural revival instills a kind of global perspective in which Sakha children imagine themselves as one nation among many. In this way, she sought to preempt accusations of chauvinism, and to emphasize that cultural revival should not be seen as potentially dangerous to any group (and by extension, to the existing power relations). She also emphasizes the ways that Native Americans are similar to them, referring both to widespread beliefs about actual cultural and genetic links, but also to their shared indigeneity.

#### **2.4.2 Center for Children's Art**

Arkadii Spiridonovich\* is a self-described teacher, philosopher, hunter, historian, father, poet, and political activist. He takes each of these roles seriously as part of his dedication to his people, his town, and his family. His wife jokes that he gives so much to everyone else that he has nothing left for himself. Indeed, he was always working on some project, and when I would show up at his door, he put everything aside to give me his full attention. When I explained that I was interested in the relationship between globalization and Sakha culture, he even typed up a five-page essay with his thoughts on the subject, a translation of which I include in Appendix A. Arkadii Spiridonovich is passionately committed to Sakha linguistic and cultural revival. He himself is a relative newcomer to the town of Nyurba; he came here only as an adult, moving from the town of Lensk, an industrial “Russian” town to the south where he grew up. He apparently learned to speak Sakha language fluently only after his arrival in Nyurba. His wife, a Nyurba native, told me that now he speaks Sakha language better than most native speakers.

His primary role is as the director of the Nyurba Center for Children's Art, a supplementary education center dedicated to teaching technical arts and practical skills. These include skills like metallurgy, wood-working, hunting, and also wilderness survival

skills. Importantly, the center's pedagogy is fundamentally rooted in Sakha culture, and is aimed toward providing children with locally relevant skills that are not emphasized in normal schools. What is most interesting about his school is the ways in which it integrates Sakha tradition with modern technology. That is to say that the school does not only teach "traditional" skills, in the sense of pre-industrial modes of subsistence, but rather is fundamentally geared toward preparing children for economic self-sufficiency in the modern world. Children learn to work with motors and build simple engines, in addition to learning traditional Sakha woodcarving techniques, and how to build rabbit traps.

The curriculum strongly reflects Arkadii Spiridonovich's own views on child-rearing and pedagogy, which are in turn rooted in his evaluation of the source of contemporary social problems. As he explained to me over the course of many conversations in the summer of 2008, the fundamental problem, for him, is that people have forgotten and/or disregarded cultural knowledge, i.e. the wisdom of their ancestors, accumulated over many generations of interaction with the local environment. He explained:

To be educated, that means to know well the native language and the traditions and customs of one's people, and also to be in harmony with nature. The Sakha people have this parable: If a person doesn't know his ancestors, then they call him *ileen*, lost spirit, and they do not recognize him as a person. If a person does not know his native language, then they call him *munгнаakh*, they take him as a full-fledged orphan. And if a person does not know the customs and traditions of his people, then they call him *n'yuken*, such a person they call an uneducated and dim person, even if he has a higher education diploma.

For Arkadii Spiridonovich, education must be rooted in the accumulated knowledge of one's people. This knowledge, unlike that taught in schools, is tied to the local environment and to the specific natural and social world each person and each child inhabits:

And for the Nyurba center of children's scientific-technical arts, the first-order task is the development of the technical creativity, abilities, and skills of the Yakut child, taking into account their national-regional particularities. In this way, in teaching a child of Yakut nationality, an approach is necessary that corresponds with his particular way of thinking and that considers his world-view.

For this reason, like Tamara Leonidovna, Arkadii Spiridonovich argues that Sakha survival in the present-day requires an upbringing that links children with their ancestors and with their local landscape. If they pay attention to this knowledge, they will learn important survival skills, and they will also learn to be self-confident and proud of their identity as Sakha. I quote at length from the text he wrote for me:

The Sakha people considered the laws of nature sacred. Therefore, for them the first thing in raising the next generation was the question of learning to work hard [*trudovoe vospitanie*], then professional preparation and introduction to society [*vykhod k lyudiam*], and only after this, independent life. We see such an approach even among wild animals. For example, for wolves the first thing in raising their young is to be obedient and to unquestioningly follow the orders of their leader. Then they taught hunting technique and how to behave oneself in the pack. Only after that, did the beasts release their young to independent life. All of this is called the school of survival. And our present-day system of education has not tried to follow this path. As a result we have uneducatedness. Young people even after having studied so many years in school still have not been able to receive the proper vocational training. They have never been in a labor collective, they haven't seen how people work in a collective. They don't know what work is. After school, they have gone to institutions of higher education and have received professions of various specialties. But in real life, even though they have higher education and a specialty they are entirely unprepared, illiterate people. Without practical education, there is no real education. Escaping the laws of nature, violating the customs and traditions of the people, interfering with the development of one's native language, you don't give a person a real education.

Arkadii Spiridonovich's efforts at the Center for Children's arts highlight the attempt to revalue traditional knowledge by contrasting it with the supposed superficiality of scientific knowledge. Sakha ancestors, he argues, knew things that scientists have only recently discovered. In this way, he echoes arguments made by other indigenous communities regarding local knowledge that contradicts that of science. Nadasdy (2003) for example, argues that what is called "traditional ecological knowledge" on the part of Yukon native people is fundamentally incompatible with scientific approaches to knowledge, because it is not simply a collection of facts, but "one aspect of broad cultural processes embedded in

networks of social relations, values and practices” (121). Similarly, Tim Ingold (2000) points to specificity of local knowledge, suggesting that humans learn skills through interactions with their environments, which are in turn shaped by human activity. These authors call attention to the multiple forms of implicit knowledge gained from years of living in and interacting with the local landscape that are particularly important for those who depend upon their immediate environs for subsistence.

### **2.4.3 Healthy Lifestyles and Cultural Revival**

The efforts of Tamara Leonidovna and Arkadii Spiridonovich are representative of broader efforts on the part of Sakha cultural revival advocates to rekindle continuity with the past and to revitalize Sakha cultural tradition. In these efforts, they hope to lift peoples’ spirits and make them proud of their identity as Sakha people. For them, the important thing is to make links with the ancestors. They locate processes of “modernization” as artificial breaks in the development of the ethnic group, brought in by Soviets (Russians) and westerners, and look to pre-Soviet traditions as a source of wisdom and collective identity that will allow them to live more harmoniously with their environments. In this way, they do not seek to wrest political control over resources from the Russian government, etc. but rather to distinguish “their own” practices from those of the Russian state. For this reason, discourses of indigeneity that emphasize ecological wisdom and a rich cultural heritage are important as a means to revalue local identities and practices. This is similar to processes in Nunavut, for example, described by Graburn (1998), whereby indigenous intellectuals have sought to cleanse indigenous identity of its negative stereotypes. At the same time, it is also similar to process described by Marisol de la Cadena (2000) in Peru in which “culture” is celebrated as a kind of sanitized realm distinct from the economic conditions of poverty and rurality. This culture is compatible, then, with middle-class Russian values and can be assimilated into contemporary multiculturalist discourses. I describe these in more detail in chapter 5, but I emphasize here the contradictions of Sakha cultural revival as it simultaneously contests and embraces hierarchical frameworks of ethnicity, class and culture.

Ultimately, cultural revival advocates position their efforts as a solution to various social problems imagined as resulting from the break in tradition caused by Soviet-led modernization, and in this way distinguish an essential Sakha identity from these manifestations of “culture loss.” As Viktor Borisov,\* a guide at the Nyurba museum, explained:

Yakuts are experiencing a kind of break. Young people don’t listen to their elders, children don’t listen to their parents. Everything is very mixed-up (*koloblenno ochen’ sil’no*). There is a large number of deaths, homicides and suicides, 90% connected with alcohol. Very early births among girls, teenagers even. All of this would not be this way if Yakuts had their former traditions. Like in the tsarist time, before the revolution.

He argues that crime, alcoholism, and other moral failures are the result of a lack of continuity with the past. By rekindling continuity with pre-Soviet tradition and with the wisdom garnered through traditional subsistence practices, they seek to make people proud of their identity and also capable of survival regardless of the availability of wage labor. Cultural tradition would provide a focus and a kind of moral code to those who struggle with alcoholism and the psychological effects of unemployment and poverty. For example, in a 2010 grant submitted to the European Union for cultural program development, the Nyurba administration of culture justified the work of their folklore ensemble by presenting it as a solution to contemporary social problems:

The loss of spiritual orientation during the time of social-economic transition of the 1990s has seriously impacted the current generation of young people. An ideological vacuum has forced people to reexamine their traditional roots in order to formulate an idea of national revival as one of the paths to survival. In the ranks of the Nyurba folklore collective “Constellation of Talents,” there are talented people, who have problems due to the social instability and suffer from alcoholism. Artistic interaction with people of the older generation in the folklore collective opens their virtuous core, allows them to express positive spiritual-moral qualities, and construct a path of spiritual cleansing, empowerment, and positive self-esteem.

In this grant, the employees of the cultural administration frame their work expressly in terms of promoting physical and moral well-being of the Nyurba population. This particular grant was linked with the current focus of the Russian government on healthy lifestyles (*ZOZh—zdorovyi obraz zhizni*). For this reason, they felt the need to specifically mention alcoholism in the grant. At the same time, they also see their mission as intimately tied up in the spiritual health of the region, and from this also follows the physical health of the region. For the Nyurba administration of culture, national culture is not necessary just because it is national, not simply for the preservation of diverse cultural traditions. For them, Sakha culture as *local* culture and as environmentally relevant practice is necessary for the very survival of the region's people.

Ultimately, we can see the efforts of cultural revival advocates in Nyurba as situated within a context of industrial decline. They have embraced depictions of a rich, indigenous cultural heritage as a means to combat the negative stereotypes that adhere to rural identities. Farmers, like Akhmed Dmitriev in the opening vignette, insist that Sakha tradition is key to their success in the current era of demodernization. Simultaneously, other like Arkadii Spiridonovich and Tamara Leonidovna seek to instill a strong sense of ethnic belonging into the next generation as means to cultivate ethnic pride as well as to provide them with skills for survival.

### Chapter 3: Cultural Revival and the Politics of Sovereignty



Figure 9: White Shaman performs the blessing at the 2007 Yhyakh

The 2007 Republic summer solstice festival of Yhyakh was supposed to be a great celebration, an “anniversarial” (*iubilennyi*) festival organized in honor of the 375-th anniversary of the “entry” (*vkhozhdenie*)<sup>15</sup> of Yakutia into the Russian State. To be sure to find a seat for this well-attended event, I arrived an hour early to the open grass fields of *Us Khating*, where the festival was to be held. Nevertheless, by the time I made my way through the giant gates, past the rows of brightly adorned women waving horse-tails at arriving guests and past the bustling bazaar with Sakha handicrafts and food for sale, the bleachers were already full and I had to nestle in on the grass in front of them to watch the opening ceremonies. At noon, when the ceremony was supposed to begin, the mayor of Yakutsk, dressed in a deep green, Sakha-style coat and hat, trimmed in fur, strode through the special gates erected for honored guests. The crowds grew quiet, assuming that the events were beginning and we all eagerly craned our necks, ready for something to happen. But the Mayor himself simply sat like a statue on the small stage erected for the hosts of the

<sup>15</sup> The word “entry” is often replaced with “joining” (*prisoedinenie*). See Zuev (2000a) for a more in-depth discussion of these terms in the present, and Zuev (2000b) for their roots in Soviet historiography.



ceremony. As I discovered later, we were awaiting the arrival of the Republic's President, Viacheslav Shtyrov and his contingent—statesmen in town for the concurrent meeting of the Assembly of the Peoples of Russia, a state organization dedicated to promoting “interethnic friendship” in Russia. Next to me a group of young Sakha girls in braids and ballet-style costumes flitted about impatiently, ready to perform in the cultural program.

The long-awaited guests arrived an hour after the festival was to begin according to traditional proscriptions. Dressed in business suits, they stood out clearly from the rest of the participants, who were all draped in the brightly colored Sakha “national dress:” women in long, shimmering dresses with ruffled sleeves and necklines, men in elaborately embroidered, knee-length coats. The ceremonies began with 375 performers playing the Sakha jaw harp, or *khomus*, one for each year of Yakutia's union with Russia. This was followed by the dance of the white cranes, performed by young Sakha women dressed in white with wings attached to their arms in imitation of the crane, a sacred bird in Sakha tradition. Following the dance, the ritual cleansing, or *algys* began; a “white shaman,” cloaked from head to toe in white fur and accompanied by a coterie of young men and maidens, fed a small fire with bread and pronounced the blessing (Figure 9).

After the *algys*, the “honored guests” each took their turn at the podium. First, the Mayor of Yakutsk greeted spectators in Sakha language. Then, in Russian, President Shtyrov said a few congratulatory words. German Gref, the Federal Minister of Economic Development and Trade, expressed his hopes for the increasing fertility of the region's people and that the people of Yakutia multiply, at least doubling by the year 2020. Ramazan Abdulatipov, the president of the Assembly of Peoples of Russia, delighted spectators by demonstrating his familiarity with Sakha language and customs by shouting the Sakha celebratory slogans “*Urui-Aikhal*, *Urui-Tusku*, *Urui-Michil!*”<sup>16</sup> Finally, the first President of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolaev, stepped to the podium and was greeted with a thunderous standing ovation. The newspaper described it the following day as the “most enthusiastic reception” and noted, “Such an ovation was not received by anyone else” (Everest, Alieva, and Kisileva 2007), highlighting Nikolaev's immense popularity here.

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<sup>16</sup> These are not directly translatable. Roughly speaking, they are the equivalent of “Hallelujah” in that they are celebratory slogans with a spiritual connotation. At the same time, strung together in this way, they are also triumphal, proud, and even defiant, shouted in the context of *Sakha* celebrations of ethnic pride.

The Sakha historian Ekaterina Romanova explains the significance of Yhyakh in this way: “It is and still remains the principal factor unifying the Yakut ethnos and for its self-expression as a nation. Ysyakh<sup>17</sup> is a symbol of Yakut culture, a distinctive representation [*miniāt’ura*] of the traditional Sakha picture of the world” (Romanova 2007, 1). In contemporary celebrations, almost all the major activities associated with Sakha traditional culture are performed in the course of Yhyakh: Olonkho (the Sakha folk-epic), khomus (the Sakha “national instrument”), Ohuokai (the circle dance), algys and kymys (fermented mare’s milk) are central aspects of every Yhyakh. As part of this “national festival” (*natsional’nyi prazdnik*), these elements embody the Sakha as a people and, more importantly, as a *nation*. When former President Nikolaev initiated the annual celebration of a Republic-wide Yhyakh in 1991, it was a powerful assertion of Republic identity as *Sakha* and intimately linked with the 1990s sovereignty movement (see also, Balzer and Vinokurova 1996e; Balzer 2005d).

This vignette, however, begins to suggest some of the contradictions at stake in contemporary celebrations of Yhyakh. While the ovations given to Nikolaev suggest that many spectators still remember and value the festival’s significance as a symbol of Sakha statehood, a number of factors underscore the shifting significance of the festival in service of discourses of Russian national unity. The dedication of the 2007 Yhyakh to the incorporation of Yakutia into Russia, for example, overtly emphasized the long history that links Yakutia to Russia. Furthermore, the festival was held up long past its prescribed starting time by the non-Sakha VIPs, who then arrived in business suits that clearly marked their outsider status and ties to the Russian state. A local newspaper reported afterwards that the opening ceremonies had only been delayed once before in the ten years that Yhyakh had been performed at *Us Khating*, and that was for 30 minutes in 2002 (Everest, Alieva, and Kisileva 2007). The article explained that this year’s delay was the subject of disagreement between the chief director-producer of Yhyakh, Afanasii Fedorov, who argued that the ceremony proceed according to traditional Sakha law, precisely at noon, and the Minister of Culture and Spiritual Development, Andrei Borisov, who insisted upon waiting for the guests. The effect was to reinforce that the cultural event proceeded only via state sanction.

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<sup>17</sup> Ysyakh (with an ‘s’) is the Russian spelling of the festival as the Russian Cyrillic alphabet does not use the letter ‘h’; I use the normal Sakha spelling, Yhyakh (with an ‘h’), everywhere except when I am directly quoting from Russian language sources.

The presence of Ramazan Abdulatipov was also not incidental—as the president of the Assembly of the Peoples of Russia, he has been one of the most outspoken opponents of ethnonationalism, promoting instead a Russian version of multiculturalism in which the peoples of Russia are harmoniously united in one state. As we shall see, this discourse helps to divorce ethnic identity from political identity and to undermine aspirations for ethnoterritorial sovereignty.

If the previous chapter looked at present-day cultural revival in the countryside, this chapter examines post-Soviet cultural revival efforts as they unfolded in urban centers as a “politically-salient conscious cultural vitalization” (Balzer 1996, 108). As a number of scholars working in the post-Soviet Sakha Republic have observed, Sakha cultural revival was intimately linked with political claims to sovereignty in the early 1990s (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996a; Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; VB Ignat’eva 1999; Lynn and Fryer 1998). Many Sakha political and cultural leaders saw the 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty to be an important chance to revive Sakha traditions and culture, perceived by many within the Sakha intelligentsia to have been denigrated and neglected during the Soviet Union. As I explore in the previous chapter, Sakha cultural leaders have sought to reverse the stigma and negative stereotypes of indigenous identity, by focusing on indigenous cultural tradition as vibrant and vital in the present. At the same time, cultural revival has also been important in terms of establishing collective identity and cohesion vis-à-vis the Russian state. From the early 1990s, Sakha folkloric traditions like the summer solstice festival Yhyakh, the epic poetry Olonkho, and the circle dance Ohuokai, among others as a central part of asserting Sakha political identity as a nation, and thereby legitimating aspirations for sovereignty. As Julie Cruikshank has argued in the context of the Yukon First Nations, cultural performance in the circumpolar North everywhere engages “long-standing tensions between local initiatives to bolster cultural autonomy and pragmatic efforts by states to incorporate diversity” (1997, 56).

A robust literature on nations as “imagined communities” has documented the extensive work that goes into constructing and reproducing national communities (B. Anderson 1991). Nestor Garcia-Canclini (1995) calls attention to the importance of folkloric tradition in particular in the construction of national identities through reference to an idyllic past. While indigenous rights activists have, at times, taken pains to distinguish the kinds of

collective identities deployed by indigenous peoples from those of nation-states, there are many overlaps, especially in the ways that they both rely on deep historical roots of identity. As numerous observers have pointed out, folklore and cultural revival more generally have been an integral part of indigenous movements transnationally. For many, the choice to establish identity through the assertion of primordial roots has been conditioned by the identity categories of the dominant societies in which they are incorporated. As Kay Warren and Jean Jackson have argued, “Clearly these are not unencumbered choices; rather they are contingent on wider political and economic pressures as well as on local history” (Warren and Jackson 2002a, 11).

Warren and Jackson (2002a) also point to the particularity of indigenous self-representation in this regard, which is continually confounded by dilemmas of an ephemeral authenticity. Indigenous activists must negotiate often conflicting expectations for authenticity coming from a range of non-indigenous and indigenous actors and the nation-states into which they are incorporated. This results in a kind of catch-22 of indigenous rights, whereby indigenous peoples must demonstrate sufficient cultural difference in order to claim rights, but true cultural difference is almost by definition not graspable by cultural others, and therefore not communicable (Povinelli 1998). In this context, cultural performance can be seen as a delicate balancing act in which indigenous actors carefully negotiate these competing claims, both consciously and implicitly. For this reason, Cruikshank argues (drawing on Fred Myers) that indigenous cultural performance should be understood as “tangible forms of social action” and analyzed as processes by which meaning is translated, more or less successfully (1997, 56). I would add to this as well that meaning is not only translated, but is also created in the course of cultural performance.

In the Sakha Republic, cultural revival emerged in the 1990s very much linked to a politics of sovereignty as performers, artists, scholars, and other cultural leaders sought to effect a cohesive national community with inherent rights to self-determination sanctioned by international discourses and legal convention. More recently, however, the meaning of these performances has shifted as the Russian Federal government asserts greater control and has undermined aspirations for sovereignty altogether. In this context, cultural revival becomes decoupled from overt political goals, while Sakha cultural leaders distance themselves from political positions that could be perceived as ethnonationalist. In the process, folkloric

practices that had been at the center of the cultural revival movement, like Yhyakh and Olonkho, cease to be symbols of ethno-territorial sovereignty. Instead, as chapter two highlights, they become important for signifying ethnic survival in the face of ongoing threats to ethnic and cultural identity posed by industrialization and globalization. For many involved in Sakha cultural revival, especially in rural areas, preservation of culture is not about “politics,” (i.e. overtly oppositional and/or separatist politics), but rather about assertions of ethnic worth, the cultivation of the moral and psychological health of the people, and the continued vitality of indigenous ways of life. For others, their value need not even be articulated. They can be seen in terms of what Raymond Williams (1977) terms “structures of feeling,” operating in practice rather than as consciously held beliefs. As Williams argues:

It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt... We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity (132).

In thinking about culture and ethnicity as belonging to these “structures of feeling,” I highlight the extra-strategic and affective ways in which they are experienced in practice. The imperative to preserve or to revive culture is often part of political strategy, but it is rarely identical to it; rather, it emerges as the result of historically constituted subjects negotiating contemporary relations of power and political possibilities (Li 2000; Hall 1996).

### **3.1 Sovereignty, Ethnonationalism, Indigeneity**

The post-Soviet movement for sovereignty in the Sakha Republic invites questions about the nature of sovereignty, self-determination, and ethnic and cultural rights. Thomas Biolsi (2005) provides an in-depth discussion of issues surrounding American Indian sovereignty in the US. He begins by pointing out that the division of the world into nation-states has resulted in a transnational political space which is imagined as a mosaic of discrete

territories, each with its own citizenry. In this dominant view, sovereignty is imagined as “fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimeter of legally demarcated territory” (B. Anderson 1991, 19), while citizens are imagined as atomized, interchangeable objects equally subject to state law (Biolsi 2005, 240). Biolsi argues, however, that the practical reality is that sovereignty is never fully flat or even, but is variegated and “heteronymous.” He draws on Aihwa Ong’s (1999) concept of “graduated sovereignty” to call attention to the ways that different categories of citizens are always subject to different sets of civil, political, and economic rights. State citizenship, for example, did not extend to African American slaves in the US, nor does it protect undocumented immigrants or prison inmates in the present. Similarly, he argues, Native American assertions of sovereignty in all their varied manifestations also complicate the modular notion of nation-states as discrete sovereigns. Even so, the modular nation-state continues to provide an extremely powerful model for claims to tribal sovereignty. Both tribal governments and the US government regularly invoke the language of discrete national sovereignty in discussion of tribal governance. This is also the case in Canada where “First Nations” is the preferred term, highlighting the explicitly national identity claimed by indigenous Canadians.

In a similar way, the declarations of sovereignty that precipitated the USSR’s collapse have also invoked the language of nation-state sovereignty (see Appendix B). Indeed, like American Indians, the Sakha aspired to recognition as independent state that voluntarily ceded some authority to the Russian Federation on the basis of bilateral, government-to-government treaties. Initially, the federal government also recognized the legitimacy of these claims and signed the 1992 Federative Treaty, which affirmed the status of the signatories as sovereign nation-states. This built upon a long-standing recognition (in theory) on the part of the USSR of the right of nations to independent development, and was celebrated by early ethnic leaders as a chance to correct the hypocrisies of Soviet governance that had promised but failed to deliver real national autonomy (Alekseev 2007; VB Ignat’eva 1999). As Sakha ethnosociologist Vanda Ignat’eva argues, the most important factor leading to the dissolution of the USSR, was “above all the fundamental contradiction between the federal structure and the centralized system of governance” (1999, 44). That is to say that the USSR was predicated on an image of voluntarily federated nations that each retained rights to self-determination, but the actual structure of governance was highly centralized and hierarchical.

Post-Soviet sovereignty advocates relied heavily on Marxist logic of national self-determination, hearkening back to the original pronouncements of Lenin and other Bolsheviks regarding the rights of nations (e.g. Lenin 1972). As we shall see, while the original Federative Treaty drew on Soviet rhetoric of national self-determination, the post-Soviet Russian Federation has ultimately gone the other direction and rejected the idea of national autonomy, insisting that national identity is not a valid source of political identity (cf. Tishkov 2000).

During the 1990s, Sakha political leaders continued to seek the modular sovereignty promised them by the Federative Treaty (Balzer 1995; Balzer and Vinokurova 1996a). Even before the Russian Federation ratified the 1993 Constitution, which nullified the Federative Treaty and asserted the supremacy of federal law, the Sakha Republic passed its own Constitution, which maintained the supremacy of its own laws over those of the Russian Federation. During the politically turbulent years of the 1990s, the Sakha government, led by President Mikhail Nikolaev, was able to preserve a modicum of political power vis-à-vis the federal government and negotiated a series of bilateral agreements regarding control over natural resources (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996a; Kempton 1996). However, beginning in 1997 when a new “Forest Code” transferred all forest resources to the federal ownership, the federal government began to pass unilateral executive orders that contradicted the bilateral agreements (VB Ignat’eva 1999). In this way, it demarcated Republic sovereignty as subordinate to Russian sovereignty in ways that resemble the “quasi-sovereignty” of American Indian governments (Biolsi 2005). In the long-run, even the idea of sovereignty for sub-state subjects has been rejected altogether by the Russian Federation, such that any form of sovereignty is now an impossible dream for most Sakha and Sakha have far less sovereignty than do Native Americans. I return to this below.

There is an important difference between American Indian tribal sovereignty and the sovereignty asserted by the ethnic republics of Russia in the 1990s. While they both used the language of modular nation-state sovereignty, they differ in terms of how they define their citizenry. Tribal citizenship in the US has long been established on the basis of blood quanta and other measures that define membership solely on the basis of ethnicity. This fact has led to complex contradictions and ambiguities in relations with the US government, which the

latter has exploited to limit the meaning of sovereignty for native groups.<sup>18</sup> This has also resulted in numerous critiques of native sovereignty claims for their incompatibility with liberal notions of citizenship (e.g. Brown 2007). By contrast, the Sakha Republic and other post-Soviet autonomous republics have claimed a civic territorial statehood in which the bearers of sovereignty are the “multinational people” of the Republic, not only the national population. The 1992 Constitution of the Sakha Republic deliberately sought to be compatible with liberal statehood, and was created after a thorough study of constitutions all over the world. Ultimately, it included a range of measures for the protection and revival of the languages and cultures of *all* the peoples of Yakutia, and never explicitly singled out the Sakha. As such, like most internationally recognized nation-states, citizenship was defined broadly in terms of a civic, multicultural identity based on residence rather than ethnic belonging.

At the same time, as I begin to suggest above, Sakha sovereignty was legitimated on the basis of (ethno) national self-determination. First of all, Sakha cultural and political leaders insisted that the USSR had privileged Russian ethnicity and suppressed Sakha and other ethnic groups. As Sakha historian E.E. Alekseev argues:

The USSR proudly proclaimed itself a union of equal peoples, but was in reality a unitary, bureaucratically organized Russian state with its center in Moscow. The “Great Power” [*velikoderzhavie*] political forces sought power at any price: with the help of violence, legal finesse, ideological controls, and repression, it sought to keep the “unified” peoples of the country as unequal, but obedient younger brothers. National self-determination, i.e. the inalienable rights of every nation to determine its own fate, decide how to live, which type of government to form, and with which peoples to establish friendly relations, was only in words (Alekseev 2007, 362).<sup>19</sup>

The ultimate result was “a rejection of national differences; adoption of the customs, traditions, and way of life of the Russian people; the gradual rejection of native languages

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<sup>18</sup> As Biolsi (2005) explains, US courts have ruled that tribal law does not cover non-natives on reservation land *at all* to the extent that non-natives cannot be taxed or be given a traffic citation. The logic of these rulings is predicated on the idea that non-natives cannot become citizens of Indian nations, while Indians can become citizens of states.

<sup>19</sup> All of the translations are mine unless otherwise stated.



and transition to Russian language” (Alekseev 2007, 15). For Alekseev, as for other Sakha scholars and activists, the language of “internationalism” and “Soviet patriotism” simply led to the destruction and oppression of non-Russian peoples and cultures (I examine this in more detail in chapter 5). By contrast, regional sovereignty provided the opportunity for a holistic “national revival” in which Sakha (and the other indigenous groups of Yakutia) could gain equal footing with Russians and achieve real cultural “development”—i.e. Sakha culture could emerge from the realm of quaint folkloric tradition and encompass a much broader spiritual and intangible experience.

The logic of sovereignty, therefore, went something like this: territorial sovereignty would protect the rights of peoples of all nationalities, but was necessary (especially) for Sakha cultural development, long stunted by subordination to the “unitary” state of Russia and the USSR. As one 2004 retrospective published by the Sakha Ministry of Culture argues:

In summing up the development of culture and art in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it begs comment that in these years there was a never-before-seen qualitative leap in this development—a real historical chance appeared for the intangible [*dukhovnyi*<sup>20</sup>] experience of the people of our republic to be incorporated into the world-wide cultural-informational space. Only under the conditions of sovereignty did all our achievements in the sphere of culture and art become possible, for it was sovereignty that gave a powerful impulse to the revelation of the spiritual and intellectual potential of society. (Chermyshentsev et al. 2004, 143).

In this way, sovereignty was widely seen as a means to protect Sakha cultural rights. To this end, the fledgling government, led by the newly elected Sakha President, Mikhail Nikolaev, implemented a wide range of measures aimed at a multi-faceted “national revival” that would help to improve the status of the Sakha (and other indigenous peoples of the Republic), both symbolically and materially. First, new symbols of statehood highlighted the central importance of Sakha culture and identity in the new Republic. The name of the Republic

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<sup>20</sup> The term “*dukhovnyi*” literally translates as spiritual, but unlike the English term, it is used in Russian to refer broadly all that is immaterial and intangible as opposed to economic and material. During the Soviet Union, for example, “spiritual culture” was often promoted by the State, wholly independently of religion, in reference to both folklore and art. Since the Soviet Union’s collapse, however, “spiritual culture” also includes religious and spiritual elements in the English sense of the term, but still retains the broad meaning as well. See also, Luehrmann (2005).

itself revised the older “Yakut ASSR” such that the self-name, Sakha, figured more prominently than the Russian ethnonym, Yakut. The parliament was renamed “*Il Tyumen*,” after ancient Sakha tribal councils, and Sakha terms were revived for administrative regions, i.e. the Sakha “ulus” replaced the Russian *raion*. Furthermore, Sakha was made a state language equal with Russian, while a Republic-wide program of Sakha language education was implemented with the goal of revitalizing Sakha language and cultural belonging (Zhirkov 1992; Hicks 2005).

In this way, the Sakha movement for sovereignty resembles various ethnonational struggles, in which ethnic groups have sought independence on the basis of a distinct ethnonational identity. There are ample comparisons, for example, with the Quebec independence movement, which has sought to protect French-speaking Quebecois from assimilation with the dominant English-speaking Canadian population. Like the Sakha Republic, Quebec has sought a civic-territorial nationhood legitimated in terms of ethnonational self-determination. In both of these instances, we can see the slippage between the “nation” as a multiethnic, territorially-defined entity and as a single ethnic group with its own language, culture, and naturally-delimited territory. They both call attention to the contradictions of the dominant idea of the modular nation-state and its assumptions regarding national homogeneity, and at the same time participate in its structures of meaning by aspiring to a supposedly more fair, equal or legitimate form of the nation-state.

Biolsi’s arguments cited above suggest that indigenous claims to sovereignty, like those of American Indians, are similarly rooted in a political imaginary that depicts a world divided into modular nation-states. Even the transnational indigenous movement does not imagine or produce an indigenous space beyond individual indigenous nations; rather, as he argues, “the world indigenous movement is very much akin to an indigenous ‘united nations’ in which the common colonial situations of each individual and autonomous indigenous nation is recognized but the mosaic of separate and autonomous Native sovereignties is never questioned” (2005, 250). Nevertheless, a number of scholars have sought to distinguish between indigenous claims to sovereignty and those of ethnonational groups. Niezen (2003), for example, argues that indigenous sovereignty is by its very nature not separatist, but rather pursues particular rights within existing states. For Niezen, this notion of sovereignty without secession represents a radical challenge to modern political organization and the institution of

the nation-state. And it is this version of sovereignty, however, that repels some groups, like Tibetans (Yeh 2007), or West Papuans (Tsing 2007), who consciously seek nation-state status from articulating their aspirations in terms of indigenous politics; they seek full independence and not dependent sovereignty. However, the example of American Indian Tribal sovereignty, and also examples like Nunavut in Canada suggest a closer link between nation-state ideologies and indigenous claims to sovereignty.

Biolsi's arguments suggest that indigenous nationhood does not inherently challenge dominant ideas about the nation-state, but in fact relies heavily on them. This is not to deny the fact that some indigenous groups and individual indigenous intellectuals may indeed have articulated radical challenges to the nation-state system (cf. Hale 2005; de la Cadena 2010). However, a group need not radically challenge the dominant view of nation-states to be considered indigenous, or to speak with an "indigenous voice" in Anna Tsing's (2007) terms. The difference between Quebec and Nunavut sovereignty claims lies in more in the specificity of indigenous identity—both in terms of self-representation and historical experience of colonization—than in regard to the nature of their aspirations.<sup>21</sup> And, for North American indigenous groups, the distinction seems clear—those who occupied territory before the arrival of Europeans are indigenous and have rights to land on that basis. In the case of African and Asian peoples, however, the distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous (or ethnonational) is not so pronounced, as numerous observers have pointed out (Beteille 1998; Nyamnjoh 2007). Nevertheless, this has not stopped a range of groups from claiming indigenous identity and from staking claims to sovereignty or self-determination on the basis of this identity rather than highlighting ethnonational identity (A. Gray, Kingsbury, and Barnes 1996; Li 2000; Nyamnjoh 2007). Furthermore, as Yeh (2007) suggests in the case of Tibet, the difference between ethnonational and indigenous claims is often blurred; groups can rely upon the language and symbols of indigeneity, and at the same time, articulate claims to full, ethno-territorial sovereignty. And so, while the political framework of the Russian Federation may produce a political space in which the particular form of sovereignty claimed by Sakha invites comparisons with Quebec and other ethnonational articulations,

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<sup>21</sup> Nunavut, like the Sakha Republic and Quebec, is not officially based on indigeneity or Inuit ethnicity. However, roughly 85% of the population is Inuit and sovereignty is often articulated and legitimated in terms of Inuit identity. As such, international discussions indigenous rights were central in establishing sovereignty. (Dahl, et. al. 2000)

Sakha themselves readily draw comparisons with indigenous claims to sovereignty, insisting as Tamara Leonidovna (in the previous chapter) did that “they are like us.”

These arguments point to the fluid and heterogeneous nature of indigenous identity, emphasizing that like other forms of identity politics, indigeneity is “without guarantees” (Hall 1996). In this spirit, Anna Tsing (2007) suggests that indigeneity can be seen as a “set of emergent tactics” to which a variety of groups have recourse in articulating a variety of political claims. Rather than attempting to describe what unites and/or differentiates the varied groups that claim an indigenous identity, she focuses on what she calls the “indigenous voice” as a genre of speech. As she writes:

By voice, I am referring to the genre conventions with which public affirmations of identity are articulated. Because it is the genre convention, not the speaker him or herself, that has power, totally unknown people can speak with this kind of voice; but they must speak in a way an audience can hear (2007, 38).

Following Tsing, I look at Sakha claims to sovereignty as a historically contingent political aspiration that was shaped by Soviet conceptions of ethnicity, nationhood, self-determination, and statehood, and also borrowed from broader liberal conceptions of both ethnonational and indigenous sovereignty. Indigeneity here emerges as a set of tactics that mix with other kinds of tactics, including those more reminiscent of ethnic separatists. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Sakha activists learned to articulate their own claims to territorial sovereignty with a kind of indigenous voice, invoking the language and logic of cultural rights and self-determination common to indigenous groups elsewhere. At the same time, this voice was neither the only voice through which sovereignty claims were articulated, nor was it always steady. As the political possibilities for sovereignty have waned in the last decade, Sakha have continued to speak (albeit haltingly and not uniformly) with an indigenous voice. However, its use in concrete political contexts has declined, highlighting the ways that indigeneity is not always linked to overt political strategy. In the following section, I examine in more detail the ways in which Sakha claims to sovereignty have been articulated with an “indigenous voice.”

### **3.2 Cultural Revival and the Politics of Sovereignty**

Even though the Sakha are not formally considered one of Russia's "indigenous peoples" in that they are excluded from the category of "small-numbered peoples," Sakha widely assume a strong kinship between themselves and other indigenous peoples of the world and, in daily conversation, they often articulate their political aspirations in terms of indigenous rights. For example, people often asked me about the control native groups in Alaska and the Canadian North have over their lands and natural resources, and pointed to these forms of tribal ownership and control in arguing for Sakha regional sovereignty. Furthermore, transnational collaborations and exchanges have been carried out on the basis of assumed links between Sakha and other indigenous groups. A Sakha emigrant in Toronto, Aleksandra Grigorieva, for example, heads the organization, "Yurt of Peace," which has as its primary goal: "to strengthen the connections of the small-numbered peoples of the North with the native peoples of other countries and of North America" (A Li 2005). In a newspaper article entitled "Aboriginals of all countries, unite!" Grigorieva implicitly includes the Sakha in the category of "small-numbered peoples" despite the fact that they are not officially categorized as such in Russia. In this way, the Sakha are widely imagined and represented (by themselves and others) as an indigenous people. The intricate field of meanings, practice, and politics associated with global indigeneity remain deeply implicated in Sakha cultural politics and identity. Sakha activists are able to speak with an "indigenous voice" in Anna Tsing's (2007) terms.

Like other indigenous movements, cultural revival played an important role in the political movement for sovereignty. In the case of indigenous activists in Colombia, Gow and Rappaport argue that the idea of culture "constitutes an effective subaltern political tool framed in ethnographic terms, through which the movement hopes to achieve autonomy in a pluralist—but also hegemonic—political and intellectual environment" (2002, 71). In this way, they call attention to the multiple idioms in which indigenous activists speak as they negotiate different publics. The "indigenous public voice" as they term it, is far from uniform but is often represented and perceived as such.

As the Sakha Republic established itself as a sovereign state in the early 1990s, there was a flurry of activity around Sakha cultural revival, in which a variety of independent cultural-political organizations, like *Sakha Keskile* ("Sakha Future") and *Sakha Omuk* ("the

Sakha people”) emerged and brought together Sakha scholars, artists, politicians, and activists to promote what cultural revival. For these organizations, cultural revival was central to “national revival,” which sought not only the revival of folkloric traditions but also economic, physical, moral, and spiritual development of the Sakha nation, seen to have suffered in all these areas during the Soviet Union. Sakha “culture” was not only a matter of folkloric forms, but a sense of broader social health and vibrancy, an ethnically-specific form of culture-as-civilization. In a deliberate contrast with Soviet economic determinism, post-Soviet Sakha leaders of the Republic insisted that, “development rests not only on economic factors,” but also on the strength of human cultural and spiritual inspiration (Chermyshevtsev et al. 2004, 118).

At the governmental level, cultural policy focused on rehabilitating Sakha national culture. The popular theater director Andrei Borisov at the head of the newly renamed Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development and sought an active relationship with UNESCO in order to procure funding and international support for national cultural projects. Borisov, in turn, inaugurated a program for cultural development based around four “pillars” of Sakha national culture: *Yhyakh*, *Olonkho*, *Khomus* (the Sakha “national” musical instrument), and *Iteghel* (belief) (Chermyshevtsev et al. 2004). Much of this program was oriented around the rehabilitation of Sakha traditional religion and worldview, which were special targets for liquidation under Soviet ideology. Organizations like Sakha Keskile and *Toion Sube* promoted national “self-consciousness,” especially through the teachings of Sakha traditional religion, “*Aiyy yorekh*” or tengriism (Ignat’eva 1999, 105). These organizations also emerged as the most outspoken defenders of Republic sovereignty, rooted firmly in the Sakha people (as opposed to the “multinational people of the Republic”) as the “bearer of sovereignty and source of state power” (Ignat’eva 1999, 104).

For cultural revival advocates, the Sakha belief system has been a particular concern even as just what constitutes this belief is contested—some insist that it is a religion and should have churches and priests, whereas others believe it is a more diffuse cultural practice, equivalent to a Sakha worldview. Viktor, the Nyurba museum guide introduced in the previous chapter, explained the importance of this belief system:

Yakuts had and have a belief system (*vera*), where...tengrism, no? Aiyy yorekh, which encompasses all the ethnic characteristics of the people, all traditions, the whole worldview. Most peoples do not have this now. But this is in every Yakut person who goes to the forest and will hunt, he feeds the fire there, right? This is in their blood. They don't understand. It's simply in the blood and they do it. However, this is not very widespread now....This belief has faltered, or...I don't know. People aren't interested. Or, there aren't people who spread this belief. Russian Orthodoxy has priests, Muslims also have priests, Mullahs, but we, tengrianists, well, it's not even a religion. It is, how do I explain to you, it is the totality of ethnic, umm...ethnic worldview (*mirovospriiatiia*).

For this reason, reviving tengrism was central to the cultural revival movement. Tamara Leonidovna in the previous chapter, for example, sought to cultivate just this unique worldview in Sakha children. For her, preschool age was an incredibly important period for development and the time when they would come to adopt these beliefs on a fundamental level, in the blood as Viktor puts it. This is also similar to the efforts that of indigenous activists in Colombia to revitalize a native *cosmovisión*, which “philosophically reconfigures the relationship between past and present, between time and space” as a means to assert a distinctive interpretation of law and political governance as the basis for political autonomy (Gow and Rappaport 2002).

For Sakha activists, there is something similar at play. As Marjorie Balzer (2005) emphasizes there has been a complex dialogue surrounding spiritual practice and cultural identity among Sakha intellectuals in the post-Soviet period, “through which competing definitions of homeland and national pride are being shaped” (2005, 58). While she focuses on the many disagreements between various members of the Sakha intelligentsia regarding the significance of Sakha belief systems, she also demonstrates the importance that some form of spiritual philosophy has for both political and cultural goals. The 2002 construction of a new “House of Purification,” (*Archy D'iete*) in Yakutsk, for example, marked an important moment for many Sakha intellectuals in establishing a space specifically marked out for the practice of Sakha culture. Balzer explains that the Archy D'iete was imagined by some as a Sakha counterpart to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral and was initially intended to stand next to the recently reconstructed cathedral in the center of Yakutsk. However, after objections from the Russian priests, it was moved further away. In practice, the Archy D'iete

has been used for a great range of cultural activities, leading some spiritual revival advocates to complain that it has become more of a club than a spiritual center. Defenders, however, insist that it ought to be a place where all Sakha feel comfortable, and where both Sakha and non-Sakha can learn about Sakha spiritual traditions (Balzer 2005, 61). In the present, it is used for a great variety of purposes connected with Sakha culture, including weddings, social-political meetings, cultural performances, and other kinds of ceremonies. In 2005, for example, I attended a celebration there for the birthday of a prominent artist. The celebration involved a banquet with Sakha traditional foods, many speeches by friends and other members of the urban Sakha intelligentsia, a handful of songs and dances, and also a purification ceremony carried out by a culturologist trained for the task. In this way, the celebration mixed secular and spiritual cultural practice, emphasizing the ways that Sakha spirituality is more than a “religion,” but rather is indistinguishable from Sakha culture more broadly.

It was in this context that the revival of the summer festival of Yhyakh has also become crucial cultural and spiritual practice in the post-Soviet period (Balzer 2005, Balzer 2006). It was officially recognized as a “national festival of the Republic” in 1990 and celebrated at the Republic level (Chermyshentsev et al. 2004, 123). While it had continued to be practiced in Nyurba (among a handful of other uluses) as a “state-calendrical” holiday throughout the Soviet Union, it was only celebrated on the Republic level after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, it also came to be celebrated regularly throughout all the uluses of the Republic. Most importantly, however, the “forgotten formerly unified structure of the celebratory ceremony” was re-established (Chermyshentsev et al. 2004, 123). This refers to the revival of the shamanic ceremony, which now begins every Yhyakh, asking the gods in heaven and the spirits of nature for blessings and good will. Through this ceremony and other additions like rituals of purification, the festival has become imbued with spiritual elements, connected with the revival of traditional Sakha religious practice. While the role of the shaman is now typically enacted by a respected male scholar or cultural figure rather than a recognized “shaman,” the ceremony has been carefully crafted on the basis of archival descriptions of pre-Soviet and even pre-Christian Yhyakh festivals. Furthermore, the newly revitalized Yhyakh festival has included virtually all of the things associated with traditional Sakha culture, including Sakha national foods sold in a market-place designed to evoke pre-



Soviet trading posts, traditional Sakha sport competitions (horse racing, jumping, and stick-pull, among others), spectators and participants draped in traditional dress, and performances/competitions for virtually all Sakha folkloric forms. These last include, especially, the circle dance *Ohuokai* and Sakha epic poetry, the *Olonkho*.

At the same time, the post-Soviet *Yhyakh* is not only dedicated to “traditional” Sakha culture as such, but also provides a forum for Sakha performers of all stripes to show off their talents in modern dance, hip-hop, and other kinds of contemporary/global musical genres. One popular exhibit at the 2008 *Nyurba Yhyakh*, for example, proudly displayed a full set of traditional Sakha jewelry designs made from pieces of plastic mayonnaise containers. In combining “traditional” and “modern” cultural forms in a uniquely Sakha festival, post-Soviet *Yhyakh* has asserted both the autonomy of Sakha culture and its continuing vitality in the contemporary and globalizing world. In this way, it challenges the way indigenous peoples have been imagined as victims of progress, always succumbing to modernity, never producing it. Post-Soviet celebrations of *Yhyakh* reflect the idea that tradition and modernity need not oppose one another and that cultural invention can itself be integral to the preservation of tradition (cf. Clifford 1988). At the same time, this flexible version of *Yhyakh* is also controversial as some spiritualists have insisted that it should adhere more closely to the ways in which it was celebrated in the past.

In addition to reviving *Yhyakh*, governmental initiatives strove to develop “national culture” more broadly. To this end, a “Plan for the Revival of National Schools” increased support for native language education, including the publication of textbooks in Sakha and other native languages, and the founding of new, Sakha language schools in Yakutsk like the Republic Lyceum. The plan also included new “national culture” classes, in which children could learn traditional folkloric practices and the basic principles of Sakha religious traditions (see also, Hicks 2005). Furthermore, various holidays like the “Day of Yakut language and writing” were inaugurated to recognize the accomplishments of Sakha intellectuals. New museums were initiated and old ones revitalized. Finally, a great deal of effort has been put into the revival of the *Olonkho*, a style of partially improvised and partially memorized epic poetry sung in a rhythmic cadence that had almost died out by the

end of the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> After a long process of application initiated by Nikolaev, the Olonkho was listed by UNESCO in 2005 as one of its endangered Masterpieces of Intangible World Heritage, and as such, received an extra boost of support. With this support, regular contests are held for young performers of Olonkho, translations of the major texts have been carried out into Russian, English and other foreign languages, and the “House of the Olonkho” was founded in Suntar, a town on the Viliui River upstream of Nyurba. The House of the Olonkho is a center for Sakha culture more broadly, but its main mission is to encourage the revival of the Olonkho.

Nestor Garcia-Canclini (1995) suggests that folklore, understood to be the “essence of the identity and the cultural patrimony” of a country (152), can be a powerful resource for the assertion of national unity and distinctiveness. As he argues, “That group of goods and traditional practices that identify us as a nation or as a people is valued as a gift, something we receive from the past that has such symbolic prestige that there is no room for discussing it” (108). Garcia-Canclini points to the powerful affective dimensions of folkloric practices in which their seemingly perennial character “makes us imagine that their value is beyond question and turns them into a source of collective consensus” (108). For Post-Soviet Sakha intellectuals, folkloric traditions have been more than a matter of nostalgia for a golden past and the celebration of a particular aesthetic, but have served as the cultural patrimony of the nation and the essence of collective identity. As the Soviet Union collapsed, folklore achieved new affective and symbolic force in legitimating Sakha aspirations for sovereignty, centered on a distinctive cultural and ethnic identity.

Indigenous identity, almost by definition, relies on demonstrations of cultural and/or biological descent from a pre-colonial population and the maintenance of cultural difference, what Beckett (1988) calls the “past in the present.” Aboriginality, he argues, is predicated upon the “existence of aboriginal people who live in ways regarded as in some sense the same as those followed before the arrival of Europeans” (1988, 6). Mobilized as such, it can

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<sup>22</sup> A handful of “real” olonkho performers, i.e. those who wrote and performed their own versions of Olonkho, still remained, although they were all quite elderly. Most Olonkho performance during the Soviet Union consisted of staged performances or enactments of previously recorded texts. These kinds of performances are still popular today and have been greatly expanded in efforts to revive the Olonkho. At the same time, resources have also been directed toward cultivating new writers of Olonkho amongst the younger generation. In one village of the Nyurba ulus, for example, a new olonkhosut was “discovered” recently and has received numerous grants and other kinds of support. The fact that he is a poor farmer, who does not speak Russian and only started to compose Olonkho after he turned 50, contributes to his mystique and popularity.

be an advantage, but it also presents problems for contemporary aboriginals as attempts to establish a single common identity and culture are doomed to fail as “bits and pieces” of the past interact with a diversity of present voices, creating a medley of competing constructions. The realities of fluid identity, for example, rarely translate into the rigid formalism of state legal systems. Clifford’s (1988a) essay on the failed Mashpee suit for recognition as an Indian tribe in the US provides a vivid demonstration of the contradictions inherent in rigid legalist definitions of identity. In this case, the court relied on ideas of whole, bounded, and persisting cultures, privileged written over oral knowledge, and denied the fluid and punctuated nature of identity. Mashpee history, however, was revealed in the course of the hearings as “a series of cultural and political transactions, not all-or-nothing conversions of resistances” (342). Clifford argues that this is characteristic of all indigenous histories, which are far more fluid than the legal system allows. Nevertheless, like so many other unrecognized tribes, they were denied recognition because they were unable to effectively prove unbroken links with a pre-colonial population (cf. B Miller 2003).

Post-Soviet Sakha intellectuals have also strived to assert the “past in the present.” Sakha sociologist and cultural revival advocate, Uliana Vinokurova (1991), for example, has described their attempts in terms of revitalizing “national memory.” As she explains:

The particularity of national memory lies in its ability, on a personal and emotional level, to tie information about long-ago moments in the history of interethnic interaction and of a people’s ethnic development together with modern moments, in a single actualized consciousness, worldview, and autonomous understanding of one’s surroundings.

In this way, cultural and spiritual revival serves to connect present-day Sakha with a pre-Soviet history and cultural development that is distinct from that of the encompassing state. Mayan activist, Victor Montejo (2002) echoes the idea of national memory when he argues that “the agenda of Mayan scholars and activists is...to revitalize our Mayan identity and weave back in the sections worn away by centuries of neglect” (129).

At the same time, the examples cited above also highlight the dilemmas of authenticity encountered by indigenous activists, in which the attempt to “revive” past cultural forms often seems to fall short. For contemporary Sakha, the new forms of

celebrating Yhyakh often contradict their lived experiences of the meaning of the ceremony and are therefore seen as inauthentic, while for some cultural revival advocates, the “new” forms of Yhyakh are actually more authentic because they are based on older forms. These meanings, however, are in constant flux as authenticity is contested and negotiated.

At the other end of the spectrum are the non-indigenous audiences (and the Russian state), who have their own understandings of what constitutes authentic indigenous tradition (cf. Cruikshank 1997). Increasingly, tourists from all over the world attend Yhyakh in Yakutsk, expecting to see an exotic indigenous tradition. Event organizers and Sakha spectators alike are well-aware of this audience and take delight in the visual spectacle, including Sakha traditional dress and the elaborately staged ritual ceremony that highlight the distinctiveness of Sakha culture and worldview. As the opening vignette suggests, however, this works very well with Russian state appropriations of indigenous culture, which increasingly highlight the diversity of peoples within Russia, but deny any form of political rights deriving from cultural difference.

### **3.4 Federal Challenges to Sovereignty**

As the previous two sections have suggested, Sakha activists have drawn on the discourses of transnational indigenous movements to bring together cultural revival and the politics of sovereignty. As Anna Tsing (2007) suggests, these discourses represent a kind of “indigenous voice.” This voice, however, is not steady. It often falters under challenges posed by Russian state discourses that exploit the contradiction between the language of cultural sovereignty and that of civic-territorial sovereignty. The Russian Federation does not recognize sub-state claims to sovereignty, and, drawing on post-Soviet criticism of ethnic-nationhood, has rejected ethnicity altogether as a legitimate source of political identity. Anthropologist and former Russian Minister of Nationalities, Valerii Tishkov (2000), for example, has argued for discarding the concept of the “nation” altogether, insisting that its implications for ethnic statehood make it inherently problematic and exclusionary. He suggests that all movements that rely on language of national self-determination are

intellectually bankrupt, misguided attempts by local elite to gain political power in the name of one group. In his words:

They represent militant and exclusivist—but politically unrealized—projects for usurping the state (its power and resources) on behalf of ethno-nations. They are projects of self-determination on the part of elites or of armed sects trying to use exiting “oppressed ethnic groups” to take a separate historic journey (631).

Using similar logic, Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party has spoken vehemently against ethnonationalism as a threat to Russia’s essential unity. As I explore in more detail in chapter 5, they have embraced the language of multiculturalism, insisting upon the right to free exercise of culture, but have limited competing political claims on the part of sub-state groups to any form of shared sovereignty. In this way, the federal government has sought to streamline sovereignty and reduce the contradictions and ambiguities by simply eliminating competing forms of sovereignty altogether. In a complicated dialogue with neoliberal multiculturalism, Russia both embraces the rhetoric of cultural rights, but rejects the idea that this is fundamentally a “political” question or connected to economic rights.

This attitude is apparent in Russia’s engagement with transnational conversations regarding “indigenous rights.” As I point out in the introduction to this dissertation, unlike the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the Russian Federation did not outright reject the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but abstained. A UN report issued after the vote relates the response of the Russian delegate:

Ilya Rogachev ( [Russian Federation](#)) said that his delegation had supported the rights of indigenous people and the development of international standards in that regard. Such an all-encompassing document should be balanced and its elements carefully weighed.

Unfortunately, the text being considered was not such a document. It was not a truly balanced document, in particular regarding land and natural resources or the procedures for compensation and redress. (United Nations 2007)

Russia maintains that it supports indigenous rights in theory, but characterizes the issue of land and natural resources as a problem of “compensation and redress” rather than one of

inherent rights to those resources based on use or prior occupation. In terms of domestic law, there are a number of federal laws designed to protect the rights of the “small numbered peoples,” the only peoples recognized as indigenous by the Russian Federation. These laws have been invoked by activists in isolated cases for protecting small-numbered groups from environmental degradation (Fondahl and Sirina 2006), and in making room for more intensive resource exploitation (DG Anderson 2002). However, Russia has been reluctant to acknowledge any inherent right to resources or land that competes with the absolute sovereignty of the federal government.

In relation to larger ethnic groups like the Sakha, the federal government has been even more unequivocal, rejecting any claims that might resemble indigenous rights to resources. This is illustrated poignantly by the following statement on the part of current Russian president Dmitri Medvedev made in the context of a question and answer session at the University of Pittsburgh during the 2009 G-20 summit in Pittsburgh. A Sakha student studying at the University of Pittsburgh asked him his opinion on the rights of the indigenous population to profits from the Sakha diamond industry. He responded as such:

Yakutia is certainly a rich region, rich in mineral resources, including the diamonds you mentioned. However, my attitude toward this is rather different than yours. As long as we live in the framework of a single country—and I hope this will continue to be so as this is our shared wish—all underground resources on the territory of the Russian Federation, they are in essence, our shared property and it does not make sense to divide them into parts. It is another question, about whether or not a subject of the Russian Federation closely connected with the extraction of these resources should receive more in the way of revenue, say. That is a possible option. The question is about whether we relate to this soberly and take thoughtful action so that one region, where there are many enterprises, a significant amount of profitable industrial production, or many valuable underground resources doesn't live extravagantly, “high on the hog,” (*v shokolade*) as they say, while another subject, where there are no resources ekes out a meager existence. For this reason the federal budget exists and redistributes income.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> From a speech given on Sept. 25, 2009 at the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA. Transcript in Russian obtained from the Russian Federal government website: <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/5570>, accessed 9/29/2009, my translation.

Here, Medvedev underscores the ways in which the current federal government of Russia has rejected the idea of preferential rights to resources on the part of one people or one territorial subject of Russia. He insists that the underground resources of Russia are the shared property of everyone in Russia by virtue of them living in a single state, and the profits should be collected and redistributed accordingly. This view of state sovereignty relies on a conception of an uninterrupted, contiguous political space in which the federal state monitors and ensures equality among an undifferentiated citizenry, eliding the essential heterogeneity of the population and differential relations of power (cf. B Anderson 1991; Biolsi 2005). Statements like this invoke a long history of state paternalism in Russia in which a supposedly impartial and all-seeing state manages and cares for its population. Further, he depicts these resources as common property in contesting potential claims on the part of subject territories, an argument seemingly contradicted by a concurrent process of increasing privatization of formerly state-owned resources that has reduced the collective ownership of these resources. Since achieving a controlling stake in ALROSA,<sup>24</sup> for example, the federal government has sought to convert the company from a primarily state-owned company (a “closed joint-stock corporation”) to a publicly-traded corporation (an “open joint-stock corporation”). For the moment, however, this has been held up by numerous legal challenges, especially on the part of Sakha political leaders, who have taken issue with the fact that a public offering would further reduce the Republic stake in the company.

Anna Tsing (2007) points out that global indigeneity often emerges from exclusion from the gains produced by industry. Likewise Tania Li (2000) also points to resource politics as central in constituting claims to indigeneity. For the Sakha, the ongoing environmental and economic inequalities associated with resource extraction are the central things that help to condition their indigenous voice. As I explore in more detail in chapter 8,

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<sup>24</sup> In the Sakha Republic, the diamond industry has been an ongoing site of struggle between the Republic and the Russian federal government (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996; Kempton 1996; Lynn and Fryer 1998). The current diamond mining giant, ALROSA (“*Almazы Rossii-Sakha*” or “Diamonds of Russia-Sakha”), arose out of an agreement forged with the federal government in 1992, which created the company as closed joint-stock corporation with a monopoly on foreign trade of diamonds. Shares were held by the Russian Federation, the Sakha Republic, local governments (such as the Nyurba *ulus*), and the company’s employees. While the exact ownership percentages were in flux through most of the 1990s, the Sakha Republic was able to negotiate significant control over the company and ultimately wrested around 20% of diamond industry profits (Kempton 1996). After a protracted legal battle, however, in 2007 the Russian Federation established a controlling share in the company, i.e. 50% + 1, a fact which led to the formation of various short-lived protest movements in the 2000s.

Sakha are able to depict themselves as children of nature, highlighting the ecological wisdom vis-à-vis the environmental destruction wrought by the diamond industry. At the same time, a number of structural factors make it difficult to succeed on the basis of indigenous rights, especially the fact that the Russian government refuses to see Sakha sovereignty and control over resources in terms of indigenous rights.

### **3.5 Cultural Revival Decoupled from Ethnic Politics**

The struggle over sovereignty has ultimately been resolved in favor of the federal government: the president of the republic is now appointed by Moscow, and, in 2009, the Sakha Republic removed the word sovereignty from its Constitution altogether. During the early 1990s, cultural revival was closely linked with the movement for territorial sovereignty, but has increasingly become decoupled from overt ethnic politics. This means that overt political action has taken on a different character, with ethnicity significantly minimized. Cultural-political organizations like Sakha Keskile and Sakha Omuk have largely disbanded. Those who are still active in oppositional politics, no longer focus on sovereignty as a major concern. A handful of outspoken activists have maintained a focus on particular issues, such as stemming the outflow of resources from the Republic, or stopping particular development projects. For example, Ivan Shamaev founded an organization called the “Peoples’ Front Yakutia-ALROSA” in order to protest the federalization of the diamond company, and in 2006 held a series of protests in an attempt to stop the process. Long haunted by the label of “nationalist,” however, Shamaev struggled to prove that his movement is not about Republic separatism, nor does it privilege the interests of Sakha over other ethnic groups of the Republic (A Ivanova 2009). While no one outright accused the group of either separatism or nationalism, newspaper articles in both regional and federal newspapers raised the question repeatedly, seeming to imply that it remained an open question.

Simultaneously, cultural and ethnic revival efforts have been, in some ways, depoliticized. By that, I do not mean to say that cultural revival has nothing to do with politics—as with all social practice, there are deeply political implications for folkloric revival in the sense that it is shaped by and engages with existing relations of power.



However, for those involved in the Sakha cultural revival movement, it has become increasingly important to demonstrate that they are not seeking large-scale political transformation, explicit changes in governmental (Republic or Federal) policies, or greater regional/local control over governmental policy. Rather, cultural revival has become in a sense privatized, a matter of individual and community initiative rather than state policy. Where Sakha folkloric forms, like Yhyakh, still receive state support, they take on new meanings divorced from “political” issues of sovereignty and control over resources. Yhyakh no longer stands as a powerful symbol of state sovereignty and, increasingly, is losing its significance for ethnic solidarity and resistance, and for Sakha cultural autonomy—as the 2007 dedication of Yhyakh to the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incorporation of Yakutia into the Russian state highlights. That same summer, I also attended an Yhyakh organized for the tenth anniversary of ALROSA-Nyurba and the beginning of diamond mining in the Nyurba ulus. While the shamanic ritual was performed as always, it was a performance by the Russian pop star, Stas P’ekha, who was flown in especially for the festival that received the most attention—the appearance of a hugely famous pop star in this small town overshadowing all else.

At the same time as it has lost some of its political significance for Sakha nationhood, however, Yhyakh, like other folkloric forms has come to take on new meanings and to revive older meanings from the Soviet period. In Yakutsk, the festival is a grand affair and attracts more and more tourists every year. Continued state sponsorship has meant that it has remained free of the necessity to court private sponsors and so there are no Pepsi, Nike, or even local business advertisements, but the festival still resembles tourist spectacles in other parts of the world with carefully choreographed performances, handicraft displays and sales, and even the possibility to undergo a traditional Sakha purification ritual for a small fee. Despite the commercialization and occasional grumbling that the whole thing has become a “show” (*shou*), Sakha residents of Yakutsk still attend diligently and use the opportunity to spend time with their families and to eat traditional Sakha foods that they rarely eat. At the 2007 Yhyakh, for example, I attended the opening ceremonies with a group of other foreigners, but my Yakutsk host family skipped the opening ceremonies and spent the afternoon together, laying in the open grass field next to the stadium area that had been erected for the main events. My host mother explained that the ceremony is just about the

same every year, and anyway it is so crowded that you can hardly see anything. For them, the festival is important not for its political meanings, but rather as any other holiday: a time to leave the city and spend time with the family.

Similarly, for the 2008 Nyurba Yhyakh, I hurried ahead with my friend Evdokia in order to catch the opening ceremonies, and my Nyurba host family caught up with us only at the tail end of the ceremony, unexcited by the spectacle. Nevertheless, even my host father, who normally stayed home during other holidays (preferring the comfort of his band saw or the quiet of the forest to the public spectacles), attended the festival and donned a brand new button-down shirt. In preparation for Yhyakh, my host mother had bought everyone (including me) brand new clothes and the night before, we heated up the sauna in order to take our weekly bath a few days early. As such, we were all looking our finest as we wandered amongst the booths, looking at the handicrafts and artwork displayed by local residents. My host mother bought a photograph of a Sakha horse standing in the nearby forest at the behest of her 12-year old granddaughter, who was in the midst of her horse-phase (apparently an international phenomenon). Afterwards, we found a grassy knoll to sit on, while my host father foraged for various Sakha delicacies at the market. He eventually returned with horse meat, various traditional bread products, and the kymys substitute, *bypakh* (fermented cow's milk rather than horse milk), which provided our lunch (Figure 10). Yhyakh, for my host family, as for many other Nyurba families, was not about the spectacle of the shamanic ceremony or the beautifully choreographed dances and reenactments that comprised the official aspects of the festival. Rather, it was about spending time with family, being outside during the short-lived northern summers, and feeling with friends, relatives, and the broader community. Collective identity as Sakha people played a role—everyone always ate “national” foods, many came dressed in “national” dress, and folkloric performances and competitions were always a part of the festival. But many, like my host family, found that wearing new clothing that could also be worn in other contexts was a sufficient way of observing the occasion.



**Figure 10: Family time at the 2008 Nyurba Yhyakh**

In some ways, for Nyurba residents, Yhyakh was actually not substantially different than it had been during the Soviet Union. In buying new clothes, for example, my host mother was continuing a tradition that she remembered from her childhood, when every year her mother would buy them new clothing. Furthermore, some elderly residents of Nyurba suggested that Yhyakh now was the same as it had been in their youth. Others insisted that it was actually far better during the Soviet era when everyone would participate in the various events, like Ohuokai and sports competitions. Now, many elderly and young Nyurba residents alike complained that Yhyakh had become a show. What this points to is the way that indigenous traditions, like Yhyakh, can have powerful political significance for the assertion of a broad scale ethnic solidarity, but also be part of the lived experience of people. They are traditions in the sense that they are passed from one generation to another, but yet the shift and change in each new generation, acquiring new meanings and significances.

As I point out above, the Post-Soviet Sakha cultural revival movement resembles the struggles of indigenous and other marginal peoples elsewhere, who seek to assert the viability of their cultural traditions in the face of economic globalization and domination by more powerful ethnic others (see especially, Warren and Jackson 2002). As Warren and Jackson highlight for other indigenous efforts to preserve folkloric traditions, Sakha cultural revival is not simply about tradition, but it is also bound up in politics of identity and difference, engaging questions of power, resistance, and domination. “Culture” and “Ethnicity” emerge as powerful essentialisms that can both be imposed coercively and embraced in the course of struggles for emancipation. At the same time, their embrace is not a simple matter of choice or strategy. The fact that culture and ethnicity are social constructs and shifting signifiers does not make them any less real in everyday experience. In

contemporary Russia, possibilities for ethnically-based political action are increasingly circumscribed and yet, culture and ethnicity persist as powerfully affective attachments. For many, their value need not even be articulated. In this way, they are part of what Raymond Williams (1977) terms “structures of feeling,” operating in practice rather than as consciously held beliefs.

## Chapter 4: Remembering Stalin—Ethnic Oppression and Collective Sacrifice



Figure 11: Monument to Stalin in Mirnii.

In the spring of 2005, the city of Mirnii, the diamond mining center of the Sakha Republic, announced its intention to erect a new statue of Stalin (Figure 11). This would be one of a handful of statues of Stalin built since 1991 and the event made headlines throughout Russia, prompting significant debate in the national media, including a round-table discussion with various celebrities on the nationwide news program “*Vremena*” (The Times). The statue’s construction was sponsored financially by the Mirnii veterans of the “Great Patriotic War”—the Russian name for World War II—and approved by the Mirnii city administration. After months of anticipation, on May 9<sup>th</sup>, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the statue was unveiled. The papers reported huge crowds at the unveiling ceremony that included residents of all ages and nationalities. Attendees brought flowers and carried signs with slogans like, “History will judge us,” and “We honor the history of our country” (S Nikolaev and Skliarov 2005). Politicians and businessmen from all over the Sakha Republic, including the then president of the Republic, Viacheslav Shtyrov

attended. The mayor of Mirnii, Anatolii Popov addressed the crowd with a strong defense of Stalin:

We are erecting a monument to the great son of Russia, who gave his people all that he had: talent, organizational ability, ruthlessness and exaction, love and devotion, never taking anything in exchange. He died without a ruble in his pocket, without an account in the bank, without any belongings or property...

I arrived in the Sakha Republic for the first time in late February of 2005. After staying in the nearby town of Nyurba a few weeks, I was invited to Mirnii in order to meet with English students at Mirnii Polytechnic University. I was surprised to find the city at the center of national media spotlight, and even more surprised that a new monument to Stalin would be erected shortly. As a young American student with little experience in Russia, this was deeply unsettling. I had grown-up understanding Stalin as a cruel dictator, who had reigned through violence and fear, a perception which was reinforced by my recent exposure to historical literature on the Sakha and other indigenous Siberians during the Soviet Union and the Stalinist era in particular. As such, I was confused when the students, including many Sakha students, patiently explained to me that elderly people, regardless of nationality, revere Stalin, and that building this statue was a form of honoring their sacrifices during the War. “Don’t they know that he killed millions of people?” I insisted. They explained that older people simply don’t believe the accounts of state terror; for them, he is the Great Leader, who led them to victory during WWII. As I spent more time in rural areas of the Nyurba ulus over the course of 2008, I grew accustomed to the reverence with which Stalin was still held by elderly. Simultaneously, I also encountered a widespread ambivalence on the part of younger Sakha, like the students in Mirnii, who understood their grandparents’ sentiments and yet were also aware of a counter discourse that labeled Stalin as the chief architect of Soviet ethnically-based oppression.

Continued veneration of Stalin on the part of elderly Sakha raises crucial questions about indigenous-state relations, history, memory, and power. Recent scholarship in both anthropology and history has called attention to the ways that historical narratives are inevitably shaped by relations of domination as subaltern versions of events are eclipsed by stories told by the powerful (Chakrabarty 2000; Trouillot 2001). For this reason, Maori

scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith has argued that “reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization” (2005, 30). She suggests that history is as much about the present as it is about the past: in conditions of ongoing colonization, “to hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges” (33) and the “need to tell our stories remains a powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance” (35). For indigenous activists, telling “indigenous” versions of history that highlight state violence toward indigenous communities has been an important means to assert collective identity and to bolster claims to sovereignty. As the previous chapter begins to suggest, urban Sakha intellectuals in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse saw themselves engaged in just such a process as they sought to recover “national memory” and dismantle hegemonic Soviet narratives.

The continuing veneration of Stalin on the part of elderly Sakha, however, points to a more complicated interweaving of dominant and subaltern histories. In examining elderly memories of Stalin, I argue that the intertwining of power and history is not simply a matter of authoritative History eclipsing indigenous memory. As Olick and Robbins (1998) have pointed out, history and memory feed into one another. State-authorized histories often shape collective memory of events, and dominant narratives come to be actively embraced by the colonized. As Bloch (2005) has argued, this is not a matter of “false consciousness,” but rather reveals the complicated workings of power. The vast literature on subjectification has demonstrated that power works not through direct application, but through framing a system of incentives and the conditions for action (Foucault 2000). It is not a constraining force, but rather a productive force that produces certain kinds of subjects and actions. We can see this in the ways that elderly Sakha embrace the figure of Stalin and with him, their identity as Soviet subjects. Just as nostalgia for the USSR on the part of the elderly Evenk women interviewed by Bloch was informed by their experience of being at the center of historic social transformation, elderly Sakha saw themselves as having been centrally engaged in the building of socialism during the Stalin era. In the present, they see the suffering and hardship they experienced then in terms of willing sacrifice, rather than state-sponsored oppression.

At the same time, this raises challenging questions about the nature of “indigenous” histories vis-à-vis dominant state narratives. What happens to contemporary efforts to “reclaim history” and assert alternative narratives if the majority of people who lived through these events and were supposed to have suffered from state oppression ardently resist these

efforts? For urban Sakha intellectuals, like those introduced in Chapter 3, Stalin is chiefly responsible for the persecution of Sakha during the Soviet era. As we shall see, narratives of Stalinist repression, mismanagement and even “genocide” against ethnic minorities have been central to legitimating aspirations for sovereignty in the post-Soviet period. Simultaneously, the figure of Stalin has come to figure prominently in Russian nationalist discourses that oppose all forms of ethno-territorial sovereignty (Khrushcheva 2005; Oushakine 2007; Shlapentokh and Bondartsova 2009). Like the mayor of Mirnii quoted above, many contemporary Russian politicians (communist, nationalist, and centrist) and other public figures have embraced the image of Stalin as a powerful leader of Russia, and carefully ignored or even denied the violence and repression that accompanied his rule. In these visions, Stalin figures less for his role as a communist ideologue, and more for his role as a strong, unifying leader, bringing together disparate peoples and establishing the Soviet Union (and with it, Russia) as a major world power. In this way, the “rehabilitation” of Stalin, nationally, coincides with the growing assertion of a supposedly non-ethnic *Rossiiskii* identity and the weakening of ethno-national movements in regions like the Sakha Republic.

The opening vignette highlights the ways that local processes of remembering intersect with broader political debates as young Sakha students in Mirnii find themselves considering the Stalin statue in light of their grandparents’ reverence for Stalin, while the national media considers the statue in light of broader trends of Russian nationalism and ethnic politics. In this chapter, I explore these tensions. I ask, first, why do elderly Sakha revere Stalin? And in the first section of the chapter, I examine the complex forms of subjectivity engendered by the early Soviet state that continue to shape perceptions of Stalin among elderly Sakha. Secondly, I ask: what are the implications of elderly reverence for Stalin for local attempts to revisit questions of political responsibility? How do rural towns like Nyurba reconcile the very different versions of Sakha history embraced by different segments of the population? Finally, I consider the implications of elderly reverence of Stalin for Sakha “national revival” more broadly. Ultimately, I argue that as aspirations for sovereignty fade and ethnicity becomes “de-politicized,” questions of political responsibility inherent in debates about Stalin are also elided, and history, like culture, becomes a matter of personal memory. As Oushakine (2009) argues, “questions of political responsibility” are “displaced by collective practices of grief and discourses of bereavement” (5). This has the



effect, therefore, of further undermining contemporary aspirations for ethno-territorial sovereignty, and reinforcing perceptions of cultural identity as an extra-political realm.

#### **4.1 The Sovietization of Yakutia**

A significant post-socialist anthropological literature has sought to explain the contradictions of indigenous incorporation into the Soviet Union, whereby native Siberians simultaneously suffered from state oppression and came to enthusiastically participate in the building of Soviet socialism (Bloch 2004; Grant 1995; P Gray 2005). What these studies highlight are the complex workings of power that shaped native Siberians as Soviet subjects. They emphasize that native Siberians were not simply *oppressed* by the Soviet state, but rather were drawn into a complex relationship, in which they also negotiated their own possibilities for action. The Soviet state, here, appears not only as a totalitarian one, imposing arbitrary rules upon its subjects, but also as Foucault's "modern state," in which individuals were *integrated* according to specific patterns (Foucault 2000). That is to say indigenous Siberians, like other Soviet citizens, came to participate in state projects and governmental structures to a much greater degree than ever before and came to understand their own identities in terms of this participation. Despite the hardship and suffering of forced collectivization and mass-repression during the 1930s, by 1945 Sakha were celebrating *Soviet* victory in World War II as "our" victory, referring to the collective efforts of all the peoples of the Soviet Union. In many ways, Sovietization can be seen as a process of "subjectification" as Sakha came to be "subject to" Soviet state control, but also to be self-aware as Soviet "subjects" (Foucault 2000, 331), i.e. agentive participants in the Soviet project.

##### **4.1.2 1920s: New Economic Policy and the "Golden Age" of Sakha Culture**

Historian Francine Hirsch (2005) has argued that "Sovietization" was an "interactive and participatory process" in which different groups and individuals often pursued competing

agendas under ostensibly similar frameworks of revolutionary Marxism. Furthermore, the way ideas actually worked out “on the ground” varied extensively among different population groups. Certainly during the 1920s, the Soviet state was by no means a monolithic entity and, in the “national” regions like Yakutia, state socialism did not immediately cause huge disruptions or bring about sweeping changes in the daily life of the predominantly rural Sakha population (A Gogolev 2005; EE Alekseev 2007). Interventions like the introduction of price-controls on grain, for example, had little effect on the cattle-herding Sakha, who continued to live in dispersed settlements and to practice cattle and horse husbandry in loosely knit kin groups. This is not to say that the new system went unnoticed—indeed, new schools, medical clinics, and “culture bases” began appearing all over the countryside—but in most cases, these did not lead to major changes in daily routines, and in some places they were simply ignored, much to the frustration of early Soviet officials.

For the urban Sakha intelligentsia, however, the 1920s were a time of exciting optimism. Under the newly created Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Yakut ASSR), Sakha intellectuals were able to participate in regional government for the first time.<sup>25</sup> While many had opposed the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, they embraced some of the new measures of the Bolshevik government, which sought to “indigenize” local and regional power structures as much as possible (Martin 2001). A handful of young, Sakha Bolsheviks ended up in significant positions of leadership and worked collaboratively with the non-party intelligentsia.<sup>26</sup> In this environment, cultural leaders ended up in positions of government, and politicians took part in a blossoming cultural renaissance. Leading Sakha Bolsheviks, like Platon Sleptsov-Oiunskii and A.I. Sofronov, for example, emerged as both important political and literary figures. Sakha scholars, like Gavril Ksenofontov, who wrote one of the first comprehensive studies of Sakha ethnogenesis, and the ethnographer-poet Aleksei Kulakovskii, both took active roles in the early government. Furthermore, new

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<sup>25</sup> In Tsarist Russia, Sakha were more or less excluded from participation in the governance of the oblast’ (the Yakut ASSR was previously the Yakutsk Oblast)—the administration of which was appointed by Moscow. Sakha “*aiians*” did exercise substantial control over local affairs, although these were always overseen by Cossak administrations (Tokarev, ZV Gogolev, and Gurvich 1957). Because of these restrictions, Sakha leaders had long sought regional self-government in the form of democratic bodies called *zemstvo*, which had been instituted in much of Western Russia after the end of serfdom in 1861 (e.g. Iakovlev 1999).

<sup>26</sup> This collaboration was also enabled by the fact that prior to the 1917 Revolution, much of the Sakha intelligentsia (communist and non-communist) had been united in their opposition to the Tsarist policies—while they differed in terms of concrete political philosophy, they all equally embraced the February revolution and worked together to form a provisional government in Yakutia (see, EE Alekseev 2007).

individual and ethnic freedoms allowed Sakha cultural organizations to be formed for the first time, and the government supported the establishment of a variety of Sakha newspapers, journals, and literature. Contemporary Sakha intellectuals look back to the 1920s as a time of significant cultural development, or “flourishing” (*prosvetanie*) and celebrate the artistic, literary, and political achievements of the Sakha intelligentsia at this time. In the present, individuals like Oiunskii, Kulakovskii, Ksenofontov, and Sofronov are celebrated as “national heroes” and their literary and scholarly works read as essential classics of Sakha literature.

This is not to say that the 1920s can be simply characterized as a time of prosperity and equality in Yakutsk or elsewhere in Yakutia. Despite the relative tolerance of these years, opposition to Soviet rule was met with often brutal retaliation and a developing secret service carried out extensive surveillance of potential opposition groups. The non-party national intelligentsia was always regarded with suspicion on the part of central Bolshevik leaders and their participation in government was tolerated largely due to the need for qualified specialists (EE Alekseev 2007). On the whole, however, the 1920s did witness a significant expansion of opportunities for Sakha to participate in their own governance over those which had existed during Tsarist Russia, and they also brought a relative degree of economic stability and prosperity to a region that had been badly torn by the long years of the Civil War.

#### **4.1.3 Cultural Revolution in Yakutia**

This situation, however, drastically changed as Stalin consolidated power and sought to accelerate the process of socialist transformation. For indigenous Siberians, the collectivization and industrialization introduced by Stalin represented a new level of state intervention in daily life, which severely disrupted long-standing social relations and community ties (A Gogolev 2005). Furthermore, large-scale repressions resulted in almost all of the pre-Soviet and early Soviet Sakha intelligentsia arrested and/or killed, such that leadership was taken over by young Russian and occasionally, Sakha communists with little tolerance for the supposedly regressive practices of the “backwards” rural population. The

repressions began on a mass-scale in 1927 and 1928, when the non-party Sakha intelligentsia began to be arrested for supposed plots against the Soviet government. In 1928, the Central Communist Party issued a proclamation, “On the condition of Yakut organizations,” which identified the “problem” of Sakha nationalism. This in turn led to the prohibition of most of the Sakha cultural organizations that had proliferated during the 1920s and many Sakha language printing presses were shut down. In addition, Sakha leaders of the Communist Party were removed from positions of power, and many were sent to other regions of the USSR, where it was imagined that any nationalist sentiments might be minimized.<sup>27</sup> During this first wave of mass repression, according to Sakha historian, E.E. Alekseev (2007), more than 500 Sakha were killed and thousands more relieved of their jobs (see also, EE Alekseev 1991; D’yachkovskii 1992). According to Alekseev, this was the first of the mass repressions carried out against non-Russian ethnic groups, leading him to conclude that, “The Yakut people were the first in the USSR to be subject to Stalin’s genocide” (EE Alekseev 1998). I return to this below.

During this same period, Stalin initiated the first five-year plan, intended to spark rapid industrialization in urban areas and collectivization of farms in rural areas. Both collectivization and industrialization were implemented in Yakutia (like elsewhere) with varying degrees of intensity during the early 1930s, and were accordingly met with varying degrees of opposition on the part of rural Sakha. On a basic level, the first five-year plan disrupted the liberal economic policies of NEP and concentrated resources in urban centers rather than the countryside. As forced collectivization accelerated, Sakha farmers often slaughtered their cattle rather than give them to collective farms. The problems of collectivization were exacerbated by drought in 1932 and 34, which led to serious famines across much of the Sakha countryside. Furthermore, the arrests and executions extended far beyond the urban intelligentsia to teachers and directors of rural institutions, supposed “kulaks” or wealthier peasants, and also ordinary collective farm workers suspected of dissent. As a result of these repressions, qualified managers and directors of collective farms were often in drastically short supply and the fledgling farms were poorly managed. Livestock populations collapsed throughout the Republic: official statistics, for example,

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<sup>27</sup> Prominent Bolshevik and personal acquaintance of Lenin, M.K. Ammosov, for example, was sent to Kirghizstan for a number of years, before being arrested and killed in the late 1930s (EE Alekseev 1997).

estimate that the number of cattle in 1939 was 2/3 of 1929 levels, and the number of horses half (Alekseev 2007, 247). Contemporary Sakha historians point to the collapse of cattle and horse farming as crucial blow to the rural Sakha population, for whom cattle and horses were not only the primary source of subsistence, but also held deep symbolic significance (Maj 2009).

As the 1930s progressed, repressions caused a massive turnover in leadership at all levels, throughout the USSR. Arrests and executions mounted, and almost the entire early Soviet leadership was destroyed, including much of the central committee of the Communist Party, the Red Army leadership, and local and regional administrations. In the Yakut ASSR, more than 1800 people have been estimated to have been killed during the great purges of 1937 and 38, including almost all of the prominent Sakha Bolsheviks who had led the Republic during the 1920s and the non-party Sakha intelligentsia—writers, actors, artists, and others. Even Sakha living outside the Republic (in Moscow, Leningrad, and other regions) were arrested and/or killed (Alekseev 2007, 230). In addition, Sakha working in supposedly sensitive industries, like the gold-mining industry, were fired from their jobs and many were arrested for suspected sabotage (Alekseev 2007, 246). Few Sakha were untouched by the repressions; during my fieldwork almost everyone I met recounted how teachers, friends, and relatives had disappeared during this time. However, it was the urban intelligentsia that was the most devastated segment of the Sakha population, and it is this fact that contemporary Sakha intellectuals point to as crucially destructive for subsequent Sakha “cultural development.” I return to this below, but emphasize here that the elimination of the intelligentsia has been characterized as the destruction of the Sakha avant-garde, those who would help to “develop” cultural traditions in the future. Nevertheless, because of the specific targeting of intellectuals, rural Sakha did not experience the same degree of upheaval as did urban Sakha communities. For this reason, perhaps, many rural Sakha continue to insist that those repressed were largely guilty, and if they were not, then it was the result of honest mistakes.

Accompanying the horrors of mass repression and forced collectivization, however, historians have noted “another truth” to Stalin’s politics. Alekseev argues, for example:

Stalinist nationalities' policy was not simple, but rather contradictory and complicated. It relied on the chauvinism of the largest ethnic group—Russians...for the physical and spiritual subjugation of the non-Russian peoples. However, there was another truth. Nationalities' policy prior to the great repression [of 1937-38] was directed toward the development of the productive strength in the national regions and republics in the name of the powerful Soviet Union and the socialist-in-content...national-in-form...culture of the non-Russian peoples. And even such a nationalities' policy produced some positive results (244).

For Alekseev, the “positive results” include the expansion of industry, the expansion of education, and the improvement of infrastructure across the country. The processes of industrialization and collectivization introduced sweeping changes in the daily lives of both rural and urban Sakha, including advancements that brought increased mobility and educational and work opportunities for Sakha young people. Roads were built connecting the major urban centers, the first regular air flights connected the Republic with the Southern Siberian city of Irkutsk, telephone and telegraph lines expanded to even the most remote regions, and a sea port on the Arctic Ocean was established connecting the Republic with other northern cities during the summer months (Gogolev 2005). In addition to these “material” gains, contemporary historians also note supposedly significant gains in the sphere of “culture.” Literacy rates rose from less than 1% through most of the Republic to almost 80% by the end of the 1930s, native-language primary schools were expanded to serve almost all of the population centers of the Republic, secondary-schooling was introduced in many regions, and opportunities for higher education expanded immensely. From the point of view of contemporary Sakha scholars, this was especially beneficial for Sakha, very few of whom had any formal schooling prior to the revolution. Furthermore, “culture clubs” were established in all the villages of the region and introduced the rural population to theater, art, and film. Finally, “indigenization” policies meant that the use of Sakha language in official venues had increased significantly.

As these kinds of opportunities to engage with Russian cultural and political norms expanded with post-War industrialization, young Sakha in particular learned to embrace them, and also came to embrace Marxist philosophy and the notions of progress that were central to the Stalinist revolution. They came to internalize ideas of cleanliness and

civilization enforced at schools, and to celebrate the new opportunities for “cultural development” offered by the culture bases. They watched films, acted in plays, and learned to read for the first time. And the whole time, they were told that as supposedly less-advanced peoples, they were making a “giant leap across time” (see also, Bloch 2004; Grant 1995). As Sakha participated in these new activities, they created a new social environment, new conditions for action and new expectations about what ought to be (cf. Oushakine 2004). In the process, they also created themselves as Soviet subjects. Despite the difficulties of these years, Stalin did instigate a “cultural revolution” and effected a wholesale transformation of both economic and cultural norms that has been evaluated variously, and led some to question in retrospect whether or not the means, on some level, justified the ends. It also points to the complex forms of subjectification through which new Soviet selves were constructed.

#### **4.1.4 The Great Patriotic War**

Whatever the evaluation of the preceding years, however, the advent of World War II (or the “Great Patriotic War” as it was termed in Russian<sup>28</sup>), inaugurated new upheaval for the country as a whole, and this, in turn, provided a new lens through which to view the preceding years. As I discuss in more detail below, for many who lived through the War, the repressions and rapid industrialization of the 1930s came to be seen as necessary to the USSR’s ultimate victory, and therefore as evidence of Stalin’s foresight, rather than his brutality. That is to say that his supporters insist that he knew that war was coming and that rapid industrialization was necessary to “catch up” with the Western capitalist countries. In this view, the repressions were a perhaps regrettable, yet understandable means of enforcing this strenuous pace. Nevertheless, for many contemporary historians, the history of the Great Patriotic War is one of spectacular mismanagement and neglect for individual life. From the Yakut ASSR, more than 62,000 people were drafted, and of these, almost 40,000 died in battle (Alekseev 2007, 262). This is from a 1939 population of around 413,000 (Sivtseva

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<sup>28</sup> Technically, “The Great Patriotic War” refers to the Soviet war against Germany, which began in 1941.

2005), which means that almost one-tenth of the total population of the Republic died on the front. Alekseev (2007) argues that draft exemptions, which were granted for other, smaller indigenous groups ought to have been extended to the Sakha as well, because most Sakha soldiers ended up as little more than warm bodies on the battle field. As he insists, the vast majority of Sakha draftees was called from the “depths of the provinces” (*iz glukhikh naslegov*), did not even know a single word of Russian, and had no military experience. They were unable to orient themselves in Russian cities, much less in the battlefield and an army led by Russians. For them, the war was a tragedy and they would have been better off staying at home to help with the harvests (EE Alekseev 2007, 263).

This insistence upon the naïveté of the Sakha soldiers was repeated by many Sakha, especially those who were critical of Stalin. It is true that Russian language was not widespread at the time and so many of the recruits likely struggled to simply understand what was going on for linguistic reasons. At the same time, broader histories of the War suggest that Russian and other soldiers were equally unfamiliar with modern warfare and all quickly scrambled to learn the basics of survival. I return to this below, but one of the things this emphasis on Sakha naïveté does is to underscore the distinction between pre- and post-War populations, in which before the war, Sakha were not integrated in the Soviet Union and lived in “traditional” ways, whereas after the war, modernization and progress enveloped the Sakha and separated them from the practices of their ancestors.

The situation on the home front was as catastrophic or even more so for the rural Sakha population, who suffered from years of famine, in which thousands of people literally starved to death. With all of the young and middle-aged men gone to the front, the newly collectivized farms were bereft of the most crucial segment of their workforce—women, children and the elderly eventually came to replace the men, but the sudden reorganization of the workforce took two-three years to become effective. Further, war time laws allowed the state to appropriate most of the produce from the collective farms and also made most forms of private food production illegal. In addition, state redistribution of food often neglected the rural areas, and as such the rural population was left with little to no food. This was compounded by the lack of experienced leaders and managers, many of whom had been killed. Alekseev writes that all who might have “raised a brave voice in defense of their starving people” were replaced by opportunistic yes-men, who fulfilled every command from



the “great leader” (Stalin) without concern for the actual circumstances of the people (Alekseev, 2007, 261). Indeed, any mention of starvation was prohibited (for, according to official rhetoric, “In the Soviet Union, people did not die of starvation”) and doctors were pressured to indicate almost any other cause of death. Even after Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin, official histories avoided confronting the realities of widespread starvation during the war years. It has only been since the advent of *perestroika* that Soviet/post-Soviet scholars have begun to examine the extent of the loss of life on the home front (e.g. Isupov 2000; Sivtseva 2005). According to recent estimates, in Yakutia alone, more than 60,000 people died from hunger from 1941-45 (Alekseev 2007, 264).<sup>29</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of the tragedy of the War, Sakha emerged from it very much aware of their identity as Soviet citizens. Victory Day on March 9, 1945, was a collective Soviet celebration and in every single village, town and city, residents poured out on the street to celebrate Soviet victory. In Nyurba, residents celebrated with a giant Ohuokai circle dance. In this way, the war and victory comprised a powerful symbolic moment for Soviet solidarity when all the peoples of the empire were united in a common struggle. It has been continually evoked since then in official rhetoric as means to anchor collective Soviet identity, i.e. successive Soviet administrations promoted the commemoration of Victory Day and the memory of those who lost their lives through elaborate state rituals in what has been termed the “cult of World War II” (see also, Tumarkin 1994; Wanner 1998). As such, World War II provides a powerful anchor for collective Soviet (and now, pan-Russian) identity, signifying a collective experience of loss and victory (Oushakine 2009).

Simultaneously, the war brought about a massive transformation in the material life of Soviet citizens, including in the Yakut ASSR. Sakha villagers, who had previously only heard of Moscow and, perhaps Leningrad as distant and faraway places, followed the progress of the Red Army and of their sons (and often daughters as well) throughout Western Russian and then into Berlin. Those who went to battle, found themselves in places that had previously been dots on a map, and they found themselves fighting alongside others from all

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<sup>29</sup> The precise numbers vary widely. Alekseev (2007) argues that 60,000 people died on the home front and 40,000 on the front lines, which would put the total deaths at around 100,000, although he never provides this number. Sivtseva (2005) indicates that 65,256 people in Yakutia died in a discussion about the impact of the war on the home front, but does not indicate whether this includes both soldiers and those on the home front. Either way, the losses in battle and on the home front were very large. According to Sivtseva (2005), the entire population of Yakutia decreased 15% from 1941-1945.

over the USSR, speaking in Russian as a lingua franca. Many of those who returned home stayed in contact with comrades-in-arms throughout the following decades; many stayed in Moscow or Leningrad. On the home front, the collective farms achieved new authority as they came to organize almost every aspect of the daily lives of rural Sakha. Even though collectivization had only just been completed by the start of the War, by the War's end, a return to older methods of farming and subsistence was unthinkable. With so much of the pre-war population killed (by some estimates as much as 1/3), older social relations and practices were thoroughly disrupted, such that even if the state had abandoned collectivization as a policy, it seems unlikely that Sakha communities would have been able to simply return to pre-collectivization lifestyles.

The war inaugurated a sea change in people's daily life and in their conceptions of their position in the world. As Paxson (2005) writes, "The very real German enemy that caused the very real deaths of an estimated 20 million Soviets was enough to form a circle around the imagined nation" (112). For Sakha, as for other Soviet citizens, it meant that they were very much participants in the larger Soviet project—no longer simply subject to state interventions, but fully implicated in the building of communism. As post-war reconstruction efforts unfolded, this sense of participation in the Soviet project expanded. For Nyurba residents, in particular, Russians and others from elsewhere in the USSR began to arrive in droves as part of the great search for diamonds in the Viliui, introducing children to a range of new potential professions, like "geologist" or "engineer." Despite continued hardship, for many, life did appear to get better and provided a strong lens through which to justify the past. As I begin to emphasize in chapter 2, elderly Sakha often look back at this time with pride rather than with pain or anger. They resolutely insist that Stalin was a strong guide and leader, and that he could not be the source of so much suffering as post-Soviet revelations came to insist.

## 4.2 Stalinism and National Revival

*“The Stalinist regime not only destroyed the flower of the Yakut nation, but also planted in the consciousness and minds of the people of the subsequent generations a paralyzing fear, disbelief in their own strength, and a feeling of inferiority.” (A Nikolaev 2002)*

As I begin to explore in the previous chapter, the post-Soviet Sakha “national revival” movement challenged Soviet discourses that painted the USSR as a voluntary union of peacefully coexisting ethnic groups. Sakha scholars and cultural leaders insisted that state rhetoric of the “friendship of the peoples” actually masked an unequal relationship between ethnic Russians and non-Russians that was maintained through force and coercion on the part of the Soviet state. Importantly, however, they did not see this as necessarily inherent to the Soviet state or to communist ideals (at least as they were initially conceived in the 1920s), but rather directly attributable to shifts introduced by Joseph Stalin. Alekseev (2007), for example, argues that the Soviet Union actually began with relatively noble goals, and early Bolshevik leaders, like Lenin, sought to ameliorate the inequality faced by non-Russian groups. According to Alekseev, however, Stalin corrupted Lenin’s conception of the national question and inaugurated a ruthless campaign to root out manifestations of “bourgeois nationalism” amongst non-Russians (Alekseev 2007, 27). And so, for many Sakha intellectuals, Stalin figures chiefly as a genocidal dictator, who was personally responsible for both the pre-War repressions of Sakha and for the devastation of World War II.

While the denunciation of Stalin and the rehabilitation of the victims of repression were initiated by Khrushchev in the 1950s, they proceeded slowly and cautiously, and then, were halted altogether during the Brezhnev era of “stagnation.” It was only with the era of *glasnost*’ or “openness” inaugurated by Gorbachev that the dark side of Stalinism could be fully examined. In the Sakha Republic, Sakha historians and others began to look to the archives to discover missing pieces of their “national memory” (Vinokurova 1991)—through cultural revival, but also through the rehabilitation of the victims of repression and new critical histories of the USSR. In conjunction with the opening of Soviet state archives, for the first time, Sakha historians published the horrific details of the violence and repression of the 1930s and 1940s (e.g. EE Alekseev 2004; I Nikolaev and Ushnitskii 1990; Sivtseva

2005). As the Sakha legal scholar, Ivanova (2006c) maintains, “The restoration of justice, begun in the 50s and 60s, received its logical conclusion in the beginning of the 90s” (192). She highlights, in particular, Yeltsin’s 1994 signing of a special order with regard to the Sakha victims of Stalinist repressions. She continues, “This order has a huge historical significance, in that it allowed all unjust accusations of imagined political crimes to be removed from the repressed and has once and for all returned their names to their native people” (192). The “restoration of justice” has in this way played an important part in the movement for national-territorial sovereignty in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse as Sakha intellectuals sought to “return the names” of the repressed to the people in a metonymical rehabilitation of the entire Sakha people, long suspected of harboring latent nationalism.<sup>30</sup>

Contemporary Sakha scholars look to the early Bolshevik approaches to nationalities’ policy and especially Lenin’s sensitivity to the roots of ethnic nationalism in oppression as an enlightened philosophy that sought to address the abuses of the Tsarist administration with regard to ethnic minorities. They also see the actions and philosophies of early Sakha Bolsheviks, like Platon Oiunskii (now seen as one of the founders of Sakha literature) and M.K. Ammosov (a leading Sakha Bolshevik and personal acquaintance of Lenin), as national heroes, who fought for the liberation of their people. In this framework, there is no essential contradiction between certain kinds of nationalism and orthodox Bolshevism. All sought to counteract the ethnic oppression and “great power chauvinism” that had long subjugated the non-Russian peoples of the Russian Empire.<sup>31</sup> For contemporary Sakha scholars, Soviet ethno-federalism and the establishment of the Yakut ASSR was not a *concession* to nationalists, but rather a sincere attempt to bring about greater social justice and equality for the different ethnic groups. Ethnically-based territories were supposed to be able to introduce communism in “nationally-specific” ways and to protect minority groups from Russian

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<sup>30</sup> See also, Argounova (2007b), who demonstrates that the supposed crime of bourgeois nationalism was appended not just to those individuals, who were actively arrested and/or executed, but that the entire Sakha people were suspected of “bourgeois nationalism” and punished as such.

<sup>31</sup> A number of English-language historians have also documented early Bolshevik criticism of Great Russian Chauvinism (Slezkine 1994, Hirsch 2005). Lowell Tillet (1969) also provides an early analysis of the contradictions between early Soviet perspectives on national tensions and later perspectives.

chauvinism.<sup>32</sup> According to post-Soviet Sakha historians, however, Stalin turned this theory on its head and insisted upon non-Russian nationalism as the principle threat to the building of socialism. Ultimately, Alekseev (2007) argues that Stalin emerged as “the destroyer of Lenin’s multinational state and the principal persecutor and oppressor of non-Russian peoples” (16). For Alekseev, as for many other Sakha intellectuals, the blame for the repressions and mismanagement that resulted in the deaths of so many lies squarely with Stalin; later Soviet administrations were also guilty of continuing the repressive policies initiated by Stalin, but he was the architect.

It was this view which contrasts so starkly with the renewed celebrations of Stalin’s legacy and helped condition my surprise when I was confronted with veneration of Stalin during my first trip to Mirnii. As I suggest above, urban Sakha intellectuals have depicted the Stalin era, beginning from the late 1920s up until Stalin’s death in 1953 as one of particularly severe ethnically-based oppression for the Sakha people and even genocide. They highlight: 1) repressions for bourgeois nationalism that resulted in thousands of Sakha deaths and destroyed the “national intelligentsia,” which effectively halted Sakha “cultural development;” 2) the havoc wreaked on rural livelihoods, where the bulk of the population (the “essence” of Sakha culture) resided; and 3) the spectacular level of neglect and mismanagement of the home front during World War II, which disproportionately affected non-Russian and more remote groups like the Sakha.

First, they argue that repressions for bourgeois nationalism resulted in thousands of Sakha deaths, which for a “small people” like the Sakha is an enormous number. In citing the huge numbers of people killed during the repression, for example, Alekseev (2007) argues: “It follows that the loss of one person for such a small-numbered people, like the Buryats and Yakuts was equivalent to the loss of tens and hundreds of people for the large-numbered peoples like the Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and others” (32).

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<sup>32</sup> There is significant disagreement in the literature on the nature of early Bolshevik attitudes to non-Russian nationalities, however. While Slezkine (1994) insists upon the “earnestness” of early Bolshevik leaders with regards to ethnic minorities, others have suggested that assimilation was always the ultimate goal. Hirsch (2005), for example, argues that even in the 1920s, nationalities’ policy was NOT directed toward national self-determination for its own sake, nor was it a kind of Soviet version of “affirmative action” as Terry Martin (2001) has argued. Rather, the intent was to *assist* victims of Soviet modernization and to usher the *entire* population through the Marxist timeline of historical development (8). For Hirsch, then, Stalinist nationalities’ policy did not contradict Lenin’s, but rather represented an *acceleration* of the Marxist transformation that Lenin and other early Bolshevik leaders also sought. At the same time, as I point out above, she also emphasizes the fact that “Sovietization” was an “interactive and participatory process” in which different groups and individuals often pursued competing agendas under ostensibly similar frameworks of revolutionary Marxism.

Secondly, these repressions targeted and ultimately exterminated (*istrebili*) the entire pre-Soviet Sakha intelligentsia, who contemporary intellectuals insist were “the best part of the people” (Alekseev 2007, 32). As cultural and intellectual leaders, the intelligentsia was supposed to be at the forefront of Sakha cultural enlightenment and would be the ones who would lead the Sakha into modernity in culturally and ethnically specific ways, and in this way, allow for the autonomous *and* progressive development of Sakha culture.<sup>33</sup> So when they were repressed this was a blow to the *entire* Sakha people, who had no one to lead their cultural development. Uliana Vinokurova also echoes this argument in suggesting that after the destruction and diminishing of Sakha cultural leaders, “nothing was left except to follow the shining representatives of other peoples” (1991, 5). By this she means that without the intelligentsia, ordinary Sakha had to follow the intelligentsia of other peoples, i.e. Russians. This argument is also echoed in post-Soviet efforts to revive and rehabilitate repressed Sakha leaders from the 1920s and 30s—a variety of museum exhibits, books, articles, and concerts, for example, all celebrate a handful of notable intellectuals as “shining representatives” of the Sakha people, who were eliminated. These were people who would have been able to effectively merge “tradition” and “modernity” for the Sakha people, allowing them to overcome the ways that Sakha identity, like that of so many other indigenous groups, is indelibly linked with tradition and the past.

Third, histories of Stalinism have sought to demonstrate that it was not simply the intelligentsia who suffered (even if they did disproportionately to everyone else), but rather all Sakha suffered from the collectivization and industrialization that concentrated resources in the urban centers and left the countryside in disarray. While collectivization had a positive impact on grain agriculture, which was largely practiced by *Russian* peasants, it had a disastrous impact on the “national wealth” of the Sakha people—their cattle and horses, undermining Sakha subsistence practices.

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<sup>33</sup> In a recent article, Michelle Rivkin-Fish (2009) discusses the way that “the intelligentsia” in Russia is constructed as an essential class and argues that this has been reinforced in the present through narratives about the Bolshevik revolution as essentially an attack on the intelligentsia by the uncultured masses. This discourse is also echoed in contemporary discourses of the Sakha intelligentsia, especially in the sense that the intelligentsia forms a stable and enduring class. However, there are important differences when it comes to the relationship of the Sakha intelligentsia to the Bolshevik revolution, conditioned by the relationship of the Sakha to the Tsarist state. As I suggest above, the revolution itself is seen as a moment of potential national liberation. For most Sakha intellectuals, then, it was Stalin who corrupted the relatively noble goals of the revolution and turned Russians against non-Russians. The attack upon the Sakha intelligentsia, then, came not so much from the unruly Sakha masses, but rather from the unruly and uncultured Russian masses and the machinations of Stalin.

Finally, as I suggest above, they highlight the ways that World War II was especially traumatic for Sakha people, who were asked to fight for a country they hardly knew existed. Most traumatically, they point to the massive famines and the spectacular failure of collective farm policy that resulted in widespread starvation in the countryside. In this way, the history of the War as the common victory and tragedy of the multinational people of the Soviet Union is challenged. The tragedy is highlighted as a specifically Sakha one, and a source of collective belonging *against* the state (cf. Oushakine 2009).

In this way, contemporary scholars tell a horrific story of suffering and state neglect/persecution that was largely downplayed in official discourse even after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in the 1950s. This account is echoed in many of the post-Soviet texts by (especially) Yakutsk-based Sakha writers, who embraced the opportunity to revitalize "national memory," in part, by telling the untold tales of hardship inflicted upon the Sakha people by the Soviet State. As Sakha sociologist and outspoken advocate for sovereignty, Uliana Vinokurova (1991) argued: "historical truths about interethnic interactions can call to action reserves of the people and have a creative and mobilizing effect on the descendents [of those involved in past historical events]."

Ultimately, however, this attempt to link cultural repression with the necessity for ethno-political sovereignty has been thwarted by a steady undermining of the federal treaty signed in 1993. As I explore in the previous chapter, a narrative of anti-ethnonationalism once again posits Russia as a fundamentally international state, and has effectively effaced attempts to assert ethnicity as a legitimate basis for political agitation. Ironically, the contemporary Russian state is able to draw on the legacy of the Stalin era as a time of Soviet multinational unity in order to undermine the legitimacy of ethnic politics. I come back to this point in the final section of this chapter. In the next section, I examine the tensions between the post-Soviet deconstruction of Soviet narratives of international unity and friendship, and the narratives of rural, elderly Sakha. Elderly narratives emerge as crucial nodes in tensions between an "international" Russian identity and Sakha assertions of independence. Elderly Sakha support efforts for cultural revival and embrace their role as "bearers of culture." However, they also contest the narrative of ethnic oppression posited by urban intellectuals and younger cultural activists. For them, Stalin remains a hero and

attempts to denigrate his legacy are perceived as personal attacks upon their own sense of identity and achievement.

#### **4.3 “We Were Hardworking People...”**

I dwell extensively on the tragedy of World War II and the pre-war repressions in part because this was a conversation that seemed to be constantly present, if not always articulated, during the time I spent in the Sakha Republic. As the above discussion indicates, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened new possibilities to explore the trauma of the war and of the processes of collectivization and industrialization that preceded and followed it, and to remember the suffering, the starvation, and the sacrifice of ordinary people. Popular and scholarly accounts, like those of Alekseev, have sought to challenge older narratives and to pose an alternative narrative of systemic, state-sponsored persecution of the Sakha people and to attribute political responsibility largely to Stalin. This has not been a simple process, however, as the political imperative to dismantle Soviet master narratives and recover untold stories of suffering and oppression often comes up against the very memories and personal experiences of a very large portion of those who lived through these turbulent events.

Ethnographers working in Siberia have highlighted the ways that indigenous Siberians often look back to Soviet times with nostalgia despite a violent history of state subjectification, in which their lives and livelihoods were drastically altered and forced to accommodate utterly alien ideologies and development projects. Rethmann (1997) for example, has argued that this nostalgia is a kind of “historical homesickness,” enabling individuals to both appropriate and assert feelings toward their own history and to express their detachment from a disempowering, harsh present. Similarly, Bloch (2005), argues that elderly Evenki veneration for Stalin and for the Soviet Union more generally, ought to be seen in light of their contemporary experience of increasing marginalization and thus as a kind of protest against the globalizing and liberalizing trends of Neoliberalism. At the same time, she also calls attention to the complex workings of power that simultaneously positioned Evenki as a privileged vanguard of Soviet progress and marginalized their cultural practices and traditions. Contemporary nostalgia, she suggests, focuses on the privilege and



care the Soviet state extended to Evenki in relation to their present marginalization, and also points to the powerful socialization practices of the Soviet state that engendered strong feelings of identification on the part of its citizens.

Elderly Sakha also express nostalgia for the Soviet Union and contrast the social stability of the Soviet Union with present day instability and marginality. For elderly Sakha, the values of the Stalin era, in particular represent a time of order, when everyone did all one could for the country and for socialism, and they contrast the strict moral order of those times with a perceived decline in moral standards of the present. In this way, Sakha nostalgia also represents a form of protest against a disempowering and harsh present and reflects some forms of privilege and care accorded to indigenous Siberians that have since been eradicated or transformed. At the same time, elderly Sakha veneration for Stalin is not only a matter of nostalgia, but it is also about particular forms of subjectivity and historically sedimented structures of feeling (Williams 1977).

In this section, I briefly describe the ways in which rural, elderly Sakha spoke about Stalin in conversations with me. In each of my interviews with these bearers of culture, they insisted upon Stalin's greatness and expressed frustration with more recent attempts to denigrate his memory. It is not that they looked upon their youth with rose-colored glasses, nor that they escaped the hardship and suffering that afflicted much of the region's population during that time; rather, they saw their personal experiences of hardship and suffering in terms of willing sacrifice and representative of the endurance and strength of their generation. They contrasted the values of the Stalin era, when people saw hard work as necessary and good, with the materialism and frivolity of the present era. Furthermore, they also looked to their own childhoods as a time when Sakha culture itself was protected and promoted by the state—not as a period of ethnically-based oppression.

#### **4.3.1 The Great Leader**

As I traveled around the villages of the Nyurba ulus in the summer of 2008, I was astonished by the number of portraits of Stalin that hung in peoples' homes. My own host family jokingly offered me a portrait of Stalin that used to hang in an elderly relative's

home.<sup>34</sup> In addition, almost every village museum had a portrait of Stalin. One even had an entire room dedicated to his role as leader in World War II, underscoring the importance of the War itself in the continued veneration of Stalin. Despite the fact that these images seemed to be present everywhere I went, however, there was a surprising lack of overt discussion about Stalin, particularly in the villages. In conversations about the War, or about collectivization, it was as if the figure of Stalin was always there just under the surface, but at the same time, there was nothing to be said on the subject.

It took me some time to gain the courage to broach the subject myself because it was a sensitive subject and people were defensive about the topic, especially considering my position as an American. Eventually, however, I overcame my hesitancy and started making it a point to ask my interlocutors about Stalin directly. Some were, as I expected, reluctant to speak on the topic at all, but many were not shy about emphasizing their deep support and admiration for him. Generally speaking, for those over the age of 70 and many over 60, the positive legacy of Stalin was simply a fact. When my friend Svetlana was helping me with Sakha language interviews and I asked about Stalin, for example, she would often rephrase my question, “What do you think about Stalin?” as, “In your opinion, Stalin was a great man, no?” as if to moderate any possible disagreement on the subject. Ultimately, every one of the fifteen elderly Sakha who I interviewed in town and in the villages gave me some variation of the response: “I say nothing bad about him.” For some, this was self-explanatory, while others continued to explain their pride in him as a leader. When I asked, Yrya Daria\*, an 84-year old woman well-known for her singing talent about Stalin, she responded defensively: “I received the Stalin medal; at that time, you would be proud to wear it. And even now, I say nothing bad about Stalin.” Similarly, when I asked Anna Gerasimovna\*, a former milkmaid in her 70s, what she thought about Stalin, she quickly responded, “He was a very good man. I have nothing bad to say about him. We sang songs about Stalin, we were a hardworking people.” For Anna Gerasimovna, Stalin was someone about whom they sang songs in their childhood; he represented a set of values, connected with hardwork and self-sacrifice. She seemed to imply that criticizing Stalin would be a form of complaining about the work they had to do, and that their reverence for Stalin was evidence of their hardworking nature.

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<sup>34</sup> They did not know what to do with it themselves and ended up storing it behind the refrigerator.

These kinds of memories of Stalin are not limited to elderly Sakha, but appear to be characteristic across Russia. Paxson (2005), for example, describes similar sentiments among elderly residents of a Russian village. She suggests that for them, Stalin was never a historical person, but rather a kind of symbol, almost like an Orthodox Christian saint. She writes:

When I asked people if they remembered Stalin, they would often answer that, no, they only knew him from the radio and films. People seemed to neither know nor love Stalin as a historical character. However, they were and are intimate with his idealized function; that is, the maintenance of group cohesion through heavy-handed leadership and the bestowing of bounty. Stalin was an index of that functional complex. So prominent in Soviet history, he was like the figure in an icon—powerful and useful and able to be turned to in times of need, but more or less interchangeable with other saints. He sits at the head of the national community as an opaque symbol, a two-dimensional image of necessary proportions and functions.

Paxson draws explicit parallels between the practice of icon worship in Orthodox Christianity and the ways that Stalin's "cult" resembled a kind of religious worship. I do not want to overstate the argument that Stalin-era practices were another instantiation of Orthodox Christian rituals (Kharkhordin 1999; Tumarkin 1997). As Luehrmann (2009) points out, this overlooks many of the ways in which Soviet collective practices departed significantly from Orthodox practices, and furthermore, were governed by substantially different logics. Nevertheless, for elderly Sakha, as for elderly Russians in Paxson's ethnography, Stalin served less as a real human being with strengths and shortcomings and more as an idea, a symbol of a particular era and a set of values—like a Saint, or like God, one would not blame him for life's difficulties.

#### 4.3.2 Defending Stalin

As the above comments also suggest, elderly Sakha were defensive about Stalin when challenged. They insisted upon his role as a Great Leader, who led the country to victory during World War II and who brought modernization to much of the Soviet Union. For them, the criticisms of Stalin initiated by Khrushchev were deeply hypocritical, levied by those who were themselves responsible for the crimes they attribute to Stalin. They do not romanticize their youth but, in fact, describe the War years as the most difficult time of their lives. When I asked Vasilii Mikhailovich, introduced in chapter 2, for example, what he remembered from childhood, he replied: “our childhood was, do you know, it must be said, it was difficult. We were always poor at that time, wages in those days...how do I explain? It was after the war.” It is because of this, however, that the memory of Stalin is so important: they fought and died for Stalin during World War II and afterwards followed his lead in putting their energies into rebuilding the country. As I point out in chapter 2, Vasilii Mikhailovich, who was born in 1939, spent five years after the war in a residential school, where he was fed, clothed, and provided an education, and he was very grateful for this, particularly when he considered his parents’ poverty: “Fortunately, it was the time of Stalin,” he said. To a large degree, he and others see their efforts and those of their parents in terms of willing sacrifices. Contemporary criticism of Stalin, therefore, seems to de-legitimize these sacrifices, and to suggest that their efforts were in vain. And, as the voices for “rehabilitation” of Stalin grow louder in the country more broadly, they find more ways to honor his memory.

One example demonstrates some of the vigorousness with which elderly defended Stalin’s memory. In 2008, the veterans association of Yakutsk sought to replicate the Mirnii example and build a statue of Stalin in the capital city. Unlike the Mirnii veterans, however, the Yakutsk veterans encountered a powerful opposition on the part of the urban Sakha intelligentsia and others, who have been involved in efforts to rehabilitate and recover the names of the victims of Stalinist repression and to expose alternative histories. To resolve the dispute, the city administration commissioned the Yakutsk weekly newspaper, *Yakutsk Vecherniy* to conduct a poll among its readership, and promised to abide by the results of the poll. Ultimately, the statue was not built, but for weeks during the summer of 2008, residents

sent in ballots as well as letters to the editor on both sides of the debate, which spilled into most of the major newspapers in the Republic, including the Sakha language newspaper *Kyym*.<sup>35</sup> In the letters, written in both Sakha language and Russian, respondents expressed a range of deep emotions on the subject that ranged from disgust to vehement defense of the statue. There were also letters from many who sought to understand both sides of the debate. In their defense of the statue, elderly often recalled their childhood under Stalin and their sense of duty to the state. For example, one elderly Sakha man from Nyurba wrote to the newspaper *Kyym* the following:

I joined the Octobrists, pioneers, and the komsomol in my childhood at a time when Stalin was the leader of the communist party and the state. My parents, my teachers raised me as a child to respect and honor Stalin... In people's understanding, I.V. Stalin was a great revolutionary, theoretician, diplomat, military commander, and a brilliant leader... I.V. Stalin knew to prepare the country early on for war. At the beginning of the 1930s, he also said: "We began 50-100 years behind the people of developed capitalist countries in all economic sectors... we cannot take even 10-15 years to make this step, otherwise they will destroy us." For this reason, in the 1930s, despite aggressive opposition, Stalin quickly brought about industrialization and collective farming such that we could win the 1941-45 Great Patriotic War (PN Semenov 2008).

The letter writer attributes the victory in World War II to the aggressiveness of collectivization, implicitly justifying the casualties of repression by the need for rapid industrialization in order to "catch up" with the West. The horrors of the War lent justification to the difficulties of the previous years, as evidence that the hard work was necessary. Another letter published in *Kyym* came with a poem written in honor of Stalin, entitled, "Stalin is the White Light of Day." In the letter, the author relates his memories of the day that Stalin died:

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<sup>35</sup> *Kyym* was the Sakha language communist paper during the Soviet Union and had been published since the 1920s. In the present, like Yakutsk Vecherniy, it is an independently published paper and is widely read by Sakha throughout the Republic. I focus especially on letters to *Kyym* because the letters are written in Sakha and generally express the views of elderly, rural Sakha.

On March 5, 1953 I lay in the hospital with tuberculosis. The day that Stalin died, I remember that even nature noted the day with regret: a tremendous blizzard came such that through the window you could not even see the house across the street. The noise was inside and outside the building. As we listened to the radio in the corridor, the patients all cried for Stalin. I was a 16-year old child and didn't understand Russian very well, but I surmised that a horrible tragedy had occurred and I cried from my heart. In my child's understanding, there was no leader of the Soviet Union and the country would fall and we would all die... Now I do not like that they have dug up bad things about the great Stalin. Our generation knew hard-work and happiness; we lived well. By contrast, in the present life, we do not understand a lot. In connection with this, I would like to request this: honor the older generation and do not publish letters denigrating Stalin (Osipov 2008).

As these examples illustrate, elderly Sakha continue to revere the memory of Stalin and find the attempts to “denigrate” his memory offensive to their own sense of sacrifice and struggle. They came of age at a time when the greatness of Stalin was simply not a question—life was difficult, but they insisted that Stalin led them through these difficult times and was able to stave off total destruction. The criticisms of Stalin came as a shock and, in light of all of the injustices and problems of the present day, many feel that a person with a firm hand like Stalin's is necessary to bring order. As Vasilii Mikhailovich bluntly explained: “[In those days] if someone raped a woman, he would be shot. If a group of people raped a woman, they would all be shot...you have to keep order in Stalin's way (*nado derzhat' po-stalinsku*).” He contrasted the strong state of the Stalin period with what he perceived as the weakness and corruption of the post-Soviet state.

#### **4.3.3 The Value of Work**

In my interviews with elderly Sakha, they often emphasized “work” (*ule*) as a value that belonged specifically to the Stalin era, but was now neglected. This notion of work framed the difficulties of the 1930s and 40s as part of the willing sacrifice that Soviet citizens provided in service of their country. That is to say that many elderly look back at their

childhoods as difficult, but are proud of the hard work that they did, and are even nostalgic for a time when people believed in collective sacrifice for a better world.

Chommut\* was an 82-year-old man, who was a well-known Ohuokaisut, i.e. he could sing in the traditional *toiuk* style and lead the Sakha circle dance, the *ohuokai*. Chommut was also widely respected as a kind of local authority on Sakha history and culture (see also chapter 5). When I went to visit him in the small village of Kangalas, where he lived with his daughter and grandchildren, he seemed unphased by my appearance. This was in stark contrast to the surprise and confusion that many other elderly villagers expressed upon the appearance of an American ethnographer. Chommut spoke no Russian, but greeted me firmly and asked if I spoke Sakha language. When my companions enthusiastically overestimated my ability to speak the language, he did not wait to discover himself how feeble my grasp of Sakha language really was before launching into his own life history. He spoke for almost an hour, while I recorded his story and struggled to understand what I could.

Chommut was born in 1926 in the Kangalas region of the then Markha ulus (part of the present-day Nyurba ulus). His nasleg was collectivized in 1929. At the time, he explained, many people were unhappy about having to join the kolkhoz because they were not able to fish freely, their cattle were taken by the kolkhoz and there was a shortage of milk products. When the kolkhoz was first founded, five Russians settled in the nasleg and helped with growing grain and other vegetables, including pumpkin, onion, garlic, and potato. The Sakha did not like the grains at first but when they tried a kind of Russian bread called *lepeshka*, previously made from barley, they came to like it. Despite the initial difficulties, however, he insisted that people had a good life on the kolkhoz. There were hundreds of families and the farm had a good number of cows and horses. The kolkhoz was a good thing, he insisted, because people got as much profit from their work as they put into it. Furthermore, even during the War, his collective farm did not experience the same degree of famine and starvation that other areas experienced, because they had a chairman who was very good. Chommut spoke about the pre-war days with fondness, explaining that “To this day, I remember and miss life before the war.” As he explained, “In the kolkhoz, work was the most important thing. That is why they [kolkhoz workers] continue to remember their past lives with longing.”

In some ways, Chommut's narrative echoes the nostalgia that Evenki women express in relation to their present-day marginalization (Bloch 2005). Indeed, many elderly are deeply critical of the market economy and have struggled with the collapse of the collective farms and with the disintegration of state structures that would have supported them in the past. For individuals like Chommut, who had been officially recognized for his talents and often traveled around the Republic to perform, his present-day confinement to his home village is especially difficult. Furthermore, for Chommut, as for all of the others I interviewed over the age of seventy, one of the most important qualities about his childhood was work. In each of the fifteen interviews I conducted with elderly residents, my interlocutors underscored the ways in which work was valued in their youth, and many suggested that all of the subsequent development that has occurred in the region was because of this hard work.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, some of my elderly interviewees insisted that things were actually fairly good in the present, and yet still remembered their past lives with longing. Anna Gerasimovna, mentioned above, for example, is a monolingual Sakha speaker and a former milkmaid born in 1931 in a village near Nyurba. She told me that she is happy to see the way the world has gone, emphasizing that there has been progress and there is peace. At the same time, she also insisted that this development was possible because the "kolkhoz workers shaped their own future...they fulfilled their quotas and did quality work." Like other elderly Sakha, Anna Gerasimovna seemed to invoke the communist slogan of the "radiant future" (*svetloe budushchee*), which the Party had relentlessly promoted as a means to justify hardship and struggle. As Sheila Fitzpatrick (1999, 68) has argued, the generation that grew up in the 1930s believed that they were building a new world, and they embraced the necessity to make sacrifices for the purposes of "catching up with the West" and for guarding against the possibility of War. In contemporary memories of this period, that same sense of enthusiasm and belief in the future persists. And for many, the changes of the latter half of the twentieth century justified their optimism.

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<sup>36</sup> Paxson (2005) also underscores narratives of work among the elderly in Russian villages, suggesting that this is not unique to Sakha and that across the USSR, narratives of work held great symbolic importance.



In a recently published memoir, former chief engineer of the Stepan Vasiliev state farm, N.V. Evseev underscores this point more forcefully as he discusses his childhood in the years after the Great Patriotic War (he was born in 1937):

Having passed their childhood during the difficult war years, young people were deeply involved in public activity, thirsting for knowledge, and finding themselves. It was necessary that they use these inspirations in a socially and politically beneficial direction. There were truly many difficulties. Everything was scarce. There was insufficient firewood, few textbooks, and not enough study materials. Moreover, because of glass shortages, one-third of the school windows were closed. Children studied in two and three shifts. There was no electricity and the children came with bits of candle in their pockets... Teachers, students and parents worked together in the kolkhoz, on school repairs, firewood preparation, and in housework. *The motivating force to overcome the difficulties of this time was not material necessity, but rather moral necessity.* The responsibilities of work and study were honored duties, and as such the rules were closely observed... Having endured such strict work discipline, graduates went on to higher education and then helped out financially. (In this way, how many people were saved?) In the higher classes, the children worked in the summer on repairs and preparing firewood. Working in the Amakinskaia expedition, for the air-survey parties, their professional prospects broadened. All of this helped them to enter early into higher education. One year, the school's 40<sup>th</sup> graduating class, near 1000 kids graduated. All of them went on to higher education. Because of this, you can't find a single industry in the Republic in which Nyurba graduates do not work (Solov'eva 2008, 60-61).

While Evseev did not grow up during the 1930s, he expresses a similar sense of self-sacrifice and belief in progress. Like the elderly Sakha I interviewed, he insisted that material well-being was not their driving force, but rather a sense of moral righteousness. It was this sense of "moral necessity," which allowed for the post-war development. Evseev continues to discuss the success of the collective farm, advances in irrigation and farming technology, and also the advent of electricity and air travel. This sense of amazement at their achievements was echoed by many of my interviewees, who had memorized the dates of the first airplane in Nyurba, the first television, the first hospital, and other such markers of development. For some elderly Sakha, the radiant future was not simply an empty phrase, but actually came to fruition. Furthermore, not everyone saw the present only in terms of decline—things were

difficult and values had changed, but many also saw peace in the world, and had come to find a certain sense of comfort in the post-Soviet world.

#### **4.4 Memory and Trauma in Nyurba**

For the oldest generation of Sakha, memories of World War II are often painful ones of suffering and hardship, but they also take pride in their participation, in their survival and their sacrifices, embracing these as having been for the greater good. For many of them, especially those who live in the Nyurba countryside, the denigration of Stalin and of the Soviet system delegitimizes these sacrifices. In a way, we can see this (in some ways) as similar to the emotions surrounding September 11<sup>th</sup> in the United States, in which opposition to the Bush administration came to be equated with a denigration of the sacrifice of the victims of 9-11, and later, of the soldiers of the Afghan and Iraq wars. But here, the difference in perspective is not that of liberals versus conservatives, but rather generational with those who grew up during the Stalin era, staunch defenders of his legacy. As urban intellectuals challenged Soviet narratives, young adult Sakha often accepted and often tacitly supported these efforts.<sup>37</sup> However, by 2008, many young and old alike had begun to grow weary of the constant stream of revelations about repressions and state violence. Especially as the struggle for ethno-territorial sovereignty waned, many younger Sakha saw little need to continue assigning blame, especially when these seemed to so blatantly contradict the deeply held beliefs of parents and grandparents. It is not that they have come to agree with them, but more that the imperative to recover “national memory” increasingly seems to be less important than the need to honor the few remaining veterans and other survivors of the War. In this section, I explore local practices of remembering the war, showing how these are entangled, not only in multiple layers of politics, but also in the complex terrain of emotion and interpersonal relationships as individuals struggle to find the appropriate

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<sup>37</sup> This contrasts with the growing tendency among ethnic Russian youth to embrace the legacy of Stalin as a strong leader. While I encountered a number of young Russian defenders of Stalin, I met only one young Sakha man, who ventured to defend him. I return to this below.

balance between respecting and honoring the deeply held emotions and beliefs of their parents and grandparents and also articulating their own interpretations.

#### **4.4.1 Remembering the War**

The Nyurba museum had been collecting personal memoirs of the Great Patriotic War. A large part of the goal, as the museum guide Viktor Borisov\* explained to me in an early conversation, was to highlight the “other” side of the story, i.e. the famines and hardship that took place on the home front. He echoed the reports from contemporary Sakha historians described above, in emphasizing that many more people died on the homefront, than on the battlefield, and furthermore, World War II took place at a time when most Sakha hardly understood what it meant to be citizens of the Soviet Union. He drew a picture for me in which taiga-dwellers had only begun to be moved into villages, had encountered only a handful of representatives of the Soviet state, and were totally unaware of the processes of industrialization taking place elsewhere in the country. These early Sakha, most of whom did not speak a word of Russian, were sent to Europe and Japan and marched into battle to be slaughtered like cattle. According to Viktor, these early recruits did not even know Germany existed and had little conception of fighting for the Soviet Union, and yet they were asked to die for this country. Furthermore, they knew nothing of modern warfare and they could not understand the orders that were shouted at them, such that they often represented nothing more than warm bodies on the battle field.

Nevertheless, Viktor was not as openly dismissive of the grand narrative of Soviet triumph and Stalin’s heroism as some of the urban intellectuals described above. The stories he collected were, by and large, not narrated with the intention of dismantling or challenging the grand narrative. In our conversations, I sensed that both Viktor and his brother, Boris\*, the museum’s director would have agreed with Alekseev’s interpretation, and yet they were acutely sensitive to the ways that the oldest generation continues to venerate Stalin. In another conversation with Boris, I expressed my surprise about this obvious veneration that I had witnessed. He patiently explained to me that the oldest generation had grown up during under the influence of Stalin’s cult of personality and were still strongly shaped by it. He did

not simply dismiss their perspective, though, even as he indicated his own disagreement with it, but rather tried to explain to me some of the arguments that defenders of Stalin make: they think that the mismanagement was not Stalin's fault, but rather the fault of the lower-level managers, the repressions were not as extensive as the media has insisted, and that the people courageously and enthusiastically followed him into the war.

In a similar way, another close friend of mine in Nyurba, Evdokia,\* often mentioned the arguments about Stalin that she would have with her grandmother with whom she had been very close. Her grandmother, she explained, was extraordinarily strong-willed and committed to the memory of the Great Leader. For this reason, whenever Stalin came up in our own conversations, Evdokia would always invoke her grandmother's arguments, despite the fact that, like Viktor, she also sympathized with the critique. I can only imagine that many such conversations between young people and their grandparents/parents have taken place over the years in more or less straightforward ways.

And so, in small towns like Nyurba, where grandparents and grandchildren are not separated by a language barrier as they often are in the cities, where they often live in the same house, and where the aging population figures prominently in public discourses and rituals, conversations about Soviet history and the Stalin era, in particular, leave much unsaid. It becomes easier to talk about personal experience and trauma—something all can agree on—rather than to broach the messy (and overtly political) subject of Stalin. And furthermore, as I explore in chapters 2 and 3 in more detail, it is beginning to seem less necessary to do so as the political imperative to establish the Soviet or Russian state as an oppressor of the Sakha people wanes with the decreasing possibilities for ethno-territorial sovereignty. Instead, the personal stories and the random artifacts from the war displayed in the village museum—a letter home from a soldier, a gun used on the battlefield—become part of the collective identity and collective experience of loss. They do not need to be explained, as for many Nyurba residents, all that needed to be said, has already been said. Instead, these exhibits and other public rituals of commemoration perform these personal experiences of loss as part of collective identity, creating a community of loss (cf. Oushakine 2009).

#### 4.4.2 Victory Day: Memorializing the War



**Figure 12: The honored Veterans of Nyurba sit below the local political leadership on Victory Day 2008.**

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008 I attended the celebration of Victory Day in Nyurba with my host family. In contrast to the May 1<sup>st</sup> labor day celebrations the week before in which the town's residents had brought balloons and even costumes for an enormous and colorful parade, Victory Day was a sober and serious affair. The sobriety of the holiday was matched by the damp and windy weather, which always preceded the much awaited ice flow on the Viliui River<sup>38</sup> and the start of summer. On the morning of the celebration, Nyurba residents gathered in Lenin Square, where local police and military units marched in formation, while the Nyurba *ulus* head, the chief of police, and a handful of other local VIPs looked on from their perch underneath the Lenin statue. Just beneath them, a handful of veterans sat on a raised platform in front of a banner announcing "Happy Victory Day!" [*s pradnikom Pobedy!*] (Figure 12). The effect struck me as oddly anachronistic, almost like photographs of old Soviet parades, but the military show was scant, with only a few sparse groups of

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<sup>38</sup>The annual ice flow, or *ledokhod*, takes place in mid-late May when the frozen river finally gives way. It is, indeed, a spectacular event when, in the course of a day or two, the entire river cracks into large ice sheets that are quickly swept away in the strong currents.

young men and women, many of whom looked to be high school age, straining their back as straight as possible as they walked back and forth across the square. Valentina, a Sakha woman in her 50s who accompanied me, joked sarcastically about the vast military of Nyurba. It seemed as if the small units were designed to mock the nationalist spectacles and great shows of the military might of the past.



**Figure 13: Nyurba WWII memorial. Inscription (in Sakha): “From here, I left for the war.”**

Following the march, spectators turned their attention to the town’s modest war memorial, which sat just on the other side of Lenin square looking over the river bank, and was now guarded by two soldiers and a small flame. The ulus head, Vladimir Prokop'ev laid flowers on the memorial and spoke a few words about the importance of the War and the heroism of Nyurba residents who fought for their country. Spectators took turns placing their own flowers and taking pictures in front of the memorial (Figure 13). Subsequent events included speeches and songs from school children performed for the veterans. Finally, a play enacted by the Nyurba theater troupe poignantly depicted young male soldiers leaving their wives/girlfriends for the war. The play ended with the women soberly carrying representations of flying white cranes (Figure 14) which are sacred birds in Sakha cosmology. The cranes were supposed to symbolize their memories of the men who never came home, my friend Evdokia explained. Afterwards, the actors honored the veterans with the Sakha national foods, mare’s milk (*kymys*) and fried bread (*alaad'i*). Finally, after all the official events were over, some of the elderly attendees linked arms in an Ohuokai circle, and danced and sang for some time (Figure 15).



**Figure 14: Female actors playing young women, whose men left for the war**



**Figure 15: Elderly Attendees dance Ohuokai at the Victory Day celebrations**

The 2008 Victory Day in Nyurba, seemed to resolve much of the contradictions and disjuncture associated with World War II. It brought together all generations in one day's festivities. It carefully and subtly invoked both the Soviet past (the military parade, the leadership standing under the statue of Lenin) and symbols of Sakha identity (the cranes, the Sakha food, and the *ohuokai*) in ways that were acceptable and even very positive for both those who resisted Soviet narratives and those who embraced them. Even the language of the speeches shifted back and forth from Sakha to Russian, depending on the speaker. Ultimately, the festivities were depicted as an apolitical celebration of the personal

experience of Nyurba residents. The narrative that emerged was one of mourning for the personal traumas, but also of celebration of the personal victories, the distinguished service of individuals, and the endurance of the people. At the same time, there was much left unsaid and unexamined. Unlike the Victory Day celebration in Mirnii three years prior, there were no statues of Stalin unveiled in Nyurba and no mention of the Generalissimo. But neither did anyone speak of the repressions or of the famines and mismanagement.

Oushakine (2009) argues that in the absence of an alternative, unifying framework, discourses of trauma and loss have come to frame senses of post-Soviet national belonging in Russia more generally. As the political and economic turbulence of the 1990s was replaced by the precarious and unsatisfying stability of the 2000s, trauma and violence came to be depoliticized and integrated into daily life and experience. As Oushakine argues,

Questions of political responsibility were eventually displaced by collective practices of grief and discourses of bereavement, as if no positive content could function as a basis for a sense of belonging, and a community must envision a shared experience of loss in order to establish its own borders (5).

Seen in this light, the Nyurba Victory Day celebration focused on the War as collective trauma, a shared history of loss that brought Nyurba residents together. As small children were photographed in front of the war memorial, and school-aged children sang songs for the elderly veterans, they too came to appreciate and to own in some way the tragedy and the triumphs of the Great Patriotic War. As such, Victory Day was an important ritual of collective belonging, helping to dampen and heal the discord and disjuncture that had been exposed during glasnost and turmoil of the 1990s—often dubbed a period of lawlessness (*bespredel*). At the same time, it also sidestepped questions of political responsibility, presenting the War and with it, other kinds of suffering, as if they were the effects of natural and unavoidable disasters, rather than of specific state policies and relations of power.



## 4.5 Stalin and the Dilemmas of Democracy

Both the 60<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of Victory Day were greeted with huge fanfare across the Sakha Republic. The construction of the Stalin statue in Mirnii, and the proposed construction in Yakutsk were supported strongly by both elderly Sakha and Russians. In the case of the Mirnii statue, even some youth organizations in Mirnii lent their support.<sup>39</sup> As I suggest in the introduction to this chapter, the current visibility of this reverence for Stalin can be seen in the context of increasing centralization and state control over commerce and the media, and also in light of Russian nationalism. For contemporary Russian politicians like Popov, the mayor of Mirnii quoted at the outset of this chapter, Stalin serves as a kind of mythical national hero and World War II serves as a founding myth, the moment when the disparate peoples of Russia were drawn together in a common struggle. Vladimir Putin also draws strength from Stalin's legacy, seeking to assert an image of a harsh, yet strong leader, the kind of uncompromising, patriarchal figure that Russia needs. In promoting a "United Russia," he also echoes the older tensions of diversity and multiculturalism that characterized Stalinist cultural policy. The implicit message is that diversity can be a good thing, but it must be managed by a strong, centralized state lest it disintegrate into chaos—as it did after both the Bolshevik Revolution, and after the Democratic Revolution of the early 1990s.

Despite the frustrations with the current trends of centralization on the part of advocates of ethno-national sovereignty, some Sakha have actually appreciated the appearance of stability inaugurated by Putin. Upwardly mobile young people, in particular, often echo the sentiments of Alyosha, a Sakha student I met in Yakutsk. He explained to me that he does not agree with much of Putin's approach, but he believes that Russia needs an authoritarian government. Sadly, almost as if he were admitting defeat, he pointed to both Russia's Tsars and to Stalin as representative of strong leaders who were able to bring order to the country and contrasted this with the disorder inaugurated by the liberalizing trends of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Alyosha was an English student who had studied in Europe and

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<sup>39</sup> According to the opposition newspaper, Yakutsk Vechernii, the local youth organization, "My Generation" lent its support for the statue's construction. The unknown author of the article commented, "Apparently, there is no one to be found in Mirnii to tell the young generation about the 105 concentration camps of "Dalstro" on the territory of Yakutia. Among those who died in the name of the idea of the leader [Stalin] were those who had not long before celebrated victory on the streets of Berlin" (Yakutsk Vechernii 2005). My assumption is that the youth who threw their support behind the statue's construction were largely Russian youth, who comprised the majority of the population of Mirnii.

dreamed of returning someday. He admired the success of liberal ideals in Europe and the US, but yet was convinced that such ideals were unachievable in Russia.

Like Alyosha, other young Sakha commentators were similarly cynical about the prospects of democracy and liberalism in Russia. The movement for ethnoterritorial sovereignty during the 1990s had relied heavily on a language of national liberation from an oppressive centralized state under the Soviet Union. Along with this movement, the history of Stalinism had been reinterpreted as one in which a budding golden age for Sakha culture was extinguished by brutal policies of collectivization, repression of the national intelligentsia, and then by the phenomenal mismanagement of World War II. More recently, however, a different discourse is emerging in which elderly support for Stalin figures prominently. There is an increasingly cynical suspicion that the country is right only with a strong authoritarian government. This is rarely stated so bluntly in public discourses, however. Rather, politicians praise the accomplishments of veterans, the success of Russia in World War II, and the friendship of the peoples that has united Sakha and Russians since the early days of Russian colonization. Veterans, then, enjoy the renewed attention to their perspective and have grown stronger in their push for rehabilitation of Stalin.

The effect of this, however, is also to once again undermine ethnicity as a legitimate grounds for political action. World War II figures powerfully as a narrative of collective Soviet (and now Russian) trauma, a moment when all the peoples of the USSR came together as one. Indeed the similarities of the narratives I collected and those collected by Paxson (2005) in a central Russian village suggest that this imagined community is also very real for those who lived through the War. Despite ethnic specificities (in Nyurba, for example, they celebrated Victory Day by dancing Ohuokai), the peoples of the USSR were united through this experience of tragedy. In focusing on the collective experience of tragedy, however, this renewed discourse of friendship of the peoples also effaces the ways that Soviet Patriotism relied on Russian (ethnic) nationalism to a great degree and the ways that non-Russian peoples were and continue to be marginalized in relation to the dominant Russian ethnicity.

## 4.6 Conclusion

One of the central questions of this chapter is why Stalin has such enduring meanings for different groups of Sakha. On the one hand, contemporary Sakha intellectuals have sought to highlight Stalin's role as a tyrannical dictator, who through force and violence subjected the Sakha and other non-Russian peoples to Soviet/Russian rule. For them, demonstrating Stalinist oppression of Sakha as a people is intimately linked to the project of national revival discussed in the previous chapter, as it legitimates aspirations for sovereignty and asserts a new source of ethnic pride. On the other hand, however, in the minds of most rural, elderly Sakha, Stalin remains a great leader and they contest depictions of him as a violent dictator. For them, the image of Stalin provides an important source of legitimation for the struggles of their childhood, especially those associated with World War II. They consider themselves not to have been oppressed by Stalin, but to have sacrificed willingly for the good of the entire Soviet Union. What this points to is a more complex form of subjectivity in which suffering, and with it an ethic of self-sacrifice, become a source of pride and collective belonging. Stalin becomes an important symbol of this belonging, legitimating their sacrifice.

Despite these contestations over Stalin's memory, conversations about Stalin in Nyurba were strained. People found ways of talking about the War, and the repressions, and the Soviet state more generally without mentioning Stalin. Portraits of him hung silently in homes and museums, but by and large, there was little to be said. In public rituals, like Victory Day, the Great Patriotic War is poignantly remembered as a collective and enduring tragedy, and the few remaining veterans are touchingly honored with songs and flowers. Political responsibility, however, is side-stepped and Stalin is rarely mentioned explicitly. The public spectacle strives to contain disjuncture in collective sentiment and the War comes to serve as a common source of trauma, creating a community of loss without "political" coloring (Oushakine 2009). Nevertheless, as the debates surrounding the Stalin memorials in Mirnii and Yakutsk attest, Stalin continues to haunt collective identities across Russia and the Sakha Republic, and provokes strong emotions wherever he arises. As local conversations elide this disjuncture, the national conversation increasingly legitimizes pro-Stalin discourses. Russian politicians—nationalist, communist, and centrist alike—increasingly

embrace the notion of a non-ethnic, pan-Russian *Rossiiskii* identity, which nevertheless privileges ethnic Russianness, as the category of “Soviet” did in the past. Once again the differential ways in which ethnic groups were incorporated into Russia and the Soviet Union are effaced and tragedy becomes detached from political responsibility. In this view, the issue is not whether Stalin was good or evil, but rather that he is a powerful symbol of Russian might and of a pan-Russian identity.

## Chapter 5: Friendship of Peoples—Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism and Indigenous Rights



**Figure 16: Taanda Museum in former Orthodox Church with Sakha Serge out front**

As we sat together in the drafty one-room library of the Nyurba museum, surrounded by shelves of personal memoirs and histories of the Sakha Republic and the Nyurba ulus, I asked Viktor, a museum guide and historian what role the museum plays in developing cultural identity. He answered that the Nyurba museum is a “spiritual center” for the region, and compared the museum to the Orthodox Church being built just down the street. “The museum,” he went on to explain, “carries within it the history of the Nyurba region and ethnographic information about Yakuts.” His response reflects the point made in the previous chapter about the interconnectedness of Sakha cultural and spiritual revival. Although here, culture and history themselves appears as the Sakha equivalent of religion. Indeed, ethnographic museums are in almost every town and village in the Sakha Republic and function as pilgrimage sites for residents, who will visit them as a means to pay homage to their past. Indeed, they often occupy old churches like the museum in the village of Taanda in Figure 16 above.

As employees of the museum, Viktor and his colleagues share this history and ethnography with the public. School children, for example, come to the museum and Viktor gives them tours and explains Nyurba history. But, he quickly added, he was also grieved by the children's lack of knowledge about their region. He described one recent tour he gave to students from the local lyceum, the advanced high school in the town:

I asked them a comparatively easy question relating to the geography of Yakutia. They didn't know. That saddens me deeply. And they know the geography of Europe very well, for example, Greece and France, for example. That saddens me... This is why we strive so that children will know their region. And the knowledge of one's region forms a person, makes from him a core that is strong and deep. And if a person doesn't know this core, he will never be a full person... this is what they call *cosmopolitanism*.

When I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by cosmopolitanism, he explained:

The lack of knowledge of one's region facilitates the development of cosmopolitanism... cosmopolitan viewpoints, in which a person is not tied to anything. They live where it is warm and sunny...

Where for American political theorists like Martha Nussbaum (2002), cosmopolitanism is a progressive search for an "international basis for political emotion and concern" (4) that reaches beyond the narrow bounds of the nation-state, for Viktor and others working to preserve Sakha "ethnic consciousness," cosmopolitanism portends a loss of locally-grounded cultural identity. As the previous chapters have emphasized, this is clearly problematic in light of efforts to revalue and promote Sakha cultural identity as rooted in the territory of the Sakha Republic. Like Julie Cruikshank notes in the context of the Canadian North, histories of dwelling in a particular place have been crucial to indigenous identity as a form of richly textured and integrated "local knowledge" vis-à-vis the flattening tendencies of nation-state administration (Cruikshank 2007).

At the same time, like other indigenous activists in the world, Viktor's resistance to cosmopolitanism does not eschew all forms of translocalism. In fact, he acknowledged the inevitability and even desirability of some form of globalization, but yet insisted that it was

possible (and necessary) for Sakha to maintain cultural identity even as they encountered powerful translocal constituencies. For example, while many Sakha feared the planned expansion of the Transsiberian railroad to Yakutsk, Viktor supported it, insisting that the economic benefits to Sakha will outweigh the potential negative effects of any increases in immigration (especially from China and Central Asia) on Sakha cultural cohesion—a fear articulated by a number of Sakha activists.<sup>40</sup> Viktor eschewed exclusionary and isolationist politics, and he and other advocates of cultural revival in Nyurba advocated a positive assertion of Sakha cultural identity through museum exhibits, school programs, and other forms of cultural revival that would help to link Sakha with a kind of global community of peoples. Their goals echoed recent attempts to highlight multiple and “rooted” cosmopolitanisms that have emerged outside of or in contestation of EuroAmerican/Kantian ideologies of cosmopolitanism (Cheah and Robbins 1998; Pollock et al. 2000). As Viktor further explained in the same conversation: American MacDonald’s food and Jordasche jeans will inevitably make their way even to the far reaches of Yakutia, and Sakha may indeed eat and enjoy hamburgers, but hamburgers will never replace their native foods. Sakha will nevertheless eat their *alaad’i* (Sakha fried bread) and *kyuorchek* (Sakha cream).

This discussion of cosmopolitanism is also deeply bound up in the complex negotiations surrounding post-Soviet ethnic politics explored in the previous chapters. Viktor’s ideas about cosmopolitanism and ties to place have a more specific genealogy in Soviet ideologies of ethnic identity, internationalism, and “cosmopolitanism” (*kosmopolitizm*). In using the term cosmopolitanism, Viktor invokes a history of Soviet (and especially Stalinist) condemnation of “rootless cosmopolitanism,” in which the pretenses to worldliness of supposed bourgeois sympathizers signaled ethnocentric arrogance and

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<sup>40</sup> In the post-Soviet period, many of the most recent “immigrants” have not been Russian or other “European” nationalities, but rather from Central Asia and the Caucasus—all of whom are called “blacks” due to their swarthy complexion and stigmatized as poor immigrants, especially in Western Russian cities (Lemon 2002). This is also the case in the Sakha Republic, where Sakha and Russians alike often accuse them of taking work from locals. Advocates of cultural revival, then, worry that the railroad will bring more such immigrants and further dilute the Sakha population, which has been growing rapidly as a percentage of the entire population of the Republic due to Russian out-migration. This is complicated, however, by the fact that Sakha celebrate their cultural ties with the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, who had long been positioned higher on the Soviet ladder of development, with a Union Republic. What this means is that a discursive representation of an idealized Kazakh and Kyrgyz culture persists, but the Kazakh and Kyrgyz immigrants working in construction and other blue-collar jobs fail to meet these idealized expectations and so become even more stigmatized. This is not to say that all Sakha saw them in this light—many, like Viktor, were curious about the immigrants and sought out opportunities to compare native languages and other cultural attributes. Nevertheless, the immigrant communities remained segregated, especially due to the fact that they were often brought temporarily, for a single project, and would return home after.

questionable loyalties that extended beyond the USSR.<sup>41</sup> Cosmopolitanism was contrasted with Soviet “internationalism,” which allowed for (and encouraged) pride in one’s unique national traditions (Humphrey 2004; Slezkine 1996, 856). As we shall see, Soviet ideas of internationalism, embodied in the notion of “Friendship of Peoples” continue to circulate in contemporary Russia and shape interethnic cultural politics like those described in the previous chapter. This idea, however, is intensely contested as both Sakha cultural revival advocates and Russian state representatives claim to more authentically embrace this ideal.

In the context of the post-Soviet Sakha cultural politics, Viktor’s critique of cosmopolitanism sheds some of its Cold War implications and echoes a broader postcolonial critique of EuroAmerican-led “globalization.” In critiquing globalization, indigenous activists and postcolonial critics alike have called attention to the ways that universalist and cosmopolitan ideologies often mask processes of domination and subjugation as more powerful groups and nations assert their hegemony over smaller and less powerful peoples (Latour 2004; Chakrabarty 2000; LT Smith 2005). As Bruce Grant (2010) notes in his discussion of cosmopolitanism in Baku, Azerbaijan, supposedly egalitarian cosmopolitan ideologies are often advanced by those “looking to assert the mantles of power” and inevitably reinforce and/or redraw hierarchical lines of difference. These discussions also echo critiques of neoliberal multiculturalism, which have highlighted the ways that nation-states nominally embrace their inherent cultural diversity, abandoning overt assimilationist practices of the past, but yet elide the unequal power relations that shape ethnic difference (Povinelli 1998). Sakha activists reappropriate Soviet discourses of anti-cosmopolitanism and internationalism to highlight ongoing relations of inequality that are elided in contemporary Russian state discourses of a civic, pan-Russian identity.

At the same time, Russian politicians have also sought to claim Soviet discourses of “friendship of peoples” in service of a pan-Russian nationalism. Like the older Soviet discourse, contemporary state assertions of friendship of peoples have insisted that the peoples of Russia are harmoniously united in a single state. They contest the new meanings that Sakha sovereignty advocates have sought to give this discourse. However, like Viktor,

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<sup>41</sup> In practice, Soviet-era condemnation of “cosmopolitanism” often served to justify persecution of those with questionable loyalties and underlay the persecution of various nationalities, especially Jews by virtue of their lack of homeland in the USSR and their supposed sympathies with the capitalist world (Grant 2010, 131-132; Humphrey 2004, 144-145).



they are also suspicious of globalization. This chapter discusses the polyvalent meanings of contemporary “Friendship of peoples” rhetoric and its roots in contradictory Soviet ideologies of ethnicity and nationality. I begin with a discussion of the early roots of Soviet nationalities’ policies and the complicated relationship between ideas and practices of liberation and oppression. In the second half of the chapter, I return to discourses of friendship of peoples in the post-Soviet Sakha Republic and show the ways in which different actors assign new and diverse meanings to these concepts.

### **5.1 Early Bolshevik Views on Colonization and Interethnic relations**

As the previous chapters have begun to suggest, the incorporation of indigenous Siberians into the Soviet state was ostensibly premised upon significantly different grounds than was the incorporation of native groups into other contemporary states. In the US, Canada, Australia, and other classic contexts of settler colonialism, national projects of the early twentieth century aimed at the erasure of difference and disjuncture in the national community and explicitly rejected the possibility of ethnic autonomy. Biolsi (1995), for example, describes how the US Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) dismantled the system of reservations that had provided the basis for Lakota autonomy, and redistributed the land to individual Lakota. Further, the OIA treated individual Lakota as legal children, and kept their lands and money “in trust” until they were deemed sufficiently capable of managing their own affairs, a process that often took generations. In a different context, Gordillo (2004) describes the ways in which “the Argentinean national project forged in the late nineteenth century hinged on the violent erasure of what was seen as its negative counterpart,” (48), i.e. unassimilated indigenous groups. A series of full-scale military campaigns in the late 1800s were designed to remove any semblance of native Toba autonomy. Subsequently, the formerly Toba controlled land was transformed into a “quantifiable, measurable commodity sliced into lots to be made available on the market” (50). Nadasdy (2003) tells a similar story of forced settlement and lumpenization of the native peoples in the Yukon as their lands were appropriated by white settlers, although this did not happen until the mid-twentieth century. Notably, in each of these instances, native

autonomy and difference presented obvious obstacles to the expansion of capitalism. Native peoples were ultimately incorporated as a proletarian underclass of the dominant settler society, their poverty naturalized as the inevitably result of the lack of development in relation to global capitalism.

By contrast, early Bolsheviks saw themselves in the role of liberators, working against a colonial Empire, and therefore as naturally allied with the colonized peoples, who they recognized as the most victimized by Russian colonialism. The original Bolshevik Constitution of 1918 established the Soviet Union as a “federal system” on the principle of “national-territorial autonomy” with the idea that non-Russian ethnic groups should and could govern themselves. Notably, this ethno-territorial structure was advocated by Joseph Stalin himself (Hirsch 2005, 67). Stalin, who began his Soviet political career as the Commissar of Nationalities, joined Lenin and other prominent Bolsheviks in the early 1920s in their outspoken criticism of Russian “Great power chauvinism,” and in the dominant Bolshevik belief that oppressive Tsarist policies had produced nothing but “distrust and hatred of everything Russian” on the part of non-Russian peoples (Stalin 1953, 243). He argued that problems of chauvinism on the part of Russian communists necessitated a framework for self-determination for the various nationalities of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the task was to “do away with all disabilities, formal and actual...which prevent the peoples of the East from *displaying maximum independent activity* in emancipating themselves from the survivals of medievalism and of the national oppression which has already been shattered” (Stalin 1953, 246; my emphasis).

These statements also illustrate that the Soviets were not exempt from their own versions of Orientalism, and paternalism with regard to non-Russian groups. Indeed, the early Bolsheviks shared beliefs about nation, empire, and economic development with European and Russian scholars, and the Soviet federal structure ultimately enshrined a hierarchy of autonomy based on official perceptions of the relative advancement of various ethnic groups (Hirsch 2005). Those groups deemed less capable of governing themselves by virtue of their economic backwardness, especially the “small-numbered peoples of the North,” were limited in their autonomy with the “Committee of the North” playing a role similar to that of the US OIA. The Bolshevik government also considered proposals for native governance modeled in part on the American reservation system, although these were

ultimately rejected in favor of greater integration (Slezkine 1994b, 148-155).<sup>42</sup> By and large, the ethno-federal system allowed many native groups an unprecedented degree of autonomy and participation in structures of governance, even among the small-numbered peoples of the North. This was particularly enhanced for those groups deemed “more advanced” according to the Marxist timelines of development like the Sakha. In the Yakut ASSR, Sakha were involved in the Bolshevik movement from its early stages, and both Bolshevik and non-Bolshevik Sakha intellectuals took an active role in shaping Republic governance in the 1920s (see chapter 4). While newly arriving Russian communists and Sakha intellectuals alike struggled with the perceived “backwardness” of the mostly rural population, socialist construction ultimately aimed to incorporate the mass of the population into the political process as quickly and evenly as possible. Perhaps more importantly, native lands were not seized and redistributed for private ownership as they had been in the examples cited above. Socialist property regimes, which claimed all lands and resources to be the property of the state, were of course starkly different than those that had come before them and were met with significant resistance, especially on the part of former property owners. However, the state claimed all lands and resources equally without forcible removal (at least initially), and native peoples did not become an ethnicized underclass as they had elsewhere in the world.

Importantly, unlike the US administrators in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, official Bolshevik ideology represented backwardness as having been *imposed* upon the native peoples by an oppressive Tsarist regime.<sup>43</sup> As Stalin elaborated in a 1919 article:

We are referring to the tsarist government’s imperialist policy aimed at crushing the peoples of the East, the insatiable greed of the Russian merchants who acted as masters in the eastern regions, and also, the Jesuitical policy of the Russians priests, who strove by fair means or foul to drag the Moslem peoples into the bosom of the Orthodox Church. (Stalin 1953, 245)

This picture of native oppression was critical to the legitimization of the Bolshevik role as liberators of the masses. For this reason, early Bolshevik historians sought to highlight the

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<sup>42</sup> The Russian ethnographer, Bogaraz, was among the most outspoken proponents of American-style reservations and argued that they would provide maximal independence and protection of native life-styles from Russians.

<sup>43</sup> Of course, they were not the only ones to recognize these kinds of inequalities at the time as Marxists, nationalists, and a range of other sympathetic observers all over the world noted the negative ramifications of colonial policy on indigenous and other colonized peoples. Bolsheviks were, after all, in close conversation with transnational political discourses.

history of oppression that native peoples experienced through colonization. One of the most prominent Bolshevik historians, for example, was Mikhail Pokrovskii, who insisted that Russian expansion in the East was, for non-Russians, an unmitigated tragedy and an “absolute evil.” In his comprehensive history of Russia, written in 1910-13, Pokrovskii famously termed the Russian Empire a “prison of peoples” and chronicled the history of violence, enslavement, and subjugation of the native populations of the Empire from the early days of Muscovite expansion. He argued that “Great Russia was built on the bones of ‘aliens,’ and it is no great consolation to the latter that 80% of its blood flows in the Great Russians” (quoted in Tillet 1969, pg. 27).

Beginning in the mid-1930s, official interpretations of history began to shift in connection with the growing threat of war. It is difficult to generalize about official interpretations at this time as official statements were often contradictory, issued in relation to specific inquiries and concerns, rather than as blanket statements. The general political climate of the country was tense, and official perspectives on a range of issues appeared chaotic as repressions mounted in 1937-38. Indeed, some have suggested that official vagueness on the correct party line was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Stalinist government to instigate fear and confusion, and provided a pretext for the arbitrary arrest of individuals, and especially scholars. Nevertheless, the dominant viewpoint on colonial history that emerged at this time was that of the “lesser evil” (*naimenshchego zlo*) formula (Tillet 1969; Zuev 2000b). According to this formula, tsarist colonialism was still bad, but not so bad as other kinds of colonialism, and in some regions actually spared native groups from an even worse fate at the hands of British, Turkish or other imperialists. Under this view, colonization was inevitable and also (ultimately) progressive as “more advanced” groups encountered less advanced groups. Russian colonization was comparatively peaceful. In this framework, resistance movements were treated variously with some labeled as progressive and others as reactionary.

We see this view emerge in the first comprehensive histories of the Yakut ASSR written in the late 1930s and 40s. The historian Sergei Tokarev, for example, in an early monograph on Sakha history, *The Social Organization of the Yakuts in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, condemns the brutality of Cossack soldiers and Russian merchants in early years

of colonization. In a section entitled, “The colonization, oppression and pauperization of the national population,” he is unequivocal in his characterization of Russian conquest as violent:

The rapacious (*khishchnicheskii*) nature of the Tsarist conquerors (*zavoevateli*) in Siberia and in Yakutia has been acknowledged even by the bourgeois-exploitative camp of historians... Indications of...pogroms, murder and theft perpetrated against the iasak population on the part of service people begin with a 1638 order to the first Yakut general (*voevoda*) P. Golovin, and repeat in every subsequent order given to the generals. (Tokarev 1945, 265)

He goes on to describe repeated instances of enslavement, violence, theft, and un-payable tribute obligations, which together thrust the bulk of Sakha into poverty and created a new feudal regime, in which the Sakha leadership ultimately cooperated with the Russian conquerors. The brutality of colonization, he argues, resulted in a severe decrease in the native population (273). In this way, he appears to echo the early interpretations of colonialism as an unmitigated evil.

However, after describing and condemning these abuses, he then moderates this view by suggesting that these were characteristic primarily of the early years of colonization, and the Sakha eventually came to prosper under the new regime. In the long run, he points out, the Sakha ended up increasing in population (Tokarev 1945, 274). Furthermore, he compares the Russian colonization with that of other European conquests and insists that the Russian conquerors were “softer” than their European counterparts: “Against the backdrop of the colonial politics of European states of the time, the establishment of Russian administration in Siberia...appears comparatively gentle [*miagkim*]” (274). He lists the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonial regimes as far more cruel, having resulted in the complete extermination of the native population of some places. By contrast he points to the ways that many Siberian groups survived and ultimately “progressed” and multiplied due to the positive influence of Russian culture.<sup>44</sup> This “lesser evil” formula, of course, is not unique to this context, but echoes the ways in which colonial regimes all over the world have

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<sup>44</sup> The difference in outcome here from the New World, also might be do in part to a greater resistance to diseases carried by settlers on the part of Native Siberians compared with Native Americans.

contrasted their own colonialism with that of other empires, and thereby justified it on the basis of a supposedly more civilized imperialism.

The “lesser evil” formula emerged in the context of World War II, as the Soviet government sought to inspire patriotic support for the war effort, and to unite the disparate people of the Soviet Union. This could be seen, in part, as a response to growing nationalist movements in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, many of which collaborated with the advancing German army against the Soviets and issued calls to arms against the Soviet Union as yet another incarnation of Russian colonialism. Furthermore, the Soviet government looked to incite the patriotism of the majority Russian population, and looked to Russian history for military heroes to serve as inspiration. It was with this in mind that Tsarist military leaders like Aleksandr Nevskii and Peter the Great were “rehabilitated” as folk heroes, who led their people to victory (Tillet 1969). Their colonialist exploits were initially downplayed or recast as wars of necessity. There were initial attempts to celebrate historical, non-Russian military heroes as well, but these were downplayed as most had taken part in resistance movements against the Russians, and as such presented a problem for efforts to present a united Soviet front in the struggle against Nazi Germany.

## **5.2 Indestructible Friendship and Voluntary Annexation**

By the mid-1950s, the official Soviet narrative of Tsarist colonization would change 180 degrees, such that historians and society more generally were celebrating the “*voluntary annexation*” of non-Russian peoples by the Russian State and the long history of cooperation and friendly relations between the peoples of the Russian empire. It was at this time that the phrase “indestructible friendship” (*nerushimaia druzhba*) came into popular usage, and the notion of “friendship of peoples” became associated not only with post-Revolutionary Soviet Russia, but with the entire history of the Russian Empire. What began as a tentative rehabilitation of Russian military figures in order to highlight Soviet military traditions, developed into a full-fledged rehabilitation of Russian nationalism (Zuev 2000b). In the post-War years, Russians were described in both official statements and in historical literature as the leading nation of the Soviet Union and the “elder brother” to other national

groups, and historians came to write about the expansion of the Russian empire as a progressive event that led to the advancement of the non-Russian peoples. Resistance movements were either minimized or characterized as reactionary phenomena of tribal despots or feudal lords seeking to hold on to power. In all cases, relations between simple Russians and non-Russians were characterized as friendly.

The new view on history was also applied to the history of Yakutia as represented by a new volume published in 1957 under the direction of Tokarev, the Moscow historian cited above. The new authoritative history of Yakutia, *Yakutia from the 1630s to 1917*, downplays all of the violence, murder, and enslavement as isolated instances in an otherwise “peaceful” expansion of Russian settlers (Tokarev, Gogolev, and Gurvich 1957). Indeed, in stark contrast to Tokarev’s earlier work, there is almost no mention of violence and mistreatment of the native population by the colonial administrators. Individual battles between Sakha and Cossack regiments are mentioned but typically presented as unprovoked attacks by local Toions, Sakha military, and political leaders. For example, one early battle is described as such: “Afraid of losing their privileged position, the prince-toions organized an opposition, into which their tribesmen were also dragged” (Tokarev, Gogolev, and Gurvich 1957, 29). Furthermore, instances of “murder” were largely attributed to the native population, rather than soldiers, merchants, or other Russians. According to this narrative, the Toions ultimately gave up their resistance voluntarily and made a peace agreement with the Tsarist administration. As Tokarev et al. describe it, “At first, the Toionist elite saw in the [Russian] servicemen competitors for the exploitation of their clansmen...but after incurring defeat they came to be in favor themselves of peaceful relations with the new power” (1957, 33). In total, the colonization of Yakutia was characterized as having “great progressive significance for Russia and for Yakutia,” having resulted in the introduction of grain cultivation and formal education (Tokarev, Gogolev, and Gurvich 1957, 40).

It is important to note that it did not require a wholesale denial of the earlier evidence that had been used in the “conquest” narratives. Indeed, the authors of the later text acknowledge that “monstrous atrocities” occurred in the course of Russian expansion. The difference, however, is in the weight put on the atrocities versus the cooperation—the earlier text lists atrocity after atrocity and concludes that these were fundamental to the colonization process, while the later text lists the progressive influences and only mentions the atrocities

in passing as unfortunate byproducts of expansion. They conclude that “the annexation of Yakutia proceeded for the most part peacefully: individual clashes with iasak collectors were episodic in nature” (Tokarev, Gogolev, and Gurvich 1957, 40). The atrocities are attributed to individual settlers rather than the state and state responsibility is ultimately elided.

From the mid-1950s until the 1980s, the dominant narrative advanced in official publications and statements regarding the colonization of Yakutia was one of “voluntary annexation.” The history books were rewritten with this in mind, and texts published under the earlier frameworks were either banned or “updated” (often through footnotes) to reflect the new narrative. With few exceptions,<sup>45</sup> scholars argued that the incorporation of Yakutia was, in total, a progressive and positive event for the indigenous population of the region. According to this narrative, the arrival of Russians pushed Sakha society from the “clan-patriarchal” mode of social organization into the feudal stage of history, and, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century advanced, allowed them to experience the initial development of capitalist social relations. Hardship was “episodic” in nature, not systematic, and “simple” Russians and non-Russians related to one another with mutual support and friendship. Even after the worst of the violent repressions were halted with Stalin’s death, official narratives continued to emphasize only the “friendship of peoples,” and adherence to this narrative was enforced through strict censorship, and periodic prosecutions for “bourgeois nationalism” and anti-Russian activity (Alekseev 2007, 317; Argounova-Low 2007). Indeed, the Khrushchev administration embraced this narrative to the point of inaugurating regular celebrations of the “anniversaries” of the incorporation of various peoples. In 1957, for instance, the Central Party issued a proclamation in honor of “the success achieved by the Yakut People in economic and cultural construction and in inauguration of the 325<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the voluntary entry of Yakutia into the Russian state (quoted in Alekseev 2007, 318). The 2007

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<sup>45</sup> One exception, for example, is the Sakha historian, Georgii Basharin, who, in his 1956 history of Yakutia, boldly revived the argument that “Tsarist Russia was a prison of peoples.” While he refrains from some of the more inflammatory language of the 1920s, he nevertheless lists the negative effects of colonization and in contrast to Tokarev et al. insists that violence and oppression “were the characteristic features and results of the colonial politics of tsarism carried out in Yakutia from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to 1917” (Basharin 1956, 356). Eight months after this work was published, however, Basharin reversed his position and accepted the theory of “voluntary annexation,” which his subsequent works followed without exception (Alekseev 2007, 319). One can only assume that there was considerable pressure from the authorities, enhanced by his already precarious position as having been convicted of bourgeois nationalism in 1952 for an earlier work on three banned/repressed Sakha poets.



celebration of the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary described in chapter 3, was part of a long sequence of anniversaries that began in 1957.

### **5.3 Soviet Multiculturalism in Practice**

A number of ethnographers working in post-Soviet Siberia have examined the contradictory notions of “culture” that circulated at different times during the Soviet Union and shaped the experience of Soviet modernity for indigenous Siberians (cf. Bloch 2004; Grant 1995; P Gray 2005; Rethmann 2001). As these ethnographers note, official Soviet discourses oscillated between ethnocentric disdain for the practices of more “backward” ethnic groups, and a nostalgic admiration for the seemingly timeless nature of indigenous tradition. This opposition between “primitive” and “civilized” remains pivotal in contemporary Sakha ability to speak with an indigenous voice (cf. de la Cadena and Starn 2007a; Tsing 2007). Ultimately, official Soviet policy came to celebrate certain elements of indigenous culture within the circumscribed realm of folkloric tradition. Gray (2005), for example, writes:

At the start of the Soviet era, these [folkloric traditions] were marked as the very characteristics that had to be rooted out in order for socialism to progress, but they were ultimately considered charming, interesting, or utilitarian enough to merit preservation in books and museums and certain performing venues, and as evidence of the Soviet Union’s international character and friendship with all peoples (142-3).

Beginning in the 1930s, the Soviet state insisted that it had achieved the unprecedented feat of building a multinational society without national hatreds or hostilities. After World War II, the dominant narrative insisted that not only were these hostilities absent under Soviet rule, but that they never in fact existed. This friendship was not only pronounced in the history books, but it was expected to be constantly demonstrated in practice, especially by non-Russian peoples. This was accomplished especially by means of colorful folkloric performances that underscored the happy and prosperous life of ethnic minorities in the USSR.

In these displays of interethnic peace and happiness, dance, music and traditional dress served as colorful “national forms” that served to visually and auditorially index ethnic difference without presenting a threat to socialist relations of production and Russian dominance. Concerts in Yakutia (like elsewhere in the USSR) included folkloric performances representing not only Sakha and other native groups of Yakutia, but also Russians, Uzbeks, Georgians, and others from all over the Soviet Union. In my own fieldwork, Sakha friends fondly recounted the various dances they learned as children that included Uzbek and Nenets dances as well as those of non-Soviet peoples, like the popular Indian dance, suggesting that these displays were not only mandated by the state, but they were also embraced broadly as gestures of respect for other peoples, and appreciation of diverse cultural forms. Even today, Yhyakh and other celebrations of Sakha culture include requisite performances of Uzbek or Nenets dances, carefully choreographed to represent the “essence” of each group (Adams 1999), and Sakha enthusiastically perform these both for their aesthetic value and as a gesture of appreciation of other peoples’ cultures.

Officially, all the “cultures” of the Soviet Union were celebrated equally in colorful folkloric festivals and concerts, and each nationality had its own traditional dances, folklore, and cuisine, which the other nationalities were supposed to learn and praise. Nevertheless, dominant narratives embraced a strict hierarchy of ethnic group types at the top of which was the Great Russian nation, which had selflessly guided the other nationalities through the various stages of history and continued to guide them on the path of socialist progress (see also, Slezkine 1994, 303-335). Proving one’s commitment to the values of “internationalism” came to be synonymous with praising the Russian people. As the Secretary of Ideology of the Yakut communist party wrote in 1955:

The Great Russian nation has always shown and continues to show to all the peoples of the world the path to peace, happiness and communism. The peoples of the USSR, united around their older brother—the great Russian people...victoriously stride toward communism. The unbreakable friendship of the Soviet peoples is a guarantee of long-term victory in the building of communism, one of the most important strengths in the development of Soviet society, and the basic foundation of the multinational socialist state (quoted in Alekseev 2007, 15, my translation).

In conjunction with this, folkloric forms of non-Russian peoples were often mobilized in demonstration of this friendship. Folklore performers embraced themes of Soviet patriotism and (literally) sang the praises the Russian people. For example, the well-known “Song of the Great Moscow” by the famous Olonkhosut and Ohuokaisut Sergei Zverev was dedicated to the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Moscow and sings:

Moscow! The fog of ignorance has been dispelled by you!  
Moscow! You have lit the dawn of reason,  
You were always the dwelling place  
Of men of art, science and labor.  
You are the center, where from clan to clan  
The Great Russian hero-people grew and became strong.<sup>46</sup>

In this way, the folkloric traditions of the non-Russian nationalities were “preserved” but also “internationalized” and openly and consciously incorporated elements of state ideology. As folklorist Frank Miller (1991) points out, Soviet administrators deliberately courted folklore performers to apply their talents in service of state-defined objectives. This resulted in a rich array of state-authorized folklore—songs, dances, oral poetry, and material culture—that supposedly retained their “national” particularities of form, but expressed a uniformly Soviet content and suggested the underlying “sameness” of the people. Mary Doi (2001) similarly points to the ways in which dance in Uzbekistan helped to construct a unique Uzbek national identity, but also helped to more fully incorporate Uzbeks into Soviet society, for example by encouraging women to dance on stage, which they had not done traditionally.

What this points to is the complicated relationship between national forms and socialist content during the Soviet Union, where Soviet administrations actively promoted certain “national forms” for the purposes of underscoring interethnic harmony, but yet simultaneously feared their potential to eclipse Soviet unity. As such national folklore was promoted yet closely monitored by the state.

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<sup>46</sup> Москва! Тобой развеяна незнаний мгла! / Москва! Ты зори разума зажгла, / Ведь ты была обителью всегда / Мужей искусств, науки и труда. / Ты — центр, где рос и креп из рода в род / Великий русский богатырь — народ! (quoted in, Zvereva 2000). The English translation above is my translation of the Russian, which was translated from the Sakha original by Zvereva, except for the first two lines, which are quotations from Pushkin.

The Sakha festival of Yhyakh is a good example of the contradictory ways that national folkloric forms were embraced by the Soviet state. In the central uluses, which were supposed to harbor deep-seated nationalist tendencies, Yhyakh was actually banned over concerns about bourgeois nationalism (Argounova-Low 2007). In Nyurba and other regions where it was not banned, however, it was reimagined as a “Soviet folk-calendrical festival” (Paxson 2005) and served as a central platform for demonstrations of Soviet unity. When I inquired about Soviet versions of the festival, the Nyurba museum gave me the manuscript of an article written in the late 1980s by the Sakha philosopher Ksenofont Utkin, who has since become a prominent advocate of Sakha cultural revival. In this article, entitled “Yhyakh—festival of the friendship of the peoples,” he describes Yhyakh as it was celebrated in various Viliui uluses and underscores each of the “international” elements of the festival and the regular presence of international guests. He provides the following description of the Nyurba Yhyakh of 1980:

At the beginning of the opening ceremonies, trumpeters step into the stadium and the sound of pistol shots imitating a salute is heard. The amplifier turns to the “Victory March” by [Yakutian composer] Saliman-Vladimirov. Against a background of celebratory Russian-Yakut music, in both Yakut and Russian languages, the announcers invite [the spectators] to Ysyakh. Then appears a procession of motorcyclists from the 15 Union Republics. A line of war veterans files past. The festival is adorned with a symbolic group of pairs of Russian and Yakut young women in their most elaborate national costumes. Following them, a costumed procession of the participants of amateur artistic ensembles, and further: an *algyschit* [a kind of traditional priest] with his attendants, theater actors, and athletes. Banners unfurl with the words: “Glory to the KPSS [the Communist Party],” “Peace,” “Friendship,” “Happiness,” “*Eie* [peace]” “*D’ol* [happiness]” “*Doghordohuu* [friendship].” The shout “Urui-Aikhal” “Sargy-Michil!” by the participants of the opening ceremonies is answered with a resounding “Ura!” Such begins the Yakut festival of Ysyakh (K Utkin n.d., 13-14).

In this description, Utkin carefully points out each of the “international” elements of the festival and celebrates the ways in which it has shed some of its “national particularity.” Notably, there is no spiritual ritual as there is in the description that opens this chapter, although an *algyschit* apparently files in along with the motorcyclists and war veterans. By

and large, however, the spiritual content of the festival is missing, eliminated as a “harmful survival,” and replaced by “socialist content.” In this case, the socialist content is represented by displays of international friendship, and also by an increased emphasis on the festival’s “calendrical” role, i.e. as a summer solstice festival that marked the beginning of the haying season. The Soviet Yhyakh was both a celebration of Sakha ethnic identity and of the increasingly international character of the Soviet peoples, evidence of the “convergence and merging of nations” (*sblizhenie i sliianie natsii*). This stands in stark contrast to the ways in which Yhyakh has been celebrated in the post-Soviet period as the most important celebration of an autonomous and autochthonous Sakha cultural identity. Although, as we shall see, this is also changing in the present.

Within this discourse of friendship, non-Russian ethnicity had to be carefully monitored lest it betray any signs of pernicious “nationalism.” Folkloric forms, like the Olonkho, Ohuokai, or Yhyakh were promoted as examples of Sakha ethnic identity that could be staged as evidence of Soviet internationalism and interethnic friendship. However, performances of one’s own folklore unaccompanied by sufficient praise for Russians could be seen as manifestations of nationalism. In the uluses of the Sakha Republic, for example, these folkloric forms were handled differently according to local politics. In the central regions of the Sakha Republic, which had long been labeled hotbeds of nationalism<sup>47</sup> (Argounova-Low 2007), celebration of both Ohuokai and Yhyakh were either discouraged or outright prohibited. In the Viliui regions, far from the historical centers of Sakha culture, however, they were largely sustained and even supported by the state throughout the Soviet period. At the same time, Sakha people in the Viliui region as well as in the central regions of Yakutia recalled taboos on speaking Sakha language in public, and told me that Olonkho had been more or less banned throughout the Republic. I was told, for example, that Zverov, the Olonkhosut who sang the Song of Moscow, quoted above was under constant surveillance and his movement was restricted. In this way, we can see how “friendship of

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<sup>47</sup> Most of the early Sakha leaders had come from the central regions. Argounova-Low points to the Tatta region as a particularly suspect place because of the large numbers of early Sakha leaders born there, including leading Bolshevik and Olonkhosut Oiunskii, and the poet/ethnographer Kulakovskii. In addition, the region of Chappanda had long been labeled as nationalist because it was the site of a particularly robust resistance movement during the Civil War, which resulted in much of the population being relocated.

peoples” worked differently in different locations, and this also foreshadows the ways that it shifted through time as well. I return to this below.

While it was embraced publicly, at least, the narrative of “friendship” elided differential power relations that shaped the incorporation of non-Russian peoples into the Soviet state. As is clear from above, Russians held a privileged place in official discourses, which required constant praise for the Russian nation. As Katherine Graney (2010) notes for Tatarstan, this privilege was not always visible to Russians themselves since they did not have “their own” national state, and, especially in the “national regions,” Russian “national forms” were not always as visible as those of non-Russian groups (despite often extensive efforts to remedy this by including Russian folk dances and songs alongside those of non-Russians). Nevertheless, Russians were in control of the major state apparatuses and as such, dominated in all those realms that were not specifically marked out for non-Russians. In the Sakha Republic, for example, Yhyakh was the only “Sakha” holiday; other holidays, like International Women’s Day (March 8<sup>th</sup>) or Labor Day (May 1<sup>st</sup>) were coded as purely “Soviet” (and therefore Russian) without markers of ethnic specificity.<sup>48</sup>

As I began to discuss in the previous chapter, these discursive privileges were additionally enhanced in the North by Soviet settlement policies that materially privileged the incoming settler population. Niobi Thompson, for example, documents the extensive system of entitlement and privilege for Northern settlers in Chukotka that included “higher pay, longer holidays, better pensions, earlier retirement, and priority housing entitlements” (2009, 47). In Nyurba, too, Amakinskaia workers received these and other benefits. Nyurba residents retained strong memories of the differential privilege accorded to the diamond workers. Valya, a Sakha woman in her forties, for example, would often mention the special “Amakinskaia store” with products available only to Amakinskaia workers, or the Amakinskaia summer camp, where the Amakinskaia workers were able to send their children. She would point out their former locations as we walked around Nyurba, betraying a simultaneous nostalgia and bitterness. For example, reacting to the piles of garbage that litter the woods where the camp used to be, she would sigh in remembering how clean and

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<sup>48</sup> In the present, there have been some attempts to challenge these holidays as non-ethnic as well with parade participants, for example, dressed in Sakha traditional dress.

beautiful this wood was in her childhood, and then add, “Not that we were allowed to go there.”

Ultimately, Sakha cultural politics are more complicated than a simple narrative of Soviet denigration of Sakha culture and post-Soviet cultural revival would suggest. Post-Soviet Sakha involved in the sovereignty movement contested the ways that Soviet discourses often depicted Sakha culture as inferior to Russian culture, but this opposition does not tell the whole story. “Soviet” discourses were themselves complex and shifting and shaped the ways that post-Soviet intellectuals themselves thought about culture, ethnicity, tradition and modernity. After all, most post-Soviet intellectuals were once Soviet intellectuals. Ultimately, post-Soviet advocates of sovereignty drew upon Soviet era distinctions between tradition and modernity, and politicized a long developing sense of nostalgia for disappearing tradition. For them, the fact that official rhetoric supposedly celebrated and supported indigenous traditions, but was actually leading to their decline provided all the more evidence that regional sovereignty was the only means of preserving both cultural tradition and ethnic identity. In some ways, Sakha advocacy of sovereignty could be seen not as a contestation of Sakha culture as timeless tradition, but rather asserting the value of tradition as an important complement to modernity, and the failure of the Soviet state to adequately recognize this.

In the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, Sakha advocates for sovereignty saw regional autonomy as a chance to challenge central state control over the performance and observance of indigenous traditions, and to reappropriate definitions of Sakha culture. Where Soviet policy had insisted that religion and spirituality, for example, were regressive and harmful, the early post-Soviet Sakha Republic sought to celebrate and promote religion and spirituality as essential aspects of Sakha culture. Where Yhyakh, Olonkho, and Ohuokai had been prohibited in some regions for their potential relationship to Sakha nationalism, they were embraced by the new Republic as “national” traditions that would express the essence of collective identity. In this way, it is not so much that Sakha culture and folklore were wholly redefined (indeed, post-Soviet definitions drew substantially on Soviet ones), but rather that they were re-appropriated in the context of sovereignty. Sakha culture, as such, became more expansive and central to public discourse.

#### 5.4 “Friendship of Peoples” in a Sovereign Sakha Republic

As I explore in chapter 3, Sakha cultural elite sought ethnoterritorial sovereignty in the 1990s and challenged the official Soviet deployment of concepts like “internationalism” and “friendship of the peoples.” They pointed to the ways in which these slogans served in practice to subordinate non-Russian cultures and nationalities to Russian culture. They argued that Soviet patriotism was a mask for Russian chauvinism and that true internationalism actually requires strong, independent *national* cultures. As Alekseev (2007) argues, “Internationalism is a kind of nationalism, its transformation into a higher quality...The dichotomy between nationalism and internationalism is at its root incorrect, for the latter results from the former, and as a result, they belong to the same category [*oba oni—odnogo poriadka*]” (14, my translation). They sought to reimagine nationalism as a positive phenomenon, and criticized the Soviet narratives of “friendship” as hypocritical.

This does not mean that Sakha leaders rejected the idea of “friendship of peoples” and the values to which it was supposed to aspire. As former Soviet scholars, they believed in the high ideals of socialism and, indeed, drew on the arguments of Lenin and other Soviet ideologues in seeking a “true” basis for interethnic friendship. They had come to see the Soviet state, however, as having fundamentally departed from these values. This is a crucial point and one I have tried to emphasize in the previous chapters as well. People were not simply duped by a violent ideology, but rather they came to believe in tenets that ultimately did not play out as promised (see also, Bloch 2005). In the ethnic movements of the 1990s, these ideals became a crucial rallying point for those who saw the Soviet state as having failed to live up to its promises. For many Sakha, this called into question the entire Soviet project, but it is important to note that even the rejection of the Soviet project did not mean a rejection of all of the high ideals that it embraced. Friendship of peoples was one of these ideals that Sakha advocates for sovereignty championed in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse as something that was promised, but which was not actualized. Ultimately, they suggested that Soviet rhetoric served to impede the development of the foundation for “true” friendship, based on equal rights and mutual respect.



In chapter three, I describe the ways in which Sakha cultural revival was central for the early government of the Sakha Republic, although sovereignty was articulated in terms of the multinational people of the republic. As such, the early government also sought to recognize and lend support to the folk cultures of other ethnic groups—not only Sakha. Various “national” cultural organizations that represented Jews, Finns, Tatars, Ukrainians, and Armenians in addition to those of Russians and the “small-numbered peoples of the North” formed to celebrate the folkloric traditions of their ethnic group and were eligible for state assistance (Ignat’eva 1999, 110). Furthermore, a Center of the National Cultures of the Peoples of Yakutia was founded in Yakutsk with support from the Ministry of Culture. All the “national” festivals of the various immigrant and indigenous groups were celebrated here, including Yhyakh, and also Christmas and the Tatar Sabantui, among others (Ignat’eva 1999, 114). In this way, the Sakha government, led by Nikolaev and others sympathetic to the Sakha national intelligentsia, sought to position themselves as not only supportive of Sakha culture, but as supportive of the national cultures of all the peoples of the Republic.

At the same time, Sakha historians began to question the unequivocally positive role attributed to Russians in the colonization of Siberia. Newly published articles sought a more “complex” understanding of the nature of Russian expansion into Yakutia. In 1992, as the Republic prepared to observe the 360<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “voluntary annexation” of Yakutia to the Russian State, a conference was held to re-examine the “voluntary” nature of this incorporation. In the published proceedings, a number of prominent historians of Yakutia point to the ideologization and political one-sidedness of the “theory” of voluntary incorporation. As the conference “recommendations” point out:

In the past, under the influence of the nomenclature-bureaucratic system, the given problem [Yakutia’s incorporation into the Russian Empire] was subject to extreme ideologization, which resulted in the simple listing of only its positive aspects for the substantiation of the “eternal friendship of the peoples.” More recently, a new approach has emerged..., which acknowledges the complex character of the events of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but notes the fateful role of the entry [*vkhozhdenie*] of the Lena region into the framework of the Russian state for the history of its people (VN Ivanov, Korobtsova, and Nikitina 1994b, 103).

Post-Soviet historians were particularly critical of the overt “ideologization” of Soviet history, and pointed to both early Soviet histories as well as the later histories as evidence of the effects of ideologization. On one level, Sakha criticism of Soviet historical narratives parallels indigenous critiques of colonizer history elsewhere. On another level, there is an interesting contrast between the conclusions reached by indigenous scholars in the former Soviet Union and those reached elsewhere in the world regarding objectivity in historical scholarship. A number of indigenous scholars elsewhere in the world have reacted against the pretensions to objectivity of dominant historical narratives, insisting that all histories are ultimately conditioned by one’s historical positioning and experience. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005), for example, has argued that historical scholarship and imperialism have gone hand in hand as indigenous histories are reimagined as “oral tradition” and dismissed as “subjective,” while Western histories claim to write the true history of the world (2005, 31). For this reason, she insists that effective resistance on the part of indigenous communities requires the reassertion of indigenous knowledge about their own history, a knowledge which is necessarily partial, but crucial as a counterhegemonic resource. In many ways, this argument actually echoes those made by early *Soviets* described above, in which the scholarly establishment was criticized for masking imperialist narratives under the guise of academic impartiality. These arguments served to justify political intervention in historical scholarship both in the early years of the Soviet Union and in the later years, even though the historical narrative itself shifted. Post-Soviet Sakha have therefore reacted against the ways in which politics and historical scholarship were openly and deliberately intertwined during the Soviet era. For them, the idea of scholarly objectivity has itself been a means of resistance as they contest the idea that historical scholarship should serve state interests, or the interests of any particular group. At the same time, they do not necessarily claim to be able to tell a wholly coherent story of the past, and they highlight incoherence, contradiction, and complexity.

This new approach is represented in an article for the 1992 conference by the prominent historian Ivanov, which refrains from any overarching evaluation of the colonization process altogether (Ivanov 1994a). His narrative reads as a list of dates and events with little exposition. He carefully notes each of the early clashes between Cossack regiments and the Sakha clans, and the number of people who died in each. Ultimately, he

does say that the Sakha were subdued militarily, but that afterwards primarily peaceful relations persisted. Ivanov, like the other conference participants, recognizes the realities of violence that accompanied Russian expansion into the East, but refrains from making a value judgment.

This is similar to the perspective expressed by other Post-Soviet Sakha historians. Andrian Borisov (2004), for example, argues that historians ought to refrain from judging people of the past according to contemporary values. Notably, he advocates the use of the term “colonization,” but sees it as an objective and nuanced alternative to “ideologized” terms like “conquest” (*zavoevanie*) on the one hand, and “annexation” (*vkhozhdenie*) on the other. Colonization, he argues, allows for a multi-sided analysis of Tsarist policy and the relationship between settler and native groups. Furthermore, he follows other post-Soviet scholars in calling attention to the particularities of colonial policy in different places, and the ways it evolved over time. For Borisov, early Soviet scholars who condemned colonization unequivocally and later advocates of “voluntary annexation” alike made the mistake of trying to apply a universal interpretation of Tsarist expansionism without sufficient attention to the ways in which it played out on the ground in different ways. Likewise, they ignored the contradictions and complexities in policy, where orders from Moscow and from higher ranking generals were ignored and/or interpreted in various ways, and different settlers acted independently of one another. There were instances of violence, theft, and slavery, he argues, but there were also instances of surprising restraint on the part of the more powerful Russian soldiers, and even cooperation between settlers and natives. Ultimately, he argues that a simple characterization of the colonization process as either positive or negative is not self-evident. At the same time, he actually comes closest to echoing the “lesser evil” hypotheses of Basharin and Tokarev in insisting that the Russian colonization of Siberia is not comparable to the genocide that took place in the Americas, i.e. it was relatively peaceful.

## 5.5 Friendship of Peoples: Ethnonationalism and Rossiiskii Identity

Despite calls for more “objective” and “nuanced” analyses of pre-Soviet history, in the last decade, there have been increasing calls on the part of the central government to re-emphasize the voluntary nature of the incorporation of Siberia into the Russian empire. As I point out chapter three, the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incorporation in 2007 was met with a large amount of fanfare and the Republic Yhyakh was itself dedicated to this anniversary. At the same time, a large, public meeting was held in Yakutsk of the Assembly of the Peoples of Russia, a semi-governmental organization dedicated to preserving interethnic harmony. Both events included speech after speech by various dignitaries about the long history of friendship between the various peoples of Russia, and about the mutual cooperation between ethnic groups in Yakutia that was supposed to have characterized the last 375 years. A speech by then Republic President, Viacheslav Shtyrov, was published in a Federal journal later that year, and described Russian expansion across Siberia:

The history of humanity has not seen grander or swifter movement of peoples into an unknown expanse. But this movement was not accompanied by the same kind of bloody and cruel subjugation through firepower and sword, nor by the complete extermination of the conquered peoples, or the destruction of settlements, which all differentiated the western European Protestants and conquistadors of the same century. By means of such unscrupulous measures and traditions of the epoch, Russian Cossacks and traders could have maximally exploited the riches of Siberia and the heritage of the peoples living there. However, despite the difficulties faced by the Moscow Tsardom, which was broken by war and internal discord, and despite personal hardship, the Russian people went to open and settle a new land, expanding the borders of the Russian centralized state and completing its construction in interrelation with the native peoples of Siberia. And all the while, they tried to not forget the Tsarist order to act with “friendliness and kindness, not with cruelty” [*laskoiu i privetom, a ne zhestoch'iu*]. (Shtyrov 2007)

Shtyrov goes on to discuss the importance of Orthodox missionaries, who brought education and health care, Russian exiles, who helped cultivate the early Sakha revolutionaries, and finally, the geologists, who discovered the enormous underground wealth of Yakutia.

Generally speaking, the colonization of Yakutia, from 1632 until the present, appears as one long success story, characterized by interethnic cooperation and friendship.

The celebrations of Yakutia's "joining" (*prisoedinenie*) Russia and Shtyrov's description of Russian Imperial history are reflective of a growing emphasis on the part of the Russian government on the positive aspects of Russian expansion in the East, and of an increasingly dominant discourse that depicts Russia as a voluntarily unified and a naturally unitary state. Contemporary Russian political leaders have sought to reclaim older Soviet discourses of "friendship of peoples" in combating ethnic separatism in regions like the Sakha Republic. Contemporary versions of this discourse celebrate the multiethnic and multicultural composition of Russia, and insist upon the current Federation as a voluntary union of friendly peoples. Like the Soviet discourse, they also extend this supposed friendship far back in history to insist that a colonization of Siberia as such never took place; rather, they insist that there was a more natural expansion of Russian settlement into the East, in the process of which, the native peoples voluntarily joined the Russian state.

This renewed discourse draws on an idea of Russia as a union of diverse, yet interconnected peoples. Accompanying this new vision for the Russian Federation is an increased rhetorical importance for the notion of a pan-Russian, "*rossiiskii*" identity, which encompasses all citizens of Russia and highlights a supposedly non-ethnic identity as the *civic* basis for Russian statehood. The term *rossiiskii* typically appears in English translation as "Russian" (as in the Russian Federation, or *Rossiiskaia Federatsia*), but in the original contrasts with the Russian language term for ethnic Russians, *russkii*. In this way, official discourses celebrate the historical interconnectedness of all of the different peoples of Russia, and implicitly contest the claim that the different ethnic groups of Russia have distinct paths of historical development. Further, they reject the notion of ethnicity as the basis for political identity altogether and insist upon all citizens of Russia as equal and autonomous participants in a democratic polity.

Despite official discourses of multinationalism, however, the transcendent identity of the Federation remains ethnic Russian. Like the older Soviet discourse, the rhetoric of "friendship of peoples" often necessitates praise for Russian culture—although now it is not necessarily because Russian is the most "advanced" culture and the harbinger of civilization (although this might also be one implication for many proponents of the new discourse), but

rather because Russian culture is the glue that binds the other ethnic groups together and ensures cooperation and peace. Zosim, the Russian Orthodox Bishop of Yakutsk and Lensk, highlighted the idea of Russian culture as the “glue” for the multiethnic state in a speech given at a round-table discussion during the 1997 Congress of the Peoples of Russia:

The Russian World—this is our home, where small and large families live. These families are multi-national, multi-confessional, drawn together in a single union. Only we know how to resolve the problems that have accumulated in our home. Together. And for this we need to learn to see and listen to one another, understand what is wrong and try to help. From the 1990s, our country has stopped speaking of the friendship of peoples. Everyone tries to survive, sometimes on the backs of others. This time has ended. We are again together and to help in our unity we need Russian language, common to all. This is our wealth. And we ought to take care of it like peace in our home.<sup>49</sup>

In this way, even religious leaders hearken back to Soviet discourses of “friendship of peoples” in insisting that Russia is a harmonious union of peacefully coexisting ethnic groups brought together by the benevolent Russian people. Like the older discourse, the new narrative of civic “Rossiiskii” identity makes other ethnic identities subordinate to Russian.

Similarly, at the 2007 Congress of the Sakha People, President Shtyrov gave a speech entitled “The Friendship of the Peoples—our most important wealth.” In it, he praised the Sakha national intelligentsia for their contributions to the spiritual and moral development of the Republic. At the same time, he focused primarily on the achievements of the “multinational people of Yakutia” and underscored the interethnic peace that had been achieved in the Sakha Republic.

It is important to note here that the *rhetoric* has not necessarily changed significantly, even from official discourses of the 1990s. As I point out in chapter 3, Sakha political leaders of the 1990s also focused on a trans-ethnic, civic identity encompassing “the multinational people of Yakutia” and highlighted the peaceful interethnic relations in the Republic. They also insisted upon the fundamental unity of the Russian Federation and the long relationship between Sakha and Russians. Despite Zosim’s claim that people “stopped

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<sup>49</sup> [http://www.parldv.ru/index.php?mod=art\\_show&id\\_art=18](http://www.parldv.ru/index.php?mod=art_show&id_art=18), accessed 11/18/2010, my translation.

talking of the friendship of peoples,” newspaper articles, books, and speeches of the 1990s are filled with references to the “friendship of peoples.” Indeed, this idea was central to much of Nikolaev’s rhetoric as president. The difference, however, is who is speaking and for what purposes they are invoking the notion. Nikolaev used it largely to emphasize his argument that Republic sovereignty was not about privileging one ethnic group, but rather ameliorating historical inequalities that produced frictions and prevented the “friendship of peoples.” The implicit argument for Shtyrov and for Zosim is that ethnic leaders who complain about inequality are the ones impeding “friendship of peoples.”

On the one hand, we can see the idea of the friendship of peoples as simply empty political rhetoric that has little relationship to the actual politics of the speaker—is anyone going to oppose friendship between peoples? On the other hand, the notion has achieved new force in the present context in conjunction with federal assertions of *rossiiskii* identity. As atomized citizens of Russia, individuals may have complaints, but ethnic groups may not. And those individuals who continue to insist that they do are increasingly targeted for “inciting interethnic tensions, as I explore in the following section.

## 5.6 “Inciting Interethnic Tensions”

*A specter is haunting Russia—the specter of ethnonationalism and racism.*

Ramazan Abdulatipov, president of the Assembly of the Peoples of Russia

*Nationalism—that is patriotism. It should exist. Chauvanism—that is something else, altogether. In our Republic, it cannot be. In any case, at least among intelligent people.*<sup>50</sup>

Ivan Shamaev, director of the Sakha Republic Lyceum and leader of the political organization, Yakutia-ALROSA

Tensions surrounding Sakha “ethnonationalism” have long been a sensitive issue for Sakha activists since Soviet era persecutions of “bourgeois nationalism.” From the 1928 Communist Party declaration, “On the conditions in Yakut organizations,” which declared

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.nvpress.ru/?id=13030925&dates=13/3/2009>, accessed 11/18/2010. My translation.

the entire Sakha communist leadership in sympathy with the “bourgeois nationalist intelligentsia” (Alekseev 2007, 204-205), Sakha have been periodically subject to purges and prosecutions by successive Soviet administrations for a supposedly pernicious and chauvinistic ethnic nationalism. Up through perestroika, any perceived missteps on the part of Sakha were liable to be interpreted as nationalist agitation (Argounova-Low 2007). Even as late as 1986, a fight between Russians and Sakha in Yakutsk prompted a USSR-wide discussion about the problem of nationalism, and resulted in a Communist Party declaration of the presence in Yakutia of “antisocial movements with nationalist orientation” (Alekseev 1998; Balzer and Vinokurova 1996e). In the wake of this declaration, there was a new wave of policies directed against Sakha nationalism. Alekseev points to some of the specific policies instituted at this time: many of the Sakha heads of agricultural regions were replaced by Russians, new “moral-ideological” work was initiated to teach Sakha about the great role of the Russian people in the cultural development of the Sakha, and Sakha folklore was labeled anachronistic and outmoded (1998, 15). In my own fieldwork, Sakha friends and acquaintances recalled taboos on Sakha language use in public spaces and on the practice of certain Sakha cultural forms, like celebrations of Yhyakh and performances of Olonkho. As a result of official efforts against Sakha nationalism, Alekseev argues, “Even today, the fear of the word ‘nationalism’ is planted deep in every educated Yakut. This happens, it seems, almost on a genetic level” (1998, 15).

Early post-Soviet Sakha activists and scholars sought to challenge the ways in which the Soviet state had depicted assertions of ethnic pride as equivalent to a pernicious ethnonationalism or “chauvinism” that denigrated other ethnic groups. In doing so, they sought to reappropriate the term “nationalism” as a positive feeling of pride and patriotism. Alekseev (1998), for example, argues that there is a significant difference between “aggressive nationalist *chauvinism*” and normal nationalist devotion to one’s people. Drawing on Marx, he argues that the impetus for state creation derived from the development of nations unified by a common territory, language, traditions, customs, and belief systems. For Alekseev, nationalism is a normal state of affairs and does not necessarily represent a threat to interethnic harmony. Rather, it “is the natural state of every normal person and people,” and “if nationalism manifests itself as state politics and ideology that speaks only of the level of social consciousness of a given people” (24). Chauvinism, on the other hand, he



argues is also a relatively normal sentiment, albeit potentially pernicious as, “a high-minded feeling of love and devotion to one’s native people, which can become the basis for neglect of the interests of and even disdain for other nations or peoples” (Alekseev 1998, 26).

Chauvinism can be manifested in the arrogance of large, powerful nations and also in the frustrations of small nations oppressed by larger ones. In this way, Alekseev seeks to make a distinction between positive affirmations of ethnic belonging and worth, and pernicious forms of xenophobia and exclusionary politics. In doing so, he echoes a persistent concern of post-Soviet Sakha cultural leaders, who have sought to counter accusations that the Sakha movement for territorial sovereignty represents a dangerous, exclusionary politics that carries the seeds of “ethnic conflict.”<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, they argue that ethnic oppression must be addressed in order to ameliorate concerns about ethnic conflict.

Sakha activists of the 1990s also challenged the idea that the sentiments of a few could be automatically applied to an entire ethnic group. As Mikhail Nikolaev said early in his presidency:

In my opinion, it would be appropriate for all party organs, all the way up to the Central Party Committee to refrain from accusing an entire people of subscribing to nationalism... The Yakut intelligentsia has long carried the heavy burden of the Communist Party declaration of August 9, 1928... in which the Yakut intelligentsia was defined as nationalistically inclined. The Communist Party declaration of 1986 is also completely incomprehensible for us, where a normal fight amongst urban youth was characterized as a nationalistic development” (quoted in Alekseev 1998, 14-15).

In this way, Nikolaev underscores the argument made by Argounova-Low (2007) that Sakha emerged as “scapegoats of nationalism,” i.e. Sakha nationalism was used as a pretext for political persecution of Sakha for a variety of other reasons. He does not deny the possible existence of Sakha nationalism amongst a few individuals, but insists that an entire

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<sup>51</sup> This is similar to the argument cited above by Marjorie Balzer and Uliana Vinokourova (1996f) (an American anthropologist and Sakha sociologist, respectively), in which they address the issue of Sakha nationalism, asking if the Sakha national movement is about “ethnicity or nationalism?” In doing so, they imply a distinction between benign (or even positive) affirmations of ethnic pride and belonging, and chauvinistic nationalism directed against another group. Ultimately, they argue that despite having minor characteristics of nationalist movements, the primary sentiment in Sakha ethno-politics is an affirmation of Sakha ethnicity rather than a dangerous *nationalism*.

population not be automatically classified as nationalists. In this way, he seeks to shift away from the notion of nationalism, suggesting that it is not the most useful of terms.

More recently, however, the specter of nationalism once again haunts Sakha activists.<sup>52</sup> In 2003, the federal government passed a law “On Combating Extremist Activities,” supposedly designed to thwart Caucasian terrorism as well as growing neo-Nazi movements that threatened the interethnic harmony of the country. However, there is a growing sentiment among vocal Sakha cultural elite that it is a reprise of Soviet policies that persecuted Sakha expressions of national identity under the guise of nationalism. A number of prominent Sakha activists have been targeted for “inciting interethnic tensions” (A Ivanova 2009). For example, in 2008, the regional papers were filled with the story of Ukhkhan, an outspoken Sakha critic of the Shtyrov government, who runs a rather infamous website that often publishes controversial articles from various sources. One series of articles, published in 2007 detailed a series of allegations of corruption against Shtyrov that included having business links with Caucasian oligarchs.<sup>53</sup> While the focus of the article was on the corruption allegations, some passages taken out of context suggested an attack on “Caucasians” (as opposed to oligarchs, who also happened to be Caucasian). The article was published under a pseudonym and Ukhkhan refused to name the source. Ukhkhan himself was prosecuted for “extremism” under the 2003 law and the court battle continues today. He steadfastly maintains that the accusations levied in the article are accurate and that this is the real reason for his prosecution.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond the specific prosecutions, however, there is an increasingly common public discourse about the problem of non-Russian nationalism and the prejudices facing *Russians* in the “national” Republics. For example, in 2007, a series of articles in the central newspaper *Izvestia* explored the “reality” of life for Russians in the national Republics. One dedicated to the Sakha Republic was met with particular frustration by Sakha as it painted the region’s titular population as deeply nationalistic and the 1990’s movement for sovereignty

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<sup>52</sup> At the same time, as the above discussion suggests, it never really left them as throughout the height of the sovereignty movement, political leaders always maintained a careful distance from the most radical supporters of Sakha nationalism. And even the most radical “nationalists” never advocated full-fledged separatism and hardly compared with the violent assertions of nationalism in the Caucasus, Ireland or even Basque country.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.uhhan.ru/publ/44-1-0-214>, accessed 11/30/2010.

<sup>54</sup> <http://uhhan.ru/news/2009-04-06-833>, accessed 11/30/2010.

as an unfounded attack on Russians and Russia. The article was reproduced in full in a Sakha newspaper article that contested it. Quoting a prominent Russian activist, it says:

“The last 15 years of Yakutia’s history is a clear example of how easy it is to incite nationalism with absolutely no foundation. In contrast to many other peoples of Russia, in the history of the Yakut ethnos there is not a single reason to dislike Russians ... Yakuts and Russians lived here side by side until the beginning of the 1990s”—explains local entrepreneur and the informal leader of the Russian Community Sergei Yurkov...--“all this changed with the election of Mikhail Nikolaev to the post of president...It is Nikolaev who, in the opinion of the majority of Russians granted Yakuts the moral right first to arrogance and then, to nationalism.”<sup>55</sup>

The article then goes on to explain that the Russian population of the region declined significantly during the 1990s and that Russians have a difficult time finding work in the government, which is dominated by Sakha, and that it is virtually impossible for Russian children to be granted the free spots at the regional universities. It also insists that it is virtually impossible for Russians to walk around at night without being attacked by marauding gangs of Sakha youth.

The issues pointed to in this article are extraordinarily sensitive for both Russian and Sakha residents of the Sakha Republic. The article does echo the complaints of local Russians who, despite their still greater numbers, often feel themselves increasingly in the minority as the city of Yakutsk, previously considered a “Russian” city (i.e. the vast majority of the population was of Russian ethnicity), is becoming more and more “Sakha” with the influx of rural migrants from the countryside and outflow of Russians to other regions of the Russian Federation. For example, one Russian woman in her thirties, Anastasia, explained to me that her family is an old “Sibiriak” family with deep roots in the Sakha Republic.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, she said that she feels less and less at home there, and that she was astonished in her last trip to Moscow at how comfortable she was, feeling that she was at last among “her own” (*svoi*) people. Another friend, the daughter of a Sakha man and “incomer”

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.debri-dv.com/article/667>, accessed 11/30/2010.

<sup>56</sup> Sibiriak is the term for the Russian descendents of early settlers to Siberia, many of whom claim a kind of indigenous status themselves by virtue of their long history in the region (Balzer 1994a).

woman, had gone to school in Moscow and married a Russian man, but refused to bring him with her on trips back home for fear of his safety as a Russian there, especially in the Sakha-dominated town of Nyurba. Indeed, violence is a problem in both Yakutsk and the uluses. While some Sakha commentators insist that this has more to do with a rural-urban divide (poor, rural youth getting into fights with urban youth) than with a Sakha-Russian divide, young Russian men insisted that Sakha youth gangs targeted Russians solely on the basis of their ethnicity. One such young man, Nikolai, who I met in Yakutsk during the fall of 2008, constantly questioned my decision to study Sakha culture, insisting that there was nothing interesting or good there. He later explained to me that the summer before I met him, he had been jumped by a group of Sakha youths while walking home alone one night and was beaten almost to death. A few months later, after I left the Sakha Republic, he ended up in the hospital with kidney failure as a result of injuries sustained from the attack.

It was difficult for me to respond to stories like this. Clearly, local Russians also struggle with marginality—the unemployment, violence, and poverty that swept the provinces during the 1990s did not affect Sakha communities alone, and the collapse of state industries was felt hard amongst Russian communities (Oushakine 2009; Thompson 2009). They feel themselves neglected by the state, “stuck” in a provincial backwater and further threatened by a vocal movement for ethnic pride and opposition on the part of an ethnic group long considered to be the recipient of Russian benevolence. In the context of the Caucasus, Bruce Grant (2009) points to the ways that ethnic Russians envisioned Russian/Soviet rule there as a matter of Russians providing Caucasians with the “gift of social advancement” (x). As such, they see the more recent rejection of Russian rule as an affront to the benevolence and sacrifice of the Russian people. There may be a similar sense of *noblesse oblige* at work in the discourses of Russians in the Sakha Republic—accustomed to Soviet discourses of Russian benevolence, they find the frustrations expressed by Sakha offensive. Certainly, discourses of Sakha primitivity are rampant as Russians accuse the Sakha of both laziness and savagery, incapable of building civilization with Russian help. However, there is another degree to which Russians, especially those who see their own roots in the region stretching back longer to pre-Soviet days, but also the children and grandchildren of more recent immigrants, feel their own sense of belonging to the region under attack in ethnonational discourses of sovereignty. Despite the attempts of the Nikolaev

administration to advance a civic basis for Republic independence, the transcendent identity of the Republic was implicitly Sakha, and Russians did not have a similar sense of communal identity to keep them afloat. Instead, as Oushakine (2009) argues, the overwhelming discourse for ethnic Russians was one of loss, heightened for Russians in the Sakha Republic by the optimism of the Sakha national movement. For this reason, they interpreted violence on the part of Sakha youth gangs through the lens of Sakha nationalism and blamed Sakha cultural leaders, like Nikolaev, for encouraging it.

I do not want to overstate the significance of these incidents, however, nor suggest that all local Russians experience/interpret the Sakha cultural movement in this way. Indeed, many local Russians regularly attended Yhyakh and were intrigued by Sakha folkloric forms—this rarely extended to support for Sakha “political” aspirations, but by 2008 at least, they were not especially threatened by the promotion of Sakha cultural forms. Anastasia, for example, despite her sense that she was among her own in Moscow (rather than in Yakutsk), was proud of her ability to understand Sakha language, and she also loved to tell me about different Sakha traditions. Furthermore, according to a recent letter from my Sakha language teacher in Yakutsk, the state began funding Sakha language classes for local non-Sakha residents through Yakutsk State University and they had hundreds sign up, suggesting that there is some interest on the part of local Russians in learning Sakha.

In contrast to Russians that I met, my Sakha friends almost unanimously insisted that there were no interethnic tensions in the Republic. Incidents like those with Nikolai, described above, they attributed more to issues of alcoholism and poverty. For those working in cultural revival, such displays of animosity have more to do with a lack of “culture” amongst poor Sakha, who have little education and struggle to find work and to support their families than with any kind of “nationalism.” This discourse itself highlights additional axes of class distinction that shape contemporary Sakha identity, and further reinforces oppositions of primitive and civilized described in the previous chapter. Marisol de la Cadena (2000) points to the ways that working class urbanites in the Peruvian highlands insist that differences in “education” produce legitimate social hierarchies, but in doing so reproduce dominant racisms in which “Indianness” is equated with social inferiority. Urban Sakha (in both Yakutsk and Nyurba) also point to education as a crucial dividing line between “cultured” and “uncultured” (*bezkul’turnyi*), and in that way reinforce the

discriminatory practices that mark poor, rural Sakha as inferior. Discourses of education and culture (in the sense of morality or even intelligence) also become a way to distance themselves from any manifestations of nationalism. Like Ivan Shamaev in the quotation that opens this section, they insist that chauvinism is a problem of those without culture, education, or intelligence, but that nationalism is a benign pride in one's identity. As de la Cadena points in the case of Peru, this discourse allows for the reinvention of indigenous culture stripped of the stigma assigned to it by dominant culture, but it also reproduces economic and other social hierarchies (2000, 7).

Despite efforts to draw a distinction between nationalism and chauvinism, the federal and Republic governments continue to treat them as the same. Groups such as the Assembly of the Peoples of the Russian Federation have been organized with the specific mandate to fight against racism and ethnonationalism. To their credit, they also speak against neo-fascist groups and overtly nationalistic/racist Russian groups as well, but in their 2007 meeting in Yakutia timed to coincide with celebrations of the 375<sup>th</sup> incorporation of Yakutia into the Russian state, the message was clearly directed against any possibility of Sakha ethnonationalism. Once again, the rhetoric touted "friendship of the peoples" and the long "brotherly" union between the different peoples of Russia. This union, the speakers insisted, was indivisible despite the mean-spirited attempts by some (sovereignty advocates) to tear it apart. The speakers were all members of Putin's "United Russia" party, which has promoted the idea of a "*rosiisiikaia*" nation that echoes older discourses of the Soviet ethnos into which the peoples of the Soviet Union were all merging. For many Sakha critics, however, this appears once again as a means of suppressing Sakha culture and marginalizing Sakha people all the more (cf. Hale 2006; Povinelli 1998). Nevertheless, the rhetoric of nationalism and the new law regarding "extremism" has put them on the defensive, such that many Sakha seek to avoid overt politics, cynically conceding that there is no point.

## Chapter 6: “The Only Weapon that Doesn’t Misfire”—Feminine Beauty, Gender Roles, and the Politics of National Identity



**Figure 17: Miss Yakutia beauty contest (source: <http://www.missyakutia.ru/gallery.html>, accessed 7/82011 )**

Miss Yakutia, Miss Virtual Yakutia, Miss Yakut State University, Miss Graduation, Miss Hollywood, Princess Yakutia, Miss Little Yakutia, Miss Nyurba, Lady Mass Media, Lady Trade Union, Miss School, Miss English Camp...these are just a few of the titles to which the young women of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) can aspire, awarded in recognition of their accomplishments in the realm of beauty. There are male beauty contests as well, “Mister Yakutia,” “Mister Yakut State University,” etc. but they are much fewer, sparsely followed, and they are often treated almost as parodies by contestants. By contrast, the women’s contests are taken with utmost seriousness and often bitter rivalries emerge in the course of the competition. The broader public follows them with relish and the winners become local and regional celebrities. With their faces and bodies paraded on stage and on billboards and magazines throughout the region, the winners come to express and shape local notions of womanhood. Moreover, in Republic-wide contests, contestants become important symbols of Republic identity, emerging as the “embodiment” of Yakutia. In the process, contests over both collective (ethnic/national) identity and gender are played out on pageant stages.

When I began dissertation research in the Sakha Republic, I did not intend to study beauty contests, but their seeming ubiquity sparked my interest. Contests were covered in the major newspapers and televised on the Republic's television station, NVK-Sakha. While the February-March Miss Virtual Yakutia, and the September Miss Yakutia, were the most prominent, there seemed to be another widely promoted contest almost every month. Friends and acquaintances asked my opinion of the contestants, extolled the beauty of the Sakha people represented in the contests, and questioned whether American beauty contest participants were as beautiful as Sakha. Men and women, Russian and Sakha, young people, middle-aged and elderly watched the contests on television or, at least, read about them in the newspapers. I was asked to sit on the "jury" of a handful of contests, an offer I was initially hesitant to accept due to my sympathy with critiques of beauty contests posed by western feminists (e.g. McCann and Kim 2003; Stoeltje 1996; cf. Wolf 1992). I ultimately accepted out of curiosity and politeness. I found myself caught up in the excitement of the events and came to appreciate the effort contestants had put into preparation. Indeed, critiques seemed hollow in the face of the enthusiastic and sincere participants, who had long dreamed of competing in a major contest. They insisted that beauty contests help build self-confidence and promote healthy lifestyles. It became clear that these contests, like beauty contests elsewhere, are more than just entertaining spectacles and that they are intimately bound up with local politics of identity, engaging deeply felt emotions and values, but also representing overlapping sets of power relations that entangle women and men in the Sakha Republic.

A number of scholars have recently sought to take beauty pageants seriously as objects of scholarly inquiry. Cohen et al. (1996) have suggested that beauty contests as both global phenomena, mediated through the Miss World and Miss Universe pageants, and as local productions, are key sites for examining the interactions between local identity and gender politics, and transnational trends. Beauty contests, they contend, "are places where cultural meanings are produced, consumed, *and* rejected, where local and global, ethnic and national, national and international cultures and structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but vital aspects" (8). National and regional pageants all over the world select a "queen" in a gendered performance of national or other collective identity—the bodies of young women, the symbolic reproducers of the group, become the vehicle for the expression of that identity and its reproductive potential. But in positioning women of particular



phenotypes as the collective ideal, beauty contests reveal both gender and national identity as racialized (Banet-Weiser 1999, 7). While diversity is often invoked through the inclusion of various skin-colors, dominant ideals about beauty and also popular imaginations of national identity are anyways reproduced. For this reason, some indigenous and/or other marginalized groups have staged alternative pageants as part of cultural revitalization efforts and have thus challenged hegemonic, racialized notions of beauty in a space carved out for the assertion of ethnic worth (Rogers 1999; see also, N Barnes 2000; Borland 1996; McAllister 1996). Whether reproducing or challenging dominant conceptions of collective identity and gender, beauty contests are intimately bound up in gendered and, indeed, racialized systems of power and provide a key site for examining the relationships between gender, ethnicity, nationality and race (see also, de La Cadena 2000, 177-230).

The contests I analyze in this chapter do not seek to challenge hegemonic ideals of beauty (Borland 1996, 87) or to propose alternative indigenous standards for beauty. They are not carried out in the context of a local festival, nor are they projected as the revival of an indigenous tradition. In fact, they appear as quintessentially modern phenomena, identified with mass-media and the internet and also with commercialization and markets. As “modern” phenomena, they become crucial sites for the projection of fears about modernity and its threat to national cohesion as well as potential sites for the reconciliation of these fears. In the process, women’s bodies become the focus of national anxiety—sites for the reproduction of the nation (both physical and cultural) and also for its potential destruction. Femininity itself is constructed as an essential substance of national identity and women as particular gendered beings need both to be protected and feared as a threat to the nation.

Furthermore, in the mass-mediated display of these bodies, gender and national identity emerge as inescapably *racialized* categories: the selection of particular, ethnically-marked bodies comes to index collective identity in terms of a particular community even as “race” and its culturalized counterpart “ethnicity” are downplayed in public discourses surrounding the contest. That is to say that while explicit references to individual contestants’ ethnic background are carefully avoided in public discussions of the events, the ethnic composition of the contestant field is carefully scripted and visible through the obligatory inclusion of both Sakha (Asian) and Russian (white) contestants, indexing the ethnic diversity (and harmony) of the region. As Sarah Banet-Weiser has argued for American

beauty pageants, these scriptings “confront national tensions about gender and race and, through performances of ‘diversity’ and femininity ‘resolve’ these tensions” (Banet-Weiser 1999, 7). The contests do not erase inequalities, rather they confront them, incorporate them into a single narrative, and provide an idealistic resolution. At the same time, the distinction between Russian and Sakha phenotypes is often blurred in practice and is increasingly obscured on pageant stages as ethnically-mixed contestants come to dominate the winners’ list. As I explore in the final section of this chapter, these contests reveal additional tensions between the Russian (*Rossiiskii*) national prerogative to celebrate ethnic diversity and harmony, and regional imperatives to downplay ethnicity as a salient social category and cleavage.

### **6.1 Embracing the Feminine in Post-Soviet Beauty Contests**

Beauty contests caught the country by storm when they first appeared in the Soviet Union in 1988. That same year, Vilnius, then Riga, Leningrad, Odessa, Kiev and even Tashkent held contests (Waters 1993). In May of 1989, the first “All-Union Beauty Contest” crowned Yulia Sukhanova the first Miss USSR. All over the country smaller contests popped up organized by various groups, including communist youth organizers. Russian sociologist, Lena Moskalenko (1996) describes the fervor that surrounded beauty contests during the final years of Perestroika and prompted her personally to enter Miss Moscow 1989: many Muscovites were shocked by the indecency of the spectacle, but she felt compelled by the other voices that insisted, “yes, our life is miserable and grim...but that does not mean that there should not be any shine, any sparkle in our lives” (67). Over 5,000 women answered the advertisements that year, reportedly all with similar objectives: “to break away from a routine and mundane existence, to feel important and recognized, to become a Queen, a Princess, to see the world” (69). For many spectators and participants the first pageants represented an exciting break with the past—a chance to indulge formerly prohibited fantasies and escape from the drab mundanities of everyday life. At the same time, these first beauty contests were also a source of scandal regarding the display of women’s bodies, and they were decried as part of a crisis in national values inaugurated by Gorbachev’s

liberalizing reforms (Moskalenko 1996; Waters 1993). In this way, beauty contests came to signify both liberating change and national crisis.

Beauty contests were not staged in Russia during most of Soviet history due to their inconsistency with official Soviet ideologies that emphasized the role of woman-as-worker and associated excessive attention to physical (and especially, sexualized) beauty with capitalism and the objectification of women (Moskalenko 1996, 64-65; Azhgikhina and Goscilo 1996). Official Soviet rhetoric claimed to liberate women from the need to care overly about their appearance, decried the “unreasonable excess” of “bourgeois fashion,” and banned imported cosmetics (Azhgikhina and Goscilo 1996). In Russia and the West, this has been popularly cited as evidence of Soviet promotion of “gender neutrality,” i.e. the dominant Soviet ideology is supposed to have deemphasized a distinctive feminine appearance and feminine identity more generally. However, official rejection of certain kinds of beauty practices did not mean that the Soviet state rejected gender distinctions—either in physical appearance or everyday practice. Indeed, as Sarah Ashwin (2000) has argued, the Soviet state embraced a deeply gendered social order, in which women and men were expected to serve the state in distinct ways. I discuss this gendered social order in more detail below, but here I emphasize that it resulted in differential expectations for men and women regarding bodily care, expectations which were often expressed through rhetoric of proper “hygiene.” Despite official disavowal of bourgeois objectification of women and their physical appearance, the Soviet state embraced an idea of “natural” beauty that nonetheless reproduced popularly-held belief in the importance of women’s physical appearance. Furthermore, Soviet women themselves enjoyed a thriving private world of homemade cosmetics and regular visits to semi-licit beauty salons, all of which was tacitly sanctioned, and even encouraged by the state through discussions of proper feminine hygiene (Azhgikhina and Goscilo 1996; Gradskova 2007).

Even so, women’s beauty practices were tightly monitored up through Perestroika, and all perceived eroticism was publicly condemned. When censorship controls and bans on imported cosmetics were lifted in the late 1980s, the beauty industry, and with it, beauty contests were embraced by many as progressive alternatives to official Soviet discourse (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990). Beauty practices were touted as new arenas in which women were “allowed” to be women and newly permitted (hetero)sexuality could be explored. Women

“discovered” new, sexualized forms of expression and comportment, and experienced a sense of empowerment in donning sexually provocative hairstyles and clothing fashions. When western feminist arguments that societal standards of beauty were a source of women’s oppression (e.g. Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*) made their way into Russia, they were roundly rejected by young women and men as reproducing Soviet “stereotypes” of gender equality, now glossed as gender “sameness.”

Progressive western scholars have highlighted what appears as a post-Soviet reversal of western gender politics, in which conservatives raise supposedly feminist concerns about the commoditization and objectification of women’s bodies, while liberals embrace gender essentialism in the form of women’s beauty practices (cf. Waters 1993). These debates, however, are not so different than those concerning the display of women’s bodies that unfolded in the west. Banet-Weiser (1999), for example, describes remarkably similar debates in the 1920s US when American beauty pageants emerged as popular, yet scandalous events linked with gambling and pornography in tourist havens like Atlantic City and Coney Island. It required the deliberate courting of and affiliation with “respectable” organizations over the course of the 1930s to transform the Miss America pageant into a reputable contest of feminine ideals aligned with conservative family values. Organizers sought out the cooperation of prominent women’s organizations, whose members took on the task of monitoring the behavior and liaisons of the contestants, to the point of prohibiting “morally suspect” behaviors such as alcohol and cigarette consumption, and prohibiting contestants from even speaking with a male, including their fathers, during the course of the competition week (Banet-Weiser 1999, 39). The position of beauty queens as respected, national icons of femininity was not cemented until they took on the public role of selling war bonds during World War II. It was only at this time that American beauty contests moved from the seedy margins of an emerging consumer culture to the center of nationalist imaginations.

Similarly, Russian beauty contests were initially popular, yet scandalous events associated with the emergence of consumer culture and overtime, they have taken up the mantle of respectability as contestants’ behavior is strictly monitored. Miss Russia contestants, for example, are not even allowed outside without a chaperone in the weeks leading up to the event. However, in Russia as a whole, the pageants appear to have skipped the era of dominance enjoyed by the Miss America pageant in the post-War period, moving

directly into a niche market of viewers and contestants, similar to that occupied by beauty contests in the US today (Waters 1993, Moskalenko 1996). In the Sakha Republic, however, beauty contests enjoyed increasing popularity throughout the 1990s and the Republic-wide contest winners became icons of Republic identity. Even today, while organizers report declining viewership, Miss Yakutia is an important event and residents follow the contest with relish. The organizers, contestants, and even government officials insist that the contests are positive social institutions and promote them as crucial venues for the cultivation of family values and healthy lifestyles, in line with federally-identified “national priorities.”<sup>57</sup> As such, beauty contests in the Sakha Republic are positioned within the broader nationalist discourses I explore in chapter four, in which the difference between Sakha ethnic nationhood and the civic Rossiiskii nation is often elided. In both of these discourses, a particular kind of femininity is embraced as central to national identity.

## **6.2 Demographic Politics, National Preservation and Women as Mothers**

Michele Rivkin-Fish (2006) has tied the renewed valorization of traditional gender roles in Russia more broadly to discourses of demographic crisis and a growing Russian nationalism, in which women, through their role as mothers, are extolled as reproducers of the nation. She traces this discourse to Soviet-era fears of demographic decline and state-sponsored cultivation of gender differentiation that began long before Perestroika. Indeed, Ashwin (2000) argues that despite Soviet claims to liberate women from bourgeois oppression and western scholars’ concomitant assumptions about the progressive gender politics of early Bolsheviks, Soviet authorities never fully challenged the existence or propriety of inherent gender differences, if they even did at all. Rather, men and women from the beginning were expected to serve the state in their respective gendered capacities. Then, after the Second World War, steadily decreasing birth rates prompted a vigorous campaign to promote women as mothers. Soviet scholars identified urban women’s supposedly negative attitudes toward motherhood as a primary cause of low birth-rates and so, the solution, they

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<sup>57</sup> The “national priorities” are the four arenas identified by the Putin administration since 2000 as the most pressing nation-wide social concerns: housing, health, education, and rural development.

argued, was to promote the value of motherhood (Rivkin-Fish 2005, 2006). Initially, propaganda focused on rewarding women who had 10 or more children with the title of “hero-mother” and extolling women’s natural propensity (and duty) for motherhood (Bridger 2007). Later, state administrators sought to explicitly cultivate the proper value of motherhood through a public-education campaign that focused on sex-role socialization and the promotion of traditional gender roles (see also, Attwood 1990). Thus, what many pointed to as a post-Soviet *re*-inscription of traditional gender roles was the result of a continuous evolution in state policy that began long before the Soviet Union’s collapse.

In the post-Soviet period, demographic decline has continued to be a central concern of both federal and regional governments, but Soviet ideology of gender-equality, now glossed as “gender sameness” is often blamed, providing a pretext for sustained promotion of traditional gender roles and distinctions (see also, Rivkin-Fish 2005). Demographic decline is additionally linked with other economic and social problems facing Russia, construed as part of a general offensive against the country from a combination of pernicious foreign influences and the inherent degeneracy of modernity. Rhetoric of demographic crisis has transformed into impassioned pleas to save a “dying nation” (cf. Rivkin-Fish 2006) and feminism is painted as a foreign menace. Issoupova (2000) argues that post-Soviet rhetoric about motherhood generally shifted from that of “duty” to the country to assertions of women’s “natural” desire to birth children. However, many also appear to be reasserting the links between motherhood and service to the state, now deployed as *nation*. Biological propensities and social responsibility are often conflated in calls to preserve the nation’s “gene pool” (*genofund*).

The threat of national decline has also been of primary concern to the leaders of the Sakha Republic, and politicians echo the broader discourses of demographic crisis and declining morality in promoting a return to traditional gender roles. In public speeches, any difference between state and nation is often elided as politicians use the single word “nation” (*natsiia*) in slipping between references to the citizenry of the Russian Federation and references to the Sakha ethno-nation. Which nation is under threat is not always clear. During the 1990s, the threatened survival of the Sakha nation was highlighted prominently in discourses that focused on legitimation of Republic sovereignty through ethnic claims to territory. Nevertheless, persistent concerns to minimize the appearance of more radical

ethno-nationalism even at that time meant that politicians strove to highlight the mutual concerns of the Sakha and Russian nations. More recently, recentralization and renewed persecution of Sakha “nationalism” has made national decline an increasingly shared Russian and Sakha concern in public discourse as the Sakha people and the population of the Sakha Republic are both invoked as a subset of the Russian civic nation.

The Sakha Republic, as a subject of the Russian Federation, promotes pronatalism and traditional family values as central to both Sakha ethnic interests and the interests of the Russian Federation as a whole. The support of pronatalism and traditional family values (i.e. the woman as, primarily mother) on the part of former President Mikhail Nikolaev is demonstrated by his speech at the All-Russian Forum of Mothers in 2003:

The sacred biological, social, and if you will, state and patriotic duty of every woman is the duty of motherhood. This is a god-given imperative. But, such an understanding is gradually disappearing. There is a lot of talk about rights and equality. Young women already box and practice martial arts, lift weights, play soccer, become military snipers and spies. However, a woman with an automatic weapon, like a priest with a grenade is complete nonsense. In everyday consciousness motherhood is understood almost condescendingly, like men’s fondness for hunting or fishing...

I believe that the preeminent duty, and yes I mean *duty* and not right, of a woman before God, society and the state, her patriotic obligation—is to give birth to and raise children, to love her husband and family. Like the patriotic military duty of every man.

To give birth to and to raise children as upstanding citizens of Russia, to love her husband and family—this is the true foundation of women’ high social and political status. Because no one else in the country, be he a third-term parliamentarian, doctor of science and an academic, red, white or blue, can fulfill this task.

[...] With our mother’s milk, we drink the beauty of our native language, inherit our native culture, learn to love our Mother-land and her people, to create goodness, to comprehend the beauty of the world, and to strengthen our souls. All that is good in a person is from his mother. Heroes emerge from heroic mothers... The women of Russia are her pride and glory. They should have a special status.

In this speech, Nikolaev expresses a sentiment I heard repeated regularly from both men and women in the Sakha Republic—motherhood is a high moral responsibility as well

as the natural inclination for women.<sup>58</sup> Despite the fact that everyone also insisted that the value of motherhood was declining, all young people I encountered either had children or planned to and insisted that motherhood was one of the most important tasks for women. Time and again, I was reminded personally that at 27 years old, my biological window for childbirth was narrowing. “It’s time,” I was told by people I had only just met, who gently suggested that I had been playing at this working-academic thing long enough and that I would soon put it aside to get married and have children. “Why don’t you have children yet?” was of crucial interest to everyone, and I even had a four-year-old spontaneously prophesy the date and quantity of my future children.

Local women also highlighted their own role as mothers and lamented the supposed declining value of motherhood. Urban women often sent their children to live with grandparents in the countryside, and at the same time, cited their children as their most important source of strength, the meaning of their lives. I encountered a number of young women in Yakutsk, for example, who had children living in the countryside and who rarely spoke about them. One friend, Katya, was a fashion designer and social event organizer and she often brought me with her to the events she organized. The job demanded that she stay out all night many nights a week, a task she performed with relish. After months of spending time together, she took me to a nearby village in order to introduce me to her father, a well-known musician and cultural figure. As we walked through the front gate, I was astonished to see a small boy run out of the house, shouting “Mama!” Later as we sat in a taxi and he fell asleep with his head in her lap, she explained that motherhood is the most important thing in the world for her, that she loves her son more than anything. She also pointed out that many single Sakha women living in the city have children and send them to the countryside. She insisted that having children is more important than having a husband, and anyway, the good men in Yakutsk are few and far between.

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<sup>58</sup> Nikolaev, a professed Orthodox Christian, also invokes the importance of women’s duty to God in a critical illustration of the way in which religion has emerged as a central political force in post-Soviet Russia. Indeed, Christian as well as polytheistic/animistic traditions that celebrate women’s (“natural”) propensity for motherhood are often invoked in discussions about collective identity. Despite its influence in the region, religion was not invoked in the context of beauty contests—perhaps because of the construction of the contests as “modern” phenomena, and perhaps because of the still shaky moral status of the contests as I discuss in the next section.



Throughout my fieldwork I regularly encountered women—single and married—who were living in the city (Yakutsk) and sent their children to the countryside to live with grandparents. As Katya's statements suggest, this practice did not necessarily conflict with the importance young women placed on their role as mothers. For most young urbanites, this was simply the reality of contemporary life. There were few jobs in the countryside and almost no opportunities for higher education, so it was widely accepted and even expected for young people to move to the city. At the same time, grandparents and other extended family have long played a central role in childrearing both among Russian and Sakha families as young parents work, while retired grandparents take care of the children. For Sakha, whose extended families often remain in the countryside, it is perfectly consistent to send their children to the villages while they work in the city. Those who are able often travel back and forth, but many young women, like Katya, are not as mobile and/or their jobs require them to remain more permanently in the city. This creates the situation in which motherhood is supposed to be central to young women's identities, and yet their active role as mothers is often intermittent. The role played by others in young children's development is often far greater than that played by their mothers despite rhetoric touting the importance of mothers in child development.

Despite the actual dispensation of child-rearing responsibilities in practice, young women-mothers were often depicted in popular discourse as solely responsible for their children's well-being. Irresponsible mothers were especially villainized, appearing as monsters who ignored both their biological instincts and their social responsibilities. One locally-produced film, *Michil*, aired regularly on Republic television and had won numerous prizes for its depiction of the struggles of a young boy whose alcoholic mother drinks while he takes care of himself and his younger sister. In the heart-wrenching climax, the mother finds her son's tear-stained diary, in which he pines for the time when his mother actually took care of them (before his father's death and before she became an alcoholic). At that moment, she resolves to clean herself up and the last scene shows her (tidy and fresh-looking) walking her children to school—she is momentarily tempted by the invitation of a drinking buddy to come join her, but she looks at her children and steadfastly walks on. As we watched the film at her house in Nyurba, my friend Valya, herself the mother of six children, gritted her teeth in anger and shook her head: "Such women...arggh!" Despite the

much greater prominence of male alcoholism in the region, I knew of no examples in which men were similarly castigated for eschewing parental or other responsibilities. Female alcoholism inspired particular condemnation of individuals, where male alcoholism was often seen as more of a *social* problem, related to unemployment and inequality, or even rooted in Sakha genetic proclivities. The message was that female alcoholism was not only particularly problematic, but that it proceeded from individual defects—women need only to follow their natural instincts in order to fulfill their feminine duties.

Women's "equality" was already beside the point for many of my friends and acquaintances, who insisted that women already had equal rights—women, however, were not the same as men and therefore ought to be encouraged to develop their own, gender-specific virtues. As Nikolai, a young man in his twenties, laid it out for me in the course of a lengthy argument about feminism:

It's simply that everyone has their own purpose, and no one as a whole is better than anyone else, each person is better only in that occupation, for which they are predisposed... And that's why I don't like feminism, not because of equal rights for men and women, no, let them be equal, whatever, but these eternal attacks, pitiful attempts to show that women are better than men in primordially male activities, it's not even funny, just obnoxious. A woman should be a woman and a man a man. And that's it.

While this particular statement was expressed by a man, I heard similar statements from women that emphasized the different predispositions (*prednaznacheniiia*) of women and men. In one of my first visits to the Republic, for example, the strikingly assertive, academically successful daughter of a female university dean surprised me when she expressed disdain for her mother's occupation. She insisted that women ought not be in leadership roles, and those that do are much stricter than men. In this, she implied that female leaders must compensate for a presumed lack of natural leadership through feigned control; in the process, they also risk losing their femininity. The reality of women in leadership roles was often cited not as evidence of women's equal capacity to take on these roles, but as evidence of the failure of

men to fulfill their appropriate roles—yet another indicator of national decline.<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, both women and men argue that everyone should be allowed to do what they choose, but social programs ought to encourage women to focus on the family above all else as the most important aspect of their lives and also to cultivate their beauty, or as Nikolai described it, their “only weapon that doesn’t misfire,” (*edinstvinoe oruzhie kotoroe ne daet osechku*).

### 6.3 Beauty Contests as Promoting Feminine Virtue

It is in this context that Yakutian beauty contests have come to be represented not simply as a frivolous escape from mundanity, but rather as playing an important role in the social life of the Republic and shaping the moral foundations of young people. The pageants are sponsored not only by modeling and other commercial organizations, but also by local and regional governments, educational institutions, media outlets, and trade unions. Young women are encouraged to participate in order to boost their self-esteem and to focus their energies in positive directions—taking care of one’s appearance is conflated with taking care of one’s health and therefore, beauty contests are depicted as congruent with Russia’s “healthy life-style” campaign that aims to discourage alcohol, tobacco, and drug use among young people. Beauty contests are also argued to promote social responsibility, since Yakutian beauty queens, like beauty queens elsewhere, take an active role in charity events and other public welfare activities.

The statements of contest organizers reflect these concerns and detail a wide array of other potential social benefits coming from the contests. For example, the contest Miss Universiad 2009, in which women of different universities across the Republic competed, was organized with the following goals enumerated:

The promotion of student social activity; the establishment of creative and cultural connections between the Republic’s educational institutions; propaganda for healthy life-

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<sup>59</sup> See Jennifer Patino (2010) on the “crisis of masculinity” in post-Soviet Russia. She describes the international dating industry in Russia and the way in which it is largely characterized by European and American men marrying Russian women. She argues that this is not necessarily the result of women’s lack of empowerment in Russia, but rather connected with a larger crisis of masculinity in which there is a serious lack of good men.

styles; the stimulation and development of the visual and performing arts; and also the identification and promotion of talented students (Ministry of Youth Politics 2009, 1).

The contest was held under the slogan of “Beauty, doing good” (*Krasota, tvoryashchaia dobro*) and the proceeds from ticket sales were all donated to hospitalized children.

Afterwards, two of the winners of the contest (Miss Intellect and Miss Friendship) visited a residential school and gave the children a laptop computer. According to a press release from the Ministry of Youth Politics which helped sponsor the event, beauty is “mercy and empathy and kindness and purity of thoughts” (Ministry for Youth politics 2009: 2). In this way, feminine beauty is linked to charity and high virtue—the classic Madonna, who through her beauty does good and inspires the virtue of others, and who also expresses her femininity in altruism and dedication to the ill and the young. The contestants perform and reinforce the image of woman as care-giver.

Beauty contests also provide the opportunity for younger girls to learn the value of feminine beauty. While volunteering at a summer English camp, I was asked to join two 10-year old boys and one other female teacher on the “Miss English camp” jury. The six contestants, who ranged in age from 9 to 14, adorned themselves in pretty dresses, cooked, sang, danced and answered “intellect” questions about English. While the contest was framed as a “beauty contest,” the jury sought to reward effort and talent over physical appearance—reinforcing the message that beauty is not about mere physical attractiveness. In this way, it appeared to be more about the proper performance of femininity. There was no equivalent boys’ contest. The ultimate decisions were primarily made by the two adult women on the jury (myself and the other teacher), but the presence of the two boys legitimated the decision by ensuring appropriate male representation, and reinforcing the contest as participating in the construction of hetero-normative gender relations. In other words: femininity is performed for a male gaze—men both consume and judge the performance. At the same time, they judge much more than physical appearance as the contestants perform their inner feminine virtue.

At the Republic level, young girls also have the chance to compete in various contests, such as Mini-Miss Yakutia, the winners of which have done extremely well at international competitions. Youth competitions do not garner the publicity that their adult

counterparts do, but they are often depicted in media and promotional materials as positive social investments nonetheless. For example, the virtual contest for girls from four to nine years old, “Princess of Yakutia,” was carried out for the first time in 2009 and was organized by the Yakutsk city administration of youth and family politics (Anon. 2009). In addition to the host of young city girls who participated, five girls from a near-by village orphanage were also invited to take part as a special charity gesture and each received a special prize of her own. Significantly, none of them won “normal” prizes—their participation was framed as an exceptional gesture of inclusion for girls who never would be able to participate in such a contest on their own merits. The inclusion of the charity gesture put the contest squarely in the realm of feminine charity, just like its adult counterparts. At the same time, the realm of beauty contest was reinforced as an urban phenomenon—constructing an urban femininity as the dominant form of traditional feminine values, and contradicting broader assumptions of traditional values as rooted in the countryside. Urban women and girls are simultaneously the most at risk for not developing the proper attitude toward motherhood and also the most successful at embodying the proper femininity.

According to one newspaper article, the contest’s ultimate goals included: “the moral, aesthetic upbringing of the Republic’s children, the active development of their personal qualities and self-confidence, and also encouraging social opinion of the family as an important institution of social life, increasing the role of the family in nurturing the new generation, and providing social stability” (Anon. 2009). Within this statement, the many sided aspects of the beauty contests’ role in national salvation are highlighted—girls learn self-confidence and to look after themselves, which is far better than “drinking beer in a stairwell,” as one beauty contest director suggested as the principle alternative (Mironenko 2007). Beauty contests promote healthy lifestyles for the nation’s young women—women, who both represent the nation in embodied form and will be responsible for reproducing the nation both in substance and in culture.

In this way, discourses of social responsibility and national revitalization merge with the promotion of feminine beauty and beauty contests. Beauty contests help to focus women’s goals toward feminine virtues, toward having children and taking care of their family—important national priorities that will aid in preserving and reproducing the nation both in its physical substance (its gene pool) and in its cultural identity. “Beauty” becomes

much more than physical appearance, rather it indexes a particular kind of femininity, one that is intimately implicated in the survival of the nation. In depicting the valorization of a particular kind of femininity as a shared concern of the Sakha people and of Russia, beauty contests also link the fate of the two nations together, eliding the inequalities and conflicting priorities that would necessitate ethno-territorial sovereignty. At the same time, because of its centrality in national imaginations, femininity is also the site of anxieties about a “dying nation” and the threat modernity poses to national identity. In the next section, I discuss how beauty contests, as quintessentially modern phenomena that associate femininity with commercialization and mass-media and put women’s bodies on public display risk being targeted for promoting erotica. Women emerge as both guardians of national morality and also the source of its destruction.

#### **6.4 Undressing for Cameras: Sexuality and Commodification in Virtual Pageants**

*“It’s time to bow before beauty, for beauty will save the world!” These words cannot be better suited for such extraordinary events like beauty contests, when the most beautiful women emerge onto the stage—women who radiate a heavenly aura such that all who watch are literally spellbound by the sight. Be you indifferent to everything: to your life, to what is happening in the country now, you cannot be unmoved by such beauty.*<sup>60</sup>

--From the Aiyy Kuo modeling agency, advertising materials

In the above quote, the Sakha Republic’s preeminent modeling agency, Aiyy Kuo invokes Dostoyevsky’s famous line that “beauty will save the world” in promoting their activities as performing an important social function. In this, they echo broader post-Soviet calls for a return to traditional gender roles and for women to cultivate their chief virtue: their beauty. Beauty is inspirational, moving, and “heavenly.” With the potential for such a tool at their disposal, why would any woman want to neglect her appearance? As such, physical beauty is seen as strength and power. Women seek this power, then, and take pride in it, highlighting

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<sup>60</sup> <http://sakhamarket.ru/?page=firma&id=55>, accessed 7/8/2011.

Azhgikhina and Goscilo's observation that for Russian women, beauty represents, "combating adversity, challenging life's trials, staying in good shape and hoping...to succeed" (1996, 108). For individual women, beauty contests can be a source of empowerment, a means of overcoming "complexes" and achieving success in a circumscribed realm of appropriate femininity. However, in seeking this power, women reinforce the female body as one that requires strict discipline to maintain its position as national embodiment without threatening the moral fabric of nation through its capacity for seduction and erotic pleasure.

Susan Bordo (1993) has pointed to the ways women appear in discourse as bodies in contrast to men, who appear as acting, thinking selves who happen to be trapped in bodies. Women as bodies both ground men in nature and distract them from knowledge, God, productivity, etc. (Bordo 1993, 5). Women's fashion and beauty practices, she argues are necessarily a narrow realm in which bodies and movements are tightly monitored, the line between appropriately feminine beauty that is sexy without being erotic is easily transgressed. Banet-Weiser's (1999) discussion of the swimsuit competition in the Miss America pageant is instructive in this respect: this round is the focus of some of the most extreme apprehension on the part of contestants and also the most tightly monitored. Contestants are expected to wear scant swimsuits that reveal each bodily contour (their "physical fitness," as it is now described), but the bras must have cups (lest erect nipples be visible) and the suit is stuck to the body with a spray-on adhesive to prevent any embarrassing slippage that might reveal more than intended. The round is carefully scripted and choreographed so that all potential eroticism is carefully contained.

This fear of women's sexuality is also evident in the intense monitoring to which the behavior of the contestants in Russian and Sakha contests is subject. In both the Miss Russia pageant and Miss Yakutia pageant, like in the Miss America pageant, participants are subject to a strict regime of "training," during which they learn to tame their bodies and during which, their activities are closely monitored. They are allowed no alcohol and no consorting with men. Miss Russia contestants are not even allowed on the first floor of their hotel without a chaperone during the training period. Once selected as queen, their behaviors are also monitored—Miss Yakutia 2004, for example, was stripped of her title for appearing in a men's magazine photograph in which she wore a fur coat opened just enough to expose one

side of one breast (Mironenko 2007). While far from pornographic, the photograph was deemed erotic enough to be considered an inappropriate expression of sexuality for the “embodiment” of the Republic.

The choice to strip Miss Yakutia 2004 of her title was likely imbued with an array of other political factors—the contest directors indicated that this incident was simply the “last straw” in a series of incidents (Mironenko 2007). And, as the place of near-naked women’s bodies has become cemented in advertising practices, other queens have appeared in far more compromising photographs. Nevertheless, the photographs provided apt pretext for relieving her of the crown, highlighting the ways in which fears about women’s sexuality remain integral to public discourse. Indeed, the increasing prevalence of erotic images of women’s bodies in the media provides fuel to the panic over national decline.

The two most prominent beauty contests in the Sakha Republic are Miss Yakutia and Miss Virtual Yakutia, representing two ends of a spectrum in terms of mass appeal. Where Miss Yakutia, the feeder contest for Miss Russia, is carried out in accordance with international standards for beauty contests, emphasizing decorum and elegance and judged by a carefully selected jury, Miss Virtual Yakutia prides itself in its “democratic” values, open to anyone with a camera and judged (except for the final round) by an internet audience. Contestants often participate in both contests, but Miss Yakutia is self-consciously concerned with national “embodiment” and with its reputation for promoting feminine virtue, where Miss Virtual Yakutia highlights its role as an entertainment venue and a creative outlet. Not surprisingly, the vision of femininity presented by Miss Virtual Yakutia contrasts starkly with the stateliness and elegance of Miss Yakutia. Contestant photographs are filled with nudity, presenting an untamed and erotic beauty that often verges on the pornographic. Miss Virtual Yakutia contest rules do state that nudity is only allowed for “artistic” effect and entries can be stricken from participation if deemed inordinately pornographic, but they qualify this by insisting that erotic elements can be incorporated tastefully:

About the use of artistic elements of erotica: [...] work that may offend even a small proportion of spectators, will not be accepted. However, if the shoot is done with talent, is



intriguing and happens to be capable of exciting the male segment of the audience, and given this, is also aesthetic and not excessively immodest, then why not?<sup>61</sup>

Accordingly, entrants avoid blatant pornography, but do give free reign to their “artistic” sensibilities in depictions of untamed and erotic beauty that, judging from comments left on the contest website, are indeed capable of exciting the contest’s male audience.

The Miss Virtual Yakutia (MVY) contest has thus not sought to assert an overtly moral mission to the degree sought by those contests described in the previous section. Rather, it depicts itself as a democratic contest, where women collaborate with photographers to express their creativity and individuality. Accordingly, successive contests have expanded creative opportunities for contestants, including, for example, a “body art” competition and, more recently, a video clip. The 2010 contest included photos that could operate as creative advertisements for healthy lifestyles—a possible response to some of the criticism MVY has received for its potential threat to feminine virtue, which I describe below. In addition to these other “mini-contests,” contestants keep a regular online “diary,” in which they interact with their admirers through blog posts. The diary also provides space for additional photographs, and site visitors increasingly demand that contestants post a variety of different pictures, including non-professional ones that provide a glimpse of contestants in their daily lives.

In contrast to Miss Yakutia, which has become a Republic institution, supported by the government and other social organizations, MVY has been accompanied by scandal and intrigue, including a 2007 finalist who turned out to be a man dressed in drag, a 2008 near-win by a heavy-set girl backed by a vocal movement against “Barbie doll” beauty, and regular public outcry over the age of contestants posing in suggestive photographs. In these repeated scandals MVY appears as a target for those who seek to expose the contest as inherently immoral and/or dishonest. In the process, the instability of the ground upon which beauty contests assert their social value is revealed: in “undressing for the cameras,” contestants call attention to the ways pageants position female bodies as objects of male gaze. MVY organizers defend the “virtual” contest as harmless entertainment and creative

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.missvirtualyakutia.com/index.php/%3Fm=static&ctid=rules.html>, accessed 2/26/2010.

artistry, but the contest provides fuel to the significant outrage at the forces of modernity and commercialization that many insist are unraveling the fabric of the nation. The Republic's newspapers and a growing internet blogosphere delight in the scandals, while shocked voices decry the contest as pornographic and as evidence of modern moral decay, arguing that it takes advantage of young women for the profit of the sponsoring companies (Sakhainternet and the local women's magazine, *Ona+*).

Within the debates surrounding the contest, post-Soviet moral panics around women's sexuality and around commerce are brought together—women become both the victims of societal moral decay, taken advantage of by greedy producers and also the potential perpetrators of this decay. Anxiety about the moral well-being of young women takes center stage in the litany of forces that are undermining contemporary Russia—everyone is out to make money, the government is dishonest, society is falling apart and our girls are being corrupted. Fears about corruption and suspicion of profit-making easily slide into discourses of women's sexual depravity and the forces of evil that would drag young girls into morally precarious circumstances. For example, in response to outrage about the young age of many of the girls found in the erotic photographs on the MVY website, the Plenipotentiary of Human Rights in Yakutia was quoted as saying,

Our legal system is very incomplete. Today we cannot safeguard young girls from the influences of the organizers of different contests. Who stands behind these organizers? What do they want? What I see in reality is a plummet into an abyss. Forgotten national customs, traditions, modesty. Today they hammer into a young girl's head that to garner attention, you have to take off more clothing. But that's absurd! The saddest thing is that today even under-age girls are undressing for the cameras. And that, in my opinion, is a deep violation not only of the standards of morality but also of the law. Why don't they prosecute the contest organizers for spreading erotica? (Mironenko 2007)

Here, the interviewee accuses the contest organizers of the exact opposite of what promoters of other contests cite as their mission. By “undressing” for cameras, the girls move from the virtuous into the realm of the scandalous, from a promotion of family values to an embrace of immodesty and abandonment of tradition. And the age of the girls here is key—as “underage girls” (*nesovershenno-letnye devochki*), i.e. under 18, they can be clearly

identified as the victims of corrupt organizers who use their naiveté to make money. The subjectivity of adult women who would voluntarily *choose* this depraved path is sidestepped. Likewise, the substantial male and female audience that readily consumes the spectacle and creates the commercial success of the contest is ignored—the blame is placed squarely on the shoulders of “greedy” producers, merging fears about money and profit with anxiety about the state of women, coded as nation.

The realm of the internet and technology further associate Miss Virtual Yakutia with the audacious forces of modernity that threaten the fabric of society. Site visitors are suspicious as to what degree pictures are “photo-shopped” (*otfotoshopili*). While contest rules expressly forbid modification of photographs, the website comment-pages are filled with accusations that one or another contestant modified their submissions. Whether or not the contestants use photo-shop, the winning contestants almost always have access to professional photography, photo-sets, and often have professional training as models—another source of outrage and suspicion. It was with these frustrations that a vocal movement came to support the heavy-set 16-year old, Darya Gvozdeva in 2008. Her submissions were modest, unprofessional pictures of herself dressed up for a school dance and for other special occasions. She appeared in newspaper interviews as genuinely surprised by the resonance her pictures created—a vocal internet-based movement managed to garner thousands of votes, such that she was the clear favorite going into the final round. She was unable to make it to Yakutsk for the final round of on-stage competition due to school exams, a fact, which a few of her supporters insisted was engineered by the contest organizers. Nevertheless her early success and the vocal movement supporting her suggests the ways in which a *virtual* beauty contest, in particular, becomes vulnerable to attacks from both conservatives and progressives for its depiction of female beauty.

In addition, as an internet contest it is further associated with depravity as anonymity provides a virtual zone of freedom, where anything goes. Commenters on the website can easily hide behind an avatar and screen-name to express all manner of vulgarisms and blunt opinions about the girls and the contest. And they do—witness the common double-edged compliment left bluntly on contestants’ web-pages: “I’d fuck her,” (*Ia by vdul*) which expresses both approval of the girl’s appearance and expectations about her sexual availability. Commenters also express disapproval, dissecting particular bodily features. For

example, one commenter wrote: “your legs are too short...it seems like when you mother was pregnant with you they diagnosed her with IFDD—Internal Fetal Development Delay. The legs didn’t fully grow in the womb.” Others criticize the appeals contestants make to erotica as they shift between clothed and unclothed photo posts, as in the comment: “She hid her tits and already isn’t so impressive.” The contestants hardly seem to know how to respond to these comments, which are not always censored—some ignore them entirely, some try to defend themselves, and some tease back, appearing to take it all in stride. Others leave it to their other (male) admirers to play the knight in shining armor, who scold the rude commenters for their unchivalrous behavior, repeating platitudes about virtuous beauty. Each also has her coterie of female friends, who know her personally, and make it their mission to promote their friend’s self-esteem with exclamations of “You’re the most beautiful, dear girl!! I love you!!!”<sup>62</sup>

In this way, Miss Virtual Yakutia reveals cracks in the national myth of femininity, exposing it as an inherently contested realm. Contestants collaborate with photographers to express their creativity, and often appeal to the erotic in the process. This eroticism, however, becomes grounds for a moral panic, recalling the scandalousness of early beauty contests right after the Soviet Union’s collapse (Moskalenko 1996). Women appear not simply as the guardians of the nation’s moral fabric, but also the primary threat to this fabric in their uncontained sexuality. Woman as temptress is yet again invoked in male comments on the website, which seem to interpret eroticism as indicative of contestants’ sexual availability. The judgment implied in such comments reinforces women as objects of national desire that must be publicly displayed, yet *privately* consumed (Banet-Weiser 1999, 8).

The particulars of a virtual contest contrast starkly with those of Miss Yakutia, which I turn to in the following section, and the tensions are accordingly more tightly contained. Miss Yakutia has an internet site, but the contest is mediated primarily through Republic television, NVK-Sakha, available throughout the Republic in almost every home, in every village. In addition, it is broadcast as a one night event, the months of casting, preparation and training smoothed over in a single choreographed evening event. From its 1996 inception, Miss Yakutia has sought to assert itself as an event about regional identity,

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<sup>62</sup> While the comments are often anonymous, the gender of the commenter is often discernable due to the gendered nature of the Russian language—past tense verbs and adjectives can clearly indicate the gender of the speaker.

choosing the image of femininity that will represent the region-as-nation. At the same time, through its participation in the hierarchy of local-regional-national-world pageants, it is subject to the demands of participation at the higher levels. In the process, it reproduces nested hierarchies—the region as subset of the federation. Here, the “nation” in nation-state becomes confusing—referring simultaneously to ethnic contours of the contest, the essence of regional identity as ethnic identity, and to the reality and relevance of a Russian (*rossiiskii*) nation. Femininity in national discourse is revealed as an unstable category—both gender and nation emerge as inescapably racialized categories, implicated within a variegated political terrain of difference and identity.

### **6.5 The Ethno-politics of Beauty Contests: Miss Yakutia and National Identity**

Beauty contests made their debut in Yakutia during Perestroika at the same time as they were shocking and delighting residents elsewhere in the Soviet Union. 1989 saw the selection of the first “Northern Princess”—the region’s first beauty queen, representing the city of Yakutsk (Zhuravlev 1989). Like elsewhere in Russia, the first contests were rife with excitement and scandal—the show was sold out far in advance and journalists often paid huge sums of money to get a hold of tickets; there were accusations that the results had been fixed beforehand (Ugarova 1990). Public debates echoed those of the broader post-Soviet space—older generations were shocked by the public display of female bodies, while young women embraced the opportunity to showcase their physical beauty. However, where the Russian national contests faded to the background and lost mass appeal, Yakutian contests have remained popular. Indeed, at least for the year of her reign, Miss Yakutia is a household name, her face and body painted on billboards across the Republic, the face of the region-as-nation.

The Miss Yakutia contest is the most prestigious beauty contest in the Republic. It emerged in the 1990s, when Sakha politicians (like leaders of other ethnically-defined regions) sought regional sovereignty legitimated in large part through a discourse of ethnic preservation and cultural revival. Beauty pageants were never directly associated with the ethno-national movement—in fact, given the prevalence of beauty contests as sites for

indigenous revival elsewhere in the world (e.g. Rogers 1996) and the popularity of beauty contests in the region as a whole, there is a surprising lack of expressly *Sakha* beauty contests. This fact may be testament to the continuing taboo against invoking ethnicity that would be necessary to explicitly limit participation on the basis of phenotype. I will return to this point below, but it is important to emphasize here that despite the lack of overt attention to ethnicity, beauty pageants emerged at a time when the region was (re)fashioning itself as decidedly Sakha. Miss Yakutia came to represent the beauty and legitimacy of a fledgling nation-state, and therefore, would be expected to represent the essence of Sakha-ness.

Contest rules stipulate that entry is open to any unmarried, 17-27 year-old woman of the Sakha Republic, 165cm (5.5 ft) or taller (a towering height for notoriously short Sakha women). Finalists are selected through a competitive “casting” process and via local competitions, which ensure representatives from even the most distant villages. The contest itself is held annually at the Yakutsk House of Culture, where contestants compete in rounds that replicate international competitions—question-and-answer, talent, bikini, evening dress—and include any of a number of local inventions, like a “stewardess” round—contestants dress as flight attendants; a “fur coat” round—contestants emerge draped in furs; or a “Japanese” round—contestants dressed as geishas perform a supposedly Japanese style dance. The different rounds seem to reflect particular ideas of about appropriate feminine occupations and change yearly, according to the creative inspiration of contest organizers. Like in other Soviet and post-Soviet festivals described in chapter four, beauty contests regularly appropriate a range of ethnic and national identities in performing essentialized cultural difference—hence, the Japanese round in 2008. The Japanese round also likely had appeal because of its invocation of exotic—Oriental—femininity.

The rounds are judged by prominent male and female Yakutians: newspaper editors, photographers, former pageant winners, politicians, and businessmen, in addition to one representative from the Miss Russia pageant, necessary to ensure compliance with the larger pageant’s stipulations for its feeder contests. Many prizes are awarded so that around half the contestants receive something—sponsors choose their favorite, contestants themselves elect “Miss friendship,” the audience votes for “spectator sympathy” award, a winner is chosen for each round, and a first, second and third place winner are named. The first place winner receives an elaborately bejeweled crown, and competes in Miss Russia, as well as other

national and international contests, which have included Miss Central Asia, Miss Asia-Oceania, and even Miss Tourism Kazakhstan Open.

Because of the pyramidal pageant structure, contestants come to serially index larger populations as they move through structural levels (cf. Rogers 1996:63). Village representatives proudly assert their local identity in the Republic-wide contest. In turn, Miss Yakutia represents Republic identity in the Miss Russia contest. In an interview with a local newspaper, the Miss Yakutia contest director explained that the “single prerequisite” for winners is that “the young woman should be the embodiment of our Republic” (Kolodeznikova 2009, 2). By competing in extra-Republic contests, Miss Yakutia not only embodies the regional identity of the Republic but presents that identity to the rest of the world. Thus, the stakes are high for selecting the appropriate image of femininity. This also means that this image must also appeal to transnational standards of appropriate feminine beauty, regardless of the woman’s ethnic markers.

Promotional materials demonstrate that contest organizers are well aware of the role that the contests play in establishing Republic identity. The first words on the contest website’s section “about the contest,” for example, state plainly that the contest winner will become an important symbol of the region:

The contest ‘Miss Yakutia’ is a celebration of beauty, charm and grace. A large task stands before the young ladies from different *uluses*: to participate in the selection of the symbol of the beauty of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia).<sup>63</sup>

Not only will contest winners achieve recognition for their own beauty, charm and grace, but they will represent the beauty, charm and grace of the region as a whole. This fact immediately marks Miss Yakutia as different from other contests—not simply a contest of who is the most beautiful, but rather, who best represents the region. The title of “queen,” is not trivial, pointing to the serious role the beauty queen assumes and her symbolic function for the region-as-nation. Once she moves up to the higher levels, her achievements are no longer just her own, but those of the Republic. When Miss Yakutia 2006 achieved 3<sup>rd</sup> place

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.missyakutia.ru/about.php>, accessed 2/11/10

in Miss Russia, for example, this was not just an affirmation of one girl's beauty, but of the beauty of the Sakha people and of Yakutia as a whole.

Banet-Weiser (1999) argues that beauty contests not only aid in the construction of a homogenous national identity, but they also help to contain disjuncture in nationalist imaginations: in the context of a "crisis" in national identity, "beauty pageants present the female body as a vehicle through which this disjuncture is contained" (7). Contests provide idealistic resolutions to national tensions through a performance of diversity contained in a particular image of femininity. Accordingly, the Miss Yakutia contest presents itself as a forum for the presentation of Republic diversity. The contest organizers argue, for example, that the contest,

...provides a substantive contribution to the creation of the Republic's cultural image. It demonstrates that our northern region is rich, not only in the gifts of nature, depth of spirit and strength of its people, but also in feminine beauty—in splendid young ladies representing many nationalities and cultures.

By emphasizing the "many" nationalities and cultures of contestants, organizers invoke the presence of the many ethnic groups who inhabit the territory of the Sakha Republic, including indigenous Siberian, Slavic, and other immigrant groups whose presence often disappears behind public discussions of Sakha and Russian identities. In this way, they deny the presence of tensions between Sakha and Russian in a celebration of the many ethnicities and cultures of the Republic and an invocation of the older Soviet discourse of "friendship of the peoples." The contest is presented as not simply about *Sakha* beauty but rather about a trans-ethnic civic identity and shared (amongst *many* ethnic groups) ideal of feminine beauty. Nevertheless, the actual ethnic diversity of the Republic is invisible on stage, since the ethnic background of individual contestants is almost never mentioned—after all, ethnicity is not supposed to be a factor in the judging process. The result is that the only *visible* difference is Asian and white, which, without additional information about actual ethnic affiliation, index Sakha and Russian respectively. In the end, these two phenotypes index the ethnic diversity of the Republic, containing the implied disjuncture through a shared ideal of feminine beauty.



At the same time, as Banet-Weiser (1999, 7) further argues, this same body also represents the nation in terms of a particular community. Until recently, the title of Miss Yakutia went exclusively to Sakha women, presenting the transcendent identity of the region as decidedly Sakha and Asian. More recently, the jury has favored ethnically mixed contestants who retain a kind of “national beauty,” i.e. they have some Asian features, but they are not widely acknowledged as quintessentially “Sakha” in appearance. Accordingly, many Sakha reject this as a capitulation to Russian norms of beauty. They suggest that this is a reflection of the growing power of non-Sakha to set the terms of public discourse in the region and the increasing dangerousness of representing Republic identity exclusively in terms of the Sakha community. For example, as I watched the 2008 Miss Yakutia contest with my Sakha host family, they dismissed the favorite as a “*sakhalarka*,” the term for ethnically-mixed Sakha, but predicted that she would win anyway (she did). They nostalgically recalled the winner from 2005, who was also a friend of the family, and insisted that she would be “too Sakha” to win today—that is too much the “embodiment” of a *Sakha* appearance.

Indeed, as I explore in chapters three and four, the federal government, led by Vladimir Putin’s party, United Russia, has recently sought to combat the ethno-territorial fragmentation of the country, creating a climate in which expressions of ethno-nationalism in autonomous regions like Yakutia are increasingly suspect and even subject to prosecution if made too publicly. As a result, public institutions are increasingly vigilant in ensuring proper acknowledgement of the non-Sakha population. Indeed, the Miss Yakutia contest organizer explicitly states that the “embodiment” of the Republic need not have an “Asian face.” In fact, in 2007, she explained that the jury actually leaned toward selecting a Russian winner. Significantly, however, it was the representative from the Miss Russia contest, who sits on the Miss Yakutia jury each year, who insisted upon a winner with “national beauty” (Kolodeznikova 2009, 2). As a result, an Asian winner was selected.

Here the contours of Republic politics—which increasingly demand that non-Asians are prominently represented in public discourse—conflict with the commitment of federal-level (Miss Russia) contest organizers to display the diversity of Russia. While the Miss Yakutia contest confronts fears of Sakha ethno-nationalism with non-Asian (read: non-Sakha) phenotypes as potential winners, the Miss Russia contest confronts broader fears of

Russian national-territorial disintegration through a performance of Russia's ethnic diversity. The Miss Russia pageant describes itself as a "national contest," (*natsional'nyi konkurs*)—the referent of the word "national" here potentially refers both to Russia as a whole and to the contest's representation of many different "nationalities." As each contestant represents a particular territory, the ethnically-defined regions are expected to produce a contestant of "national beauty." However, the more recent selection of ethnically-mixed winners to represent the Republic in the Miss Russia contest is testament to the fact that "national beauty" need not be accepted as sufficiently "national" by representatives of the nationality they are supposed to represent in order to adequately index ethnic diversity in the Miss Russia contest. Not surprisingly, however, despite this show of ethnic diversity, the title of Miss Russia has always been awarded to a contestant who appears Russian, ensuring that the transcendent identity of Russia remains ethnic Russian.

This serial indexing points to the central importance beauty contests have in idealistically resolving national tensions. Through a performance of diversity, difference is assimilated in efforts to uphold a universal standard of beauty. In the Miss Russia contest, the "peoples of Russia" are glossed as Russian—the legitimacy of non-Russians is acknowledged through the deliberate selection of participants of "national beauty," but the transcendent identity of Russia as white is preserved through the selection of a white winner. Similarly, in the Miss Yakutia contest, the peoples of the Sakha Republic are glossed as Sakha—non-Sakha participate and demonstrate the broad reach of Yakutian identity, but the selection of a Sakha winner ensures that the "embodiment" of the Republic continues to have an Asian face. Nevertheless this process is unstable at best. The conflicting politics of the Miss Russia and Miss Yakutia contest create a dilemma for which the selection of ethnically-mixed women as Miss Yakutia emerges as the solution. However, as the "embodiment" of the Republic, ethnically-mixed women are not compelling for either Sakha or Russians in the Republic and the contest risks losing legitimacy. This may be one reason why contest viewership appears to be declining.

Furthermore, as the ethnic pride and sense of ethno-territorial identity sparked by assertions of Republic sovereignty in the 1990's fades, cynicism grows about the position of the Sakha Republic and the Sakha ethno-nation in the Russian Federation. The importance of Miss Yakutia as a symbol of Republic identity also fades, making room for a variety of

contests, which position femininity as a broader concern that goes beyond issues of Republic identity. At the same time, through contests such as Miss Virtual Yakutia, women become both the potential victims and potential perpetrators of a pernicious moral decay brought on by modernity that afflicts all the nationalities of the Sakha Republic and the Russian Federation equally. Beauty contests, then, participate in a national discourse in which they can promote the virtuousness of women's beauty through a cultivation of traditional family values and gender roles, or contribute to national decline by promoting the sexual objectification and commoditization of women's bodies. As Banet-Weiser (1999) argues, "femininity within nationalist discourse operates in a constant state of flux...women simultaneously 'need' to be protected and exploited, must be publicly displayed yet privately consumed, and are considered both the guardians of national morality and the largest threat to this moral foundation simply because of their gender" (9).

Beauty contests reveal fragmentation within national imagery—which collectivity is embodied by Miss Yakutia, for example, is under debate. Furthermore, which kind of body most appropriately represents this collectivity is also contested. Beauty contests confront these tensions through a vivid display of "ethnic diversity" indexed through ethnically-marked female bodies. Women of different ethnic backgrounds, it is insisted, can compete on one stage according to trans-ethnic standards of beauty. Nevertheless, one particular phenotype is chosen to represent the collectivity. Miss Russia theoretically opens the door to all nationalities of Russia, but ultimately privileges whiteness as the transcendental requirement. Similarly Miss Yakutia recognizes the many different ethnic groups living on the territory of the Sakha Republic, but in consistently selecting an Asian-appearing winner (at least Asian enough to satisfy the white judge) it indexes the transcendent identity of the region as Asian and Sakha. But this is contested, both by contest organizers who insist that the embodiment of the Republic need not have an Asian face and by Sakha people, who question the legitimacy of ethnically mixed winners. In this way, the contest points to the nested hierarchies that participate and often compete in the definition of essential femininity and collective identity.

## Chapter 7: “Children Of Nature”: Environmental Imaginaries and Indigenous Identity



**Figure 18: Ksenia Safronovna and her students show off the landscape**

In the summer of 2007 I accompanied Ksenia Safronovna, a middle-aged national culture teacher and outspoken advocate of cultural revival to a celebration of the summer solstice festival, Yhyakh, held by her school, the Yakutsk “national gymnasium,” one of the few grade schools in the Republic’s capital city that used Sakha language as the primary language of instruction. Like almost all Yhyakh celebrations, the festival was held in an open field outside the city. While the children and their parents were setting up the festival ornamentation that morning, Ksenia Safronovna invited me to walk with her to the top of a nearby hill. As we climbed, she would stop periodically to point out the different varieties of grass beneath our feet, telling me the Sakha names and their uses. She explained to me that people now look at these and see just grass, but each is a different species. In the past, the Sakha knew all of them, she insisted, and they were familiar with all their health and medicinal properties. Ksenia Safronovna had learned to identify the grasses and other plants herself when she lived in the North of the Republic, where she was sent to teach in her youth. Learning about these plants was for her a powerful moment in the development of her consciousness as a Sakha person. She insisted that I should learn the names as well if I were learning about Sakha culture in order to appreciate the profound importance of nature

(*priroda*, in Russia, and *aiylgha* in Sakha) to the Sakha people. For Ksenia Safronovna, as for many others involved in the Sakha cultural revival movement, nature went hand in hand with Sakha culture, and nature protection with the protection of Sakha culture. As she explained, Sakha culture is specially adapted to the northern environment of the Sakha Republic, and so the Sakha as an ethnic group are intimately tied to that landscape. At the same time, in statements like these, various different referents of “nature” come together; nature as landscape and nature as the foundational ground outside of culture are often conflated. That is to say that for Ksenia Safronovna, the “nature” of the Sakha people is intertwined with the “nature” surrounding them.

Halfway up the hill, Ksenia Safronovna tired and we sat to rest. A group of young boys, students from the gymnasium, came running up from below. Ksenia Safronovna called out to them and they eagerly took hold of her arms and literally pulled her up the rest of the way so that she could reach the top. Once there, we all rested, breathing in the fresh air, looking out across the valley below. This is the real land of the Sakha, Ksenia explained. As I snapped photographs of the vista, she and the boys lined up for a photo themselves, sweeping the arms out, proudly welcoming me to their beautiful land (Figure 18).

Ksenia Safronovna’s commentary highlights the ways in which discourses of nature are central to contemporary assertions of Sakha identity, and also suggests ways in which Sakha identity is linked with assertions of ecological stewardship. Like Ksenia Safronovna, many of my Sakha friends and acquaintances insisted upon the fundamental relationship between the Sakha people and the environment of Yakutia, and repeated the claim that Sakha are “children of nature.” In making this claim, Sakha echo an international discourse of indigeneity, in which indigenous groups worldwide have been depicted as in harmony with nature—through their subsistence practices, spiritual beliefs and other cultural attributes. Scholarly work from Brazil, especially, has highlighted the ways in which indigenous Amazonian groups have strategically drawn on these images to position themselves as natural environmental stewards and to forge alliances with environmental organizations in struggles over land and resources (Conklin 1997; Ramos 1998; Turner 1991). Conklin (1997) has also pointed to some of the pitfalls of “strategic essentialism” in which actually-existing indigenous people inevitably fail to live up to the images deployed in the course of these struggles, and thereby make themselves additionally vulnerable to accusations of

inauthenticity. Nevertheless, these images have been powerful for the expansion of indigenous identity beyond classic contexts of settler colonialism as groups all over the world recognize themselves in the images of the inherently ecological Indian and articulate their own interests and identity through a discourse of indigeneity (e.g. Creighton 1995; Li 2000). Scholars have also pointed to the ways in which these discourses circulate even in the absence of a full articulation of indigenous identity. Emily Yeh (2007), for example, points to the importance of images of Green Tibetans for Tibetan identity and argues that this discourse can be seen as an “indigenous formation” even though Tibetans have not claimed identity as an indigenous people. Tibetans thus draw on the power of the inherently ecological Indian discourse and of indigeneity more broadly without necessarily claiming to be indigenous.

In a similar way, Sakha have embraced images of themselves as “children of nature” and in doing so have invoked international discourses of indigenous harmony with nature. Sakha activists have likewise drawn on the power of these representations in the course of various political struggles over land and the environment. Assertions of closeness to nature, however, are not and were not simple expressions of indigenous solidarity. Indeed, as I have pointed out in previous chapters, the category of indigeneity is intensely contested in the Russian Federation and Sakha are not, from an official point of view, one of Russia’s “indigenous” peoples. Furthermore, many Sakha are themselves ambivalent about this label, seeking to distinguish themselves from Russia’s more unambiguous indigenes, who are widely viewed as helplessly primitive, having lost their language and culture, destined to perish under the weight of modernity. As such, many Sakha implicitly differentiate their own relationship with nature from that of the small numbered peoples of the North, suggesting that Sakha are close to nature but somehow in a more reflective and civilized way than are the small-numbered peoples. This chapter examines Sakha claims to be “children of nature” and their ramifications for Sakha political aspirations. Ultimately, I argue that such claims represent a partial articulation of indigenous identity in that they embrace international representations of indigenous peoples as close to nature, but are complicated by historically sedimented discourses of backwardness and modernity that have shaped ethnic hierarchies in Russia and the Soviet Union.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore Sakha assertions of closeness to nature and demonstrate the ways in which this discourse brings together a range of cultural identity markers that include environmental stewardship, but also other attributes of global indigeneity like ancient spirituality and cultural harmony with nature. Here we see “nature” as much more than the landscape and its flora and fauna. As Moore et al. (2003) have argued, as a concept, nature lays claim to a pre-discursive ground outside of history and culture. Nature appears to precede history, erasing evidence of its construction through social processes. Nevertheless, it is a historical artifact, an assemblage of “material, discourse and practice, irreducible to a universal essence” (D Moore, Pandian, and Kosek 2003, 2). The claim that Sakha people are children of nature is a complex and historically contingent one that congeals many facets of their cultural identity. This is what lends it force as an indigenous formation, but it also allows for contestations of indigeneity as we shall see.

In the second section, I turn specifically to environmental politics and demonstrate the ways in which Sakha environmental activists, especially in the 1990s, drew on images of Sakha as children of nature in order to contest the environmental destruction wrought by the diamond industry and other forms of state-sponsored development. Like indigenous groups elsewhere in the world, Sakha activists sought sympathy as a particularly vulnerable indigenous population and posited themselves as more effective environmental stewards. This image of indigenous ecological stewardship has been useful not only in legal battles with the diamond industry, but also in claims to ethnoterritorial sovereignty. Thus, in the third section, I examine how sovereignty advocates of the 1990s invoked the idea of Sakha as children of nature in order to legitimate claims to Republic sovereignty. To this end, President Nikolaev put aside large tracts of land as protected areas and positioned his administration as quintessentially environmentalist in orientation.

At the same time, this example also suggests ways that Sakha articulations of indigeneity are complicated by ethnonationalist discourses. That is to say that as in Yeh’s (2007) discussion of Tibetan indigeneity, ethnonationalist claims to independent statehood stand in tension with indigenous claims to cultural sovereignty within a nation-state. As such, Sakha assertions of closeness nature have not resulted in a clear articulation of indigenous identity, and in fact echo other kinds of identity discourses, like those of Russian peasanthood that evoke pastoral images of closeness-to-nature that are not specifically

indigenous (cf. Paxson 2005). This provides the ground for distinctions between the Sakha relationship to nature and that of the small-numbered peoples of the North. Sakha assert their own modernness vis-à-vis a supposedly *more* primitive cultural other. Here we return to the tensions of backwardness and modernity explored throughout this dissertation, in which Sakha simultaneously challenge the dichotomy between indigeneity and modernity and reproduce its logic. This is additionally reinforced by an increasingly circumscribed political environment in which the federal government, led by Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, seeks to curb the fragmentation of the federation along ethnic lines. As I point out in chapter 5, any kind of overt political action that articulates Sakha collective interests is now susceptible to charges of nationalism or even racism. Therefore, in protests against the construction of an oil pipeline, for example, threats to Sakha cultural livelihoods cannot be invoked, but threats to the small-numbered peoples have become a central theme for protesters. Environmental politics have in this way, been decoupled from Sakha cultural revival, and this has hindered a full articulation of indigenous identity. Representations of Sakha as children of nature draw on global discourses of indigenous harmony with nature, but do so only partially.

## 7.1 Sakha Harmony with Nature

*From the time of ancient ideas [predstavlenie], an enduring tradition of union between man and nature has emerged among the ancestors of the Sakha.*

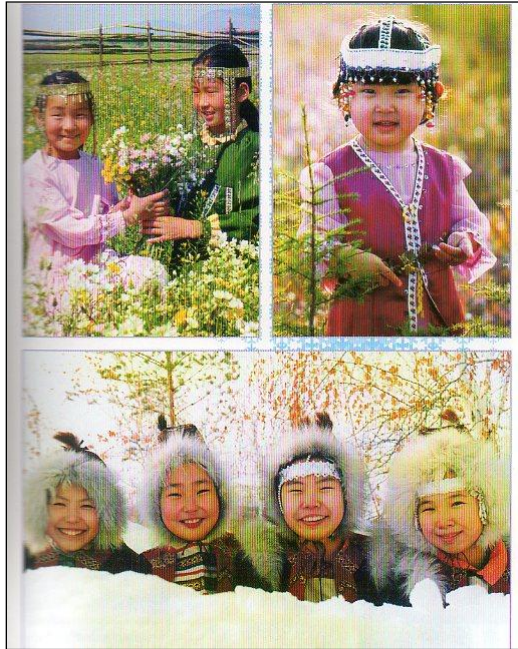
--Sakha philosopher Ksenofont Utkin, in *Self-selection [samovybor]: the Paradigm of the North*

The idea that "Sakha are children of nature" is reinforced through constantly circulating images linking Sakha people, culture and natural landscapes. The Sakha language television station, NVK Sakha, for example, often plays popular Sakha songs accompanied by images of young men and women dressed in the colorful traditional Sakha dress wandering in the woods or along a river bank. Photograph collections and promotional materials about the Sakha Republic are not complete without pictures of children in



traditional dress playing in a field of wildflowers (Figure 19). Images of pristine and peopleless nature also help to underscore the relationship between Sakha culture and the environment. Pictures of birch forests, towering larch trees, forest clearings ringed by pine trees, horses and cattle grazing in green fields, and close-ups of bright red berries and tiger lily flowers are seemingly ubiquitous. These images of pristine nature are not simply beautiful landscapes; even without human subjects, they index cultural meanings and can be seen rather as Sakha culturescapes. A forest clearing or *alaas*, for example, was the traditional homestead for Sakha, where an individual family or group of close kin would erect their dwellings in a meadow suitable for pasturing their animals. Tiger lilies appear in Sakha folktales and legends as symbols of young, beautiful women, and a popular female name is Sardana, which translates as tiger lily. Like images of the American national parks helped to sediment the idea of the US as “nature’s nation” (Shaffer 2001), images of familiar northern nature help to sediment Sakha cultural identity as rooted in a particular landscape. This is reinforced by the ubiquity of such images in promotional books, photograph exhibits, and museums, often linked visually with other aspects of Sakha culture as in Figure 20 below.

These images of Sakha nature point to the centrality of discourses of nature for Sakha ethnic identity. We can see them, in some ways, as a kind of self-exotification, invoking what Ramos (2003a) calls “indigenism,” representational practices that construct indigenous peoples as the Other of a western (or modern). The frequency with which women and children (and female children) are depicted echoes the ways in which indigenous peoples are often infantilized and feminized—childlike simplicity and feminine beauty are equated with the natural culturescapes. Masculinity is often present only indirectly as in Figure 20, where masculine hunting implements surround the photograph of a peopleless landscape and imply a (male) hunter’s gaze. Like the National Geographic photographs analyzed by Lutz and Collins (1993), these images index ethnic difference through distinctive dress, and offer an attractive, idealized “spectacle” of indigeneity. In so much as these images are produced



**Figure 19: A page from a promotional book about the Sakha Republic shows Sakha and Evenki children—marked as such by their dress—posing in nature (M Nikolaev 2004, 125).**



**Figure 20: The Markha museum displays traditional Sakha hunting and fishing implements surrounding a photograph of an alaa**

for tourist consumption, they also establish distance and incommensurability between the viewer and the indigenous subjects depicted. At the same time, like Ramos argues for indigenism in Brazil, these images are not only produced by non-indigenous people, but also by Sakha themselves. In fact, these particular kinds of images are most often (re)produced by Sakha rather than by local Russians, who largely do not hold such romantic views of their Sakha neighbors (see chapter 5), or by visiting foreign photographers, who have increasingly different criteria for “authentic” indigenous culture and spectacular natural beauty.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, these images of Sakha nature are widely embraced and celebrated by many Sakha people as representative of the deep cultural significance of particular natural environments, and of a particularly Sakha environmental ethic.

Thinking historically, we can trace this particular brand of images of native harmony with nature to the latter half of the Soviet period, in which a broad sense of nostalgia for the pre-modern world swept the USSR. The historian Yuri Slezkine (1994b), for example, argues that in the 1960s, native Siberians began to appear in the role of noble savage in Soviet film and literature as a kind of Soviet version of the *Last of the Mohicans*, which was an immensely popular book in the USSR. Slezkine argues that even as official Soviet discourses continued to emphasize industrialization and civilization-as-progress, a counter discourse was emerging in intellectual circles that lamented the loss of “ancient wisdom” and natural harmony, and mirrored EuroAmerican discourses of neo-primitivism popular in the 1960s and 70s. At this time also, Soviet ethnographers and native intellectuals alike were observing firsthand the downsides of industrialization in the North and the disconnect between official rhetoric of unequivocal progress and the realities of life in northern native communities. As Perestroika unfolded in the 1980s, a wealth of new studies confirmed and publicized the vast environmental destruction and social instability wrought by rapid industrialization in the North. Advocates of “neotraditionalism,” like the Russian ethnographer Aleksandr Pika (1999), and many indigenous cultural elites embraced notions of indigenous integration with the environment in contrast to the imbalances brought by the Soviet- and Russian-led industrialization (Pika and Grant 1999; Köhler and Wessendorf

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<sup>64</sup> The rarity of traditional dress in daily life, for example, and the use of obviously more contemporary clothing materials in making the dresses often lead international visitors to see these kinds of images as inauthentic. It is also notable that foreign photographers are now rejecting the kinds of exotifying photography practices pointed out by Lutz and Collins at the same time as indigenous peoples themselves are embracing these images as a means to assert cultural pride.

2002). In the post-Soviet period, these discourses of indigenous integration with the environment have emerged as central to Russia's indigenous movement as various groups combat former and continuing environmental destruction (DG Anderson 2002; Fondahl and Sirina 2006). Sakha activists and cultural elites have likewise embraced such discourses and have highlighted their subsistence practices and spiritual traditions as representative of a unique environmental ethic that is akin to that of other indigenous Siberians.

Conklin (1997) examines a similar kind of self-positioning among Brazilian indigenous activists, who strategically embrace stereotypes of the ecologically noble-savage in the course of political struggles over the environment. However, the history of such images in Russia suggests that the emergence and embrace of these images is rarely a simple matter of political strategy and choice on the part of activists, who respond to a larger discursive framework. Soviet ideology had long contrasted socialist civilization with native integration with nature, and depicted Sovietization as a process of emerging from the wilderness, so to speak. Many Sakha experienced socialist education in precisely this way. For example, Sakha often described collectivization of the 1930s to me as a movement from the Taiga to villages, as if they had simply lived scattered in the woods before, and not in precise areas of settlement. As they began to question the inherent progressiveness of Soviet-led industrialization, many Sakha reinterpreted the images of life in the Taiga nostalgically as a time of integration with nature. Then, in the 1980s, perestroika and glasnost coincided with the rise of the international indigenous movement and globally circulating discourse that celebrated indigenous closeness to nature. This provided a new framework through which to consider Sakha as children of nature.

Li (2000) suggests that the ecological ethic depicted by images of indigenous closeness to nature represents a more complicated kind of *positioning* as groups and individuals make connections and find resonances between their own historical practices, beliefs, and cultural symbols and those associated with other indigenous groups. These groups and individuals come to occupy a particular indigenous subject position through the "articulation" of contemporary international discourses of indigeneity and their own historically sedimented practices and self-representations. As Koester (2005) puts it, they can be said to "recognize" themselves in these globally circulating images, and thus interpret their own practices through the lens of global indigeneity. In this way, Sakha cultural

activists recognized themselves in discourses of global indigeneity and indigenous closeness to nature, and myriad historical and contemporary cultural practices came to be reinterpreted through this lens.

Contemporary Sakha draw on a range of cultural practices when making claims to a quintessentially indigenous environmental ethic, including both traditional subsistence practices and spiritual traditions. For example, like other representations of indigenous ecological wisdom, Sakha ecological wisdom is said to be interconnected with animistic spiritual traditions and shamanistic healing practices, both of which have deep historical roots in the region. Pre-Christian Sakha spiritual traditions depicted the natural world as animate, filled with spirits that had to be appeased. Many contemporary Sakha told me that they learned to respect the spirits of lakes and rivers, of roads, and of the fire from their parents and grandparents as part of inherited tradition, rather than as part of conscious cultural revival in the post-Soviet period. Hunters, I was told on numerous occasions, have never stopped performing the proper rites to Baai Baianai, the spirit of the hunt, who is not unique to Sakha, but also appears in the cosmologies of numerous Siberian peoples. These practices operate in the present as powerful markers of cultural identity, regardless of personal religious or spiritual faith. For example, Sergei Stepanovich, a sixty-year old university professor I met in Yakutsk declared himself a firm atheist, but would always toss a penny out the window of his car as he drove across an ice road, and hesitated to tell me the name of the lake near his home village, explaining that it was not proper to say the name aloud. He suggested that his own actions were “superstitions,” but he also explained to me their cultural roots in Sakha spiritual beliefs, and that they were signs of respect for nature. For him, these acts were as much a form of expressing his cultural identity as they were about a specific belief in the power of these acts. Other Sakha would likewise feed the earth before eating at a picnic, whisper when crossing a river, and leave bits of cloth at roadside shrines, explaining their importance in terms of respect for nature, even as they remained skeptical of some of the more elaborate efforts to revive traditional religion, which I explain directly.

Of course, these practices can be seen in some ways as similar to various other “superstitions,” like throwing pennies into a fountain or throwing salt over one’s shoulder, i.e. they are learned cultural practices whose meanings shift over time. However, they differ

from these in that they are embraced consciously as markers of cultural identity, and as evidence of an essential Sakha environmentalist ethic. Contemporary cultural revival advocates now seek to revitalize such practices and to link them in a coherent philosophy of respect for the environment. For some, this demands a full-fledged revival of Pre-Christian polytheistic spiritual belief system (*tengriism* or *aiyy voreghe*) and some cultural leaders have sought to do this through the creation of a kind of institutionalized Sakha religion.<sup>65</sup> This is represented in part by the Association of Folk Medicine, founded in the early 1990s by the folk-healer Vladimir Kondakov, who has sought to establish Sakha religion on the basis of shamanist tradition.<sup>66</sup> Kondakov and his followers have focused on spiritual healing as a central aspect of a revived Sakha spirituality, and see themselves as reviving Sakha connection to nature. This movement has drawn loosely on various kinds of new age spiritual practices that in turn purport to draw on indigenous naturopathic traditions. One healer that I met in the Nyurba ulus, for example, was adamant in her insistence upon consuming primarily “natural foods,” which included hand-picked berries, traditional Sakha cuisine, and horse milk. When I visited her, she proudly served me an array of such foods and emphasized the particular importance of horse milk and other quintessentially Sakha foods (Figure 21). In Figure 21 below, you can also see the picture of a pastoral landscape in the background of the room where she attends to patients, which underscores her own emphasis on nature in her healing practice.

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<sup>65</sup> Many resist the label “religion,” however, insisting upon a fundamental difference between Sakha spiritual practice and the world religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. For more on Sakha spiritual revival, see the work of Marjorie Balzer (1996, 2001, 2005, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> The term “shaman,” however, is controversial as many insist that no “true” shamans are alive today, because they were not able to apprentice with other hereditary shamans due to Soviet “liquidation” of shamans. As such, many refer to Kondakov and other healers colloquially as shamans, but the two I personally met referred to themselves as “*tselitel*” or “healers,” despite the fact that others often referred to them as shamans and they both situated their practices in terms of Sakha shamanic tradition. Both, for example, told me that they had ancestors, who were shamans, suggesting that their abilities were, in part, hereditary. However, they also claimed to draw broadly on homeopathic practices, attending conferences in Moscow and elsewhere on folk healing.



**Figure 21:** Maria Alekseevna serves me an array of "natural" foods, including horse milk, hand-picked berries, home-grown cucumbers, and a special kind of Sakha sausage



**Figure 22:** Maria Aleseevna poses for a photo with me in her "office" where she attends to patients.

Another spiritual revival group headed by the Sakha linguist, Lazar Afans'ev-Teris, has sought to promote the teaching of traditional *kut-sur* (heart-mind-soul) philosophy in classrooms as means to re-instill Sakha connection with nature. An excerpt from a journal article by one proponent of this philosophy as “ethnopedagogy” provides a vivid example of

the ways in which Sakha spiritualists see the relationship between spirituality and closeness to nature:

The man of the sunny land of the gods [*chelovek solnechnogo ulusa aiyy*]<sup>67</sup> considered himself the son of nature—*aiylgha oghoto*. Who could lay claim to the name “child of nature”? In the past, Yakuts, Even, Evenki, and Yukagir lived scattered throughout the taiga in separate forest clearings [*alaasy*], river valleys and streams, and all their lives, they were dependent upon the mercy of Mother Nature. They worshipped her in the open, natural environment [*v otkrytoi estestvennoi, prirodnoi srede*], constantly in touch with the elemental world; they knew the caprices [*prikhoti*] and the power of the Great Mother well. Man is connected with nature, who gives people strength and life force. The change of the seasons has a direct relationship to peoples’ activities. The life of the *tyuolbe* [settlement] depends on the arrival of summer since man needs to gather winter feed for the cattle, and food stores for the members of his family. In contemporary market conditions, the village-dwelling man of the sunny land of the gods needs on average 20-30 head of cattle, and 8-12 horses...Hunting and fishing provide the Yakut family with extra food products, meat and fish. In these forms of labor activities, the man of the sunny land of the gods is in direct dependence on nature, and in constant and unmediated everyday communication with living nature. Nature provides him his means of subsistence: food, and materials for making clothing and shoes. The wild forest, and blue expanses of lakes and rivers are the veins that give him life; his native *alaas*, where he lives, the surrounding environs and clean air are his strength and energy. Without them, the person of the sunny land of the gods does not exist. For this reason, there is respect for *Baai Baianai* [spirit of the forest], *Kyokh Bollokh Toion* [spirit of the water], *Aan Alakhchyn Khotun* [female spirit of the earth] and the warming, people-protecting spirit of the fire, *Khatyn Temnieriie* and others, on whose greatness depends the fate of man, his life and well-being. Having taken shelter in the bosom of mother-nature, man successfully conquers the severe, cold winter, greeting the spring and summer with joy. (Portniagin 1999)

In this passage, Portniagin weaves together traditional subsistence strategies, spiritual practice and the Sakha relationship to nature. The author explicitly identifies Sakha

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<sup>67</sup> This comes from the Sakha, *kyun sirin dionnoro*—people of the sun’s land, by which he means the Sakha people. Some Sakha will argue that the high God, *Urung Aar Toion* (Old White Master) is the personification of the sun (*kyun*), and that the Yhyakh festival is actually a festival in honor of the sun (see also, Kulakovskiy 1974, 12-13).



connection to nature with that of other indigenous peoples, the Even, Evenki and Yukagir. As I explore below, Sakha occasionally articulated their own relationship to nature as distinct from that of other Siberian indigenous peoples, but few explicitly differentiated them. More often than not, notions of Sakha as children of nature suggested a strong connection between Sakha and the small-numbered peoples of the North, in that they suggest that Sakha like other indigenous groups (in Siberia and elsewhere in the world) traditionally lived in close harmony with nature, and their subsistence and belief system were intertwined in their relationship to the natural environment. In these efforts, the relationship between secular philosophy, spiritual healing practices, and religious belief is often blurred as different individuals emphasize different aspects of Sakha spiritual practice. The important thing here is the ways in which a particularly Sakha closeness to nature is posited in all of these. As many pointed out, the Sakha word for God, *aiyy* and the Sakha word for nature, *aiylgha* both come from the same root *ai*, which means “to create.”

For many cultural revival advocates, (re)cultivating traditional Sakha spiritual beliefs will help to restore ecological harmony in the present—and ecological harmony refers to both the natural environment (landscape, flora and fauna) as well as a more expansive notion of human relationships with nature. The Sakha philosopher Ksenofont Utkin (2004) argues that the ancient Sakha philosophy represents a complex and nuanced adaptation to the natural environment of the Sakha Republic. For him and for other advocates of spiritual revival, the changes of the last century produced a previously unseen rupture in the natural balance and it is only through the revitalization of this ancient belief that the balance can be restored. Restoring this balance will not only have ramifications for the ecosystem, but for human social relations as well. As Utkin explains,

The Universe and Nature present unexpected surprises and create extreme situations. All this directly or indirectly reverberates in the depths of our souls and in the currents of individual consciousness. Anomalous phenomena of nature to our surprise are on the rise. Their consequences are deepened by social instability and the fallout of moral collapse... The result is that today's level of knowledge of nature and society on the whole far from answers the demands of real everyday life... Yakut metaphysics proceeds from the internal essence of nature and its rich and unexpected phenomena, and senses the harmony of the universe and the fundamental essence of cosmic forces.. the Sakha people have a well-developed feeling of

spirit and inner beauty that can have a positive impact on the environment....In Yakut understandings, all should develop in accordance with nature and universal rhythms, the organized order, and finally with agreement and general harmony. Nature is for the Yakut consciousness not only a fundamentally real essence, but also a model of earthly living. People always strive to follow a middle course, avoid extremes. As in nature, they need a favorable atmosphere: balance in the polar forces, steady path of movement, a predominance of healthy principles, and aspirations to revitalization and rebirth...The metaphysics of nature and the metaphysics of morality in their foundational essence are interconnected, continuous and united. (Utkin 2004, 233).

Arkadii Spiridonovich, the director of the Center for Children's Art, who I introduce in Chapter 2, also echoed this idea and explained his own thoughts on ecology over the course of many conversations with me. In one of the first of these, carried out as we walked along the Viliui river bank one afternoon, he told me that the first president of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolaev, had said that "ecology begins at your doorstep." He was referencing a campaign on the part of the Nikolaev administration to enlist ordinary people in efforts to keep the streets and forests clean of trash. I nodded in agreement, knowing the veneration with which Nikolaev was held by many Sakha. "I disagree with that," Arkadii Spiridonovich followed. I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Ecology," he said, "begins with the organism." He explained to me that according to Sakha philosophy, human beings are an integral part of the ecological system and nature protection begins with the protection of individual organisms, cleansing each body of toxins and nurturing them with positive nutrients and environmental conditions. These toxins included everything from alcohol (over which individuals have control), to environmental pollutants (over which individuals have little control). And "the environment" included all one's social and material surroundings, such that proper social relations were also as much a part of any movement for the environment as was protecting trees and animals (see Appendix A)

For this reason, Arkadii Spiridonovich and others also saw gender relations as central to ecological balance. Women, a number of Sakha (young, middle-aged, male and female) told me, are not performing their natural roles of childbirth and child care, and the dominance of women in the workforce also creates social disbalances. Men are the philosophers, I heard repeatedly. They are the thinkers, who ought to be teachers and government personnel,

where women are pragmatists, focused only with day-to-day concerns that keep households running, and children eating. For self-styled philosophers like Arkadii Spiridonovich, this belief was also woven into their beliefs about nature. Each gender had its natural role to perform, and they drew on Sakha proverbs and pre-Soviet gender relations to demonstrate the ways that natural gender balances were inscribed in Sakha tradition.

This links post-Soviet discourses of anti-feminism and pronatalism explored in the previous chapter with international discourses of indigenous ecological harmony. It also underscores the importance of “nature” as a concept that lays claim to foundational truth outside of history and culture, but yet is profoundly shaped by both (D Moore, Pandian, and Kosek 2003). For contemporary Sakha, discourses of indigenous ecological harmony weave together a range of different “natures,” emerging in movements for the environment and also in pronatalist efforts (i.e. if Sakha were performing their natural gender roles, they would be having more children). The notion of nature being under attack is not only invoked in relation to specific environmental threats, but also social threats, and underscores the ways that the Sakha nation as a kind biosocial organism is threatened in the present.

Ultimately, Sakha draw on various strands of tradition and cultural practice in highlighting their particular environmental ethic and also draw connections with the beliefs and practices of other indigenous groups. Sakha cultural scholars and environmental activists have embraced these connections and will often articulate their own beliefs and practices through an idiom of indigenous spirituality and integration with nature and the environment. At the same time, they do not simply adopt international discourses, but vernacularized them, making them relevant in their own socio-political context. In the following section, I examine the ways that Sakha activists have drawn on the discourses and strategies of the international indigenous movement in their own struggles for control over their natural resources, and in contestation of the destruction wrought by the diamond industry.

## 7.2 The Politics of Nature I: The Viliui Committee

*Industrial development proceeded without taking into account the rights of the Sakha people (narod sakha) to independent ethnic development on its primordial (iskonnnye) lands in accordance with its deeply-ecological, moral, spiritual and cultural values.*

—Representative of Viliui Committee before the Federal Ministry of Agriculture

During the 1990s, local activists were making links between exploitation of their own environment and the concerns of international indigenous groups. Members of the Viliui Committee, a group of community leaders, ecologists, and other concerned citizens from the *uluses* of the Viliui river basin, lobbied the Russian government for redress of the environmental destruction caused by rapid industrial development associated with diamond mining in the Viliui river basin during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As the above quotation suggests, the committee sought to underscore not only the health and environmental impacts of industrial development over the last 50 years, but also the negative impact of this development on Sakha culture. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, new links with organizations like UNESCO and the Northern Forum provided opportunities to rearticulate concerns about cultural identity, diversity and rights. Activists found these discourses a strategic means to assert their own goals and grievances and also invoked international treaties like the ILO's statement on indigenous peoples and the UN draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Ultimately, however, articulations of indigenous identity are fraught with contradiction as both contemporary political considerations and a history of Soviet ideologies of progressive development draw sharp distinctions between Sakha and their indigenous counterparts elsewhere.

The environmental crisis facing the Viliui region began to be openly discussed in the media in the late 1980s as state ideological controls began to unravel with the implementation of *perestroika* and *glasnost*'. Through new ecological studies, it was revealed that the Viliui region, in particular, was the site of significant environmental destruction, including river water pollution from both the giant hydro-electric station upstream of Nyurba, heavy metals from the diamond industry and outfall from atomic missile testing in the region (Burtsev 2006; Crate 2006). The negative health effects of all of these factors on the population were hard to deny: contemporary newspapers still run articles that

detail how, in the early 1970s and 1980s, cancer rates in the region skyrocketed, chronic diseases became more common and infant mortality and the incidence of birth defects also jumped significantly. At the same time hunters began to notice significantly fewer fish in the waters, many with strange mutations, forest fauna began disappearing and even whole sections of the forest lay dead as a result of atomic missile fall out (Burtsev 2006). In the present, many Nyurba residents argue that the forests are not rejuvenated, and that the new diamond mines in the North of the ulus still dump toxins into the water of the Viliui, their only source of drinking water (see also chapter 2).

During the 1990s The Viliui Committee brought concerned citizens of the region together in order to address this environmental crisis (see also, Crate 2002). Through speeches, essays, publications, and placards, they sought to inform the region's population of the full extent of environmental destruction and to put pressure on governmental organs to engage in river clean-up activities, enforce environmental regulations on the diamond industry, and to implement protective measures like drinking water filtration (e.g. Figure 23). They worked with ecologists and radiologists to document the current state of the Viliui rivers and forests, and lobbied the government and the diamond industry to help in clean-up and protection efforts. After achieving a modicum of success, in a tragic twist, the movement's charismatic leader, Pyotr Martynov, died in 1997 of cancer himself. According to Crate (2002), the movement was subsequently co-opted by the diamond industry as it came to be controlled by government and diamond industry ecologists, who insisted that the environmental situation in the Viliui basin was quickly righting itself.



**Figure 23: A protest placard made by Arkadii Spiridonovich reads—“Nyurba Diamonds, don’t be greedy.” The caption below reads in Sakha language: “Don’t be greedy, be measured. They’re not yours, they’re ours! They belong to the future generations!”**

By the time I came to inquire about environmentalism in the region, the committee still existed but had lost much of the force it had acquired during the 1990s. Reliable ecological data was difficult to come by as all research was controlled by government and diamond industry ecologists. Local officials and diamond industry representatives repeated assertions that the ecological situation in the region was on a path to full rehabilitation and that the new mines in the region were outfitted with fantastically modern equipment for environmental protection. The local newspaper printed articles listing the budget ALROSA-Nyurba had set aside for environmental protections and for social investment. The town of Nyurba boasted a number of billboards bearing ALROSA’s new slogan “People are more valuable than diamonds” (see also, chapter 2).

While the regional head optimistically asserted that he was already fly-fishing in formerly barren areas of the Viliui (personal communication, 8/2008), Nyurba residents still grumbled over tea that every year the fish were still fewer, that fish in the formerly clean Markha river, downstream of the new mines were already disappearing and that the water had taken on a red tint not present before the mines opened. One young teacher living in the village closest to the mines along the Markha river told me of a science project his tenth-

grade sister had carried out that demonstrated an impressive presence of heavy metals in the water, heavy metals associated with the diamond industry. Although she won the local competition for the contest “Steps to the Future,” she was prevented from taking her project to the Republican level, disqualified by regional authorities for murky reasons. Local support, however, resulted in the project poster being hung in the village museum. As people explained, complaining about the pollution was acceptable as long as no one heard you.

During my first meeting with the town’s cultural administration, the first topic of conversation raised was the need for reliable ecological studies and they enthusiastically suggested that I bring an American ecologist to do a full-scale ecological survey of the region. Importantly, it was the employees of the *cultural* administration that most forcefully argued the need for independent research into the environment. In their conversations with me, the employees of the cultural administration repeatedly emphasized the deep cultural connection with the land of the Sakha people and argued that degradation of the environment was also degrading their culture. This underscores the ways that struggles over the environment are simultaneously processes of “cultural mobilization” (Watts and Peet 2004, 6). That is to say that the environmental struggle here became not only about the environmental destruction and health impacts of state-sponsored development, but also about cultural identity. As Martynov argues, the health and subsistence of the region’s residents as well as the cultural and spiritual values were effaced through relentless adherence to the “plan” (Burtsev 2006). In linking environmental and cultural politics, Sakha activists came to articulate their own sense of cultural connection to the environment with those of other indigenous groups worldwide.

The quotation that opens this section demonstrates precisely the ways in which the language of international indigenism was deployed by some within the environmental movement to seek redress for the disproportionate burden born by the residents of the Viliui river basin. The representative of the Viliui committee, in a speech to representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, listed grievances that included health and environmental effects, but also the “rights to independent ethnic development,” highlighting moral and ethical claims that the Sakha have to stewardship over their own environment. This speech echoes that of the UN declaration of rights of indigenous peoples, which recognizes:

...the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources (United Nations 2007a).

Looking at speeches and letters written by the Viliui Committee in the 1990s, it would seem as if a firmly indigenous identity were emerging among the Sakha, and deployed as a means of combating environmental destruction. However, in recent years, as I explore in more detail below, these kinds of connections have not been made as forcefully. Furthermore, Sakha have not joined either Russia's indigenous peoples' organization or international organizations, participating instead in inter-governmental organization, like the Northern Forum, which brings together regional governments across the Circumpolar North, including Alaska, Greenland, and Nunavut in Canada.

Stuart Hall (1996) argues that cultural forms and discourses do not coincide automatically with collective identities, but rather come together in the emergence of certain identities due to the "articulation" of certain patterns. Tania Li (2000) draws upon this argument in analyzing the emergence of indigenous identity in Indonesia. Her argument is that "a group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous is not natural or inevitable, but neither is it simply invented, adopted, or imposed" (151). It is, rather, a "*positioning*" which draws upon historical practice and repertoires of meaning to engage particular contexts of struggle. Therefore, in Li's study, the articulation of indigeness was potentially viable for two different communities, but only one came to actively assert their indigeness. Importantly, the group that did come to assert this identity was threatened with resettlement by a large-scale hydro-electric project and well-educated elites within the community could elicit collaboration from national and international NGOs by highlighting the comparably sustainable ecological practice of the local community. Thus, Li suggests that resources politics come together with the "savage slot" of indigeneity.

Like Li's villagers, Sakha activists in the 1990s came to contrast the relatively sustainable subsistence practices of local farmers with the environmentally destructive policies of the state and in this way link their own struggle with the struggles of other indigenous groups worldwide (see also, Crate 2006). As Li argues for the Indonesian



villagers, they did not “invent” these markers of indigeneity, but rather focused on particular identity markers while neglecting others, an inevitable process when groups confront a constrained field of “slots” or “places of recognition” imposed upon them by powerful outside forces. However, these slots are by no means simple in and of themselves—there is no simple or homogenous “indigenous” condition for comparison, and the Sakha case does not easily map onto either of Li’s cases. That is to say that the Sakha field of “slots” was additionally shaped by Soviet ideologies of development and, more recently, by a broader Sakha ethno-nationalist politics that was not exclusively “indigenous” but rather negotiated a range of discursive options for legitimating claims to local and regional territorial sovereignty.

Perhaps in part because of this broad range of discursive options, Sakha have not come to embrace an “indigenous” identity in the same way that Li’s villagers did. While discourses of the international indigenous movement are important, a widespread articulation of indigenous identity has not materialized. Instead, like Li’s other example, Sakha remain split in their allegiances—some elite Sakha in fact participate in the diamond industry—and tightening political controls over the expression of ethnic solidarity prevent significant cultural mobilization. Furthermore, distance and lack of viable means of communication with international NGO’s and the disarming of the ecological movement make organization difficult and ineffective. As a result, discourses of indigeneity do not have the political force that they do elsewhere.

### **7.3 The Politics of Nature II: Ethnonationalism**

As I suggest in the preceding section, environmentalist discourses do not necessarily map nicely onto indigenous politics. In the Sakha case, invocations of closeness to nature often resemble the discourses of international indigeneity as Sakha activists are influenced by these discourses and draw strategically upon them. Indeed, a number of international organizations, especially UNESCO have been particularly active in the region and support this kind of articulation. At the same time, discursive resemblance to international notions of indigeneity do not guarantee that Sakha cultural politics can be simply characterized as an

“indigenous movement.” Indigeneity in the Russian Federation is an intensely contested slot and environmental imaginaries are likewise complicated, implicated in a range of discursive and material struggles. During the 1990s, for example, environmentalism was a cornerstone of Sakha national-territorial legitimization and took on a form quite distinct from that of indigenous struggles for the environment that have focused instead on redress for environmental destruction and local control over resources. Furthermore, potential Sakha claims to “indigenous” forms of ecological stewardship were undermined by the presence of more unambiguously “indigenous” groups within the borders of the region.

As I explore in chapter 3, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, local and regional leaders and activists worked together to remake the Sakha Republic, no longer as a “socialist” republic, but rather as a sovereign ethno-nation, on the model of European nation-states. Environmentalist discourses became central to the project of national legitimization. First, Sakha ties to land and nature were ties to a *particular* land and nature—that of the Sakha Republic. Just as Lofgren (2001) argues for national park establishment in America, cultivating a love of Sakha nature helped to bind Sakha identity with the entire the territory of the Sakha Republic. Yakutsk-based tourist agencies, for example, offered trips to the various natural wonders of the Republic. Many Sakha now take pilgrimages to newly established parks, like the Lena Pillars, which is a day’s boat ride from Yakutsk. Those with the means to do so also make treks to natural places farther afield, like the mountains of *Kihilaakh* (in Sakha language, literally “with persons”) where rocks that resemble people inhabit a place renowned for its spiritual energy. Those without the means, nevertheless dream about visiting such places.

Even in this, however, there is controversy between local significances and the emerging national significance of these places. While many Sakha dreamed of visiting *Kihilaakh*, one middle-aged Sakha woman, who I met in Yakutsk but had grown up in the region near *Kihilaakh*, explained to me that the tourists were destroying the mountain. She told me that the mountain was rich with spiritual energy, but people were not supposed to go there simply for tourism. In fact, only shamans could visit the rocks, or those accompanied by Shamans. *Kihilaakh* was a sacred place for her and others in the surrounding region and they dared not break the taboos on visits. For this reason, despite the fact that she had grown up quite near the mountain, she had never visited it, and she never would, she told me. A

few weeks later, I visited a tourism exhibit in central Yakutsk, and encountered a number of agencies that were advertising tours to *Kihilaakh*. I asked a young Sakha woman representing one agency if she was not concerned about these taboos. She looked at me with puzzlement, and explained that there were no taboos, and that local people from the nearby villages often served as guides on their tours, and that tourism was a great boon to the local economy. This points to the multiple and shifting meanings of nature and the environment. *Kihilaakh* emerged in the 1990s with powerful resonance in a national environmental imaginary, and yet this was contested by some who claimed a specific local, spiritual significance.

Generally speaking, the 1990s were an intense period of environmental imagining as Sakha leaders embraced an international environmental ethic through the establishment of national parks and implementation of conservation policies. The first president of the Republic, Mikhail Nikolaev made environmentalism a cornerstone of his administration's policy. During the decade of his presidency, he set aside thousands of acres of protected land, and created a system for the special protection of particular territories of the Sakha Republic (M Nikolaev 2004, 66). He designated a number of monuments of nature and to this day, the Lena Pillars remains a candidate for protection by UNESCO as a monument of world natural heritage. In a telling twist on nature protection that aligned him closely with the discourses of UNESCO and other international organizations, Nikolaev argued that, the "Nature of the North is the property of the world" (2004, 76). In contrast to the discourses of many indigenous movements, he does not argue for local property rights over territory, but rather uses the discourse of international governmental bodies, themselves invested in a world of nation-state actors that undermines Russian federal claims to northern resources.

He also sought to instill an environmental ethic throughout the Sakha republic and started a massive anti-litter campaign, encouraging individuals to take pride in and care of their forests and natural surroundings. Various other campaigns and competitions focused on re-kindling Sakha harmony with their environment, including the Republic-wide grade school competition, "Nature and Us," in which school children from all over the republic wrote papers and did presentations about their local environment. As the dominant figure of the Sakha ethno-nationalist movement, Nikolaev's environmentalism was inextricably linked to discourses of national sovereignty and the rejection of Soviet and Russian governance.

More recently, as the federal government asserts more control over regional politics and ethnonationalist articulations become increasingly dangerous, environmentalism has lost much of the popular force that it had during the 1990s and environmental activism has likewise been sufficiently severed from Sakha ethnic identity. The national parks established by Nikolaev remain and children still participate in the annual “Nature and Us” competition, but the kind of sustained activism exemplified by the Viliui Committee is increasingly difficult to maintain and is not linked with Sakha ethnicity in any clear way. For example, in 2008, substantial demonstrations were carried out throughout the Republic in opposition to the East-Siberian Oil pipeline (VSTO) currently being built to transport oil from Russia to China. Unlike the Viliui Committee, this movement was not isolated to Sakha communities and followed on the heels of the successful efforts of the more southerly Irkutsk oblast’ to avoid the pipeline there. Russian and Sakha joined forces to protest this dangerous environmental hazard and ethnic identity did not appear to be a central factor in these struggles. Not surprisingly, many of my Sakha friends took an active part in the protest and, in private conversations voiced their concerns in terms of ethnicity, viewing the territory of the Sakha Republic as inherently Sakha land and their environmental concerns in terms of their inherently Sakha ecological values. However, the public rhetoric rarely included any reference to particular cultural or ethnic concerns.

Interestingly, however, significant attention focused on the parts of the pipeline that would cross Evenki lands. The Evenki are a small-numbered people, one of the more unambiguously indigenous peoples and, as activists claim, their already precarious livelihoods could be ruined by an accident along the pipeline. As in the Irkutsk protests, the 2008 protests in the Sakha Republic highlighted the threats to Evenki livelihoods, and activists also invoked federal laws protecting the indigenous small peoples of the North. The fact that Evenki culture and subsistence could be highlighted in the course of these struggles, while Sakha was not underscores the substantial differences in political positioning between the two groups. Despite the fact that a pipeline accident could likewise be catastrophic for the many Sakha farmers living near the pipeline, Sakha identity was not sufficiently “indigenous” to be mobilized in protest. As I point out in chapter 3, activism surrounding

Sakha identity is more associated with a pernicious “ethnonationalism” than with the struggles of a poor, marginalized indigenous group.

During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Soviet development categories, rather than a distinction between “indigenous” and non-indigenous, dominated discussions of ethnic identity in Siberia during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Emerging from these models of progressive human development, the contemporary official category of indigenes in the Russian Federation is by no means a simple designation. Sergei Sokolovskiy (2007) points out the “numerical threshold” of 50,000 used to delineate politically vulnerable indigenous groups (who are thus covered by international legislation on indigenous peoples) from those supposedly protected through ethno-territorial self-government (Sokolovskiy 2007, 76-80). With “their own” titular region and population of almost 500,000, the Sakha fall squarely into the latter category. As such, national political designations make it difficult for Sakha to lay claim to special protections; national-territorial sovereignty presumably protects their interests to a sufficient degree, ecologically-vulnerable or not. Furthermore, Sakha are not supposed to have the same degree of ecological vulnerability as their smaller-numbered neighbors. Sokolovskiy quotes a 1991 draft law on indigenous peoples that includes the following definition:

The small-numbered peoples of the North are the peoples who are recognized by their small numbers...by the practice of traditional economy and by a complete dependency on the environment. They need special protection by this law, because they preserve the traditional subsistence economy in the form of reindeer herding and subsistence [*promyslovoe*] economy (hunting, fishing, sea mammal hunting, wild plant gathering) as the basis of their culture (2007, 79).

In accordance with international notions of indigenes, the draft writers correlated “small-numbered indigenes” with particular kinds of environmental vulnerabilities, particularly those drawing from culturally-based subsistence activities—reindeer herding and hunting and gathering.

The small-numbered peoples as unambiguous “children of nature” are reinforced as such through numerous documentaries about Evenki and Eveni peoples shown on NVK-Sakha, the Republican television station devoted to cultural matters. They depict

ecologically-minded reindeer herders, dressed in skins and furs, riding their animals through the tundra, stopping to pick the occasional berries, while a voice-over in Russian tells the viewer that these children of nature take only what they need, making sure not to disturb the delicate balance of nature. I watched these documentaries with Sakha friends in Nyurba and the accompanying conversations focused on the exotic otherness depicted in the films, including exclamations about the primitive lifestyle of reindeer herders, curiosity about the accuracy of the documentary (do they really still live like that?), and pity for the forces of civilization that are eclipsing their traditional cultural practices. When I asked whether or not they had seen live reindeer before, my Nyurba host family laughed, “where would we see a reindeer?!” These reactions point to a certain kind of distancing from the small-numbered peoples, on the part of Sakha, who sought to align themselves more properly with Euroamerican modernity. They may never have seen a live reindeer, but there were reindeer herders in the broader area and an Evenki man would occasionally come through Nyurba selling reindeer meat door-to-door, which my host family often bought. Nevertheless, reindeer herders were imagined as exotic others, living deep in the taiga. Despite discourses of Sakha respect for nature, many Sakha reserve the true “savage slot” for the small-numbered peoples, imagining a level of environmental integration and primitiveness that far exceeds their own.

Sakha were ambivalent about their own perceived primitiveness, and so exotifying small-numbered peoples often functioned to assert their own modern-ness. As a representative from an unambiguously “civilized world,” I was regularly asked about my impression of the countryside, of Nyurba, and of Yakutia in general. People would prompt me, “do you think we’re really backward (*khaalbyt*)? Nyurba residents were often embarrassed by the poor infrastructure of the region—the lack of paved roads, indoor plumbing—and insisted upon these as indicators of their extreme backwardness. Discussions of local/regional backwardness, however, were not necessarily focused on an essential Sakha backwardness, but rather suggested an implicit critique of the government and social system that produced this supposed backwardness despite their underground wealth. As chapter 2 highlights, many Sakha contrasted their present “backwardness” to the progress and development of Soviet times. At the same time, discussions about backwardness were also an expression of insecurity about appearing uncivilized to a person who would represent

Sakha culture to America. Some people would encourage me to go to certain villages—there I would find *real* Sakha culture—and they directed me to particular, exemplary individuals as having preserved Sakha tradition most effectively. Others looked at me in amazement when I expressed my intention to leave the comforts of the city for the *uluses*: Why would you go there?—there’s no kind of culture left, just poverty and backwardness.” Argounova-Low (2007a) likewise points out the ambivalent relationship of city Sakha to village-Sakha, who simultaneously glorify the greater “naturalness” of the countryside and stigmatize rural peoples’ lack of “culture.”

This ambivalence about primitive versus civilized was likewise encapsulated with Sakha relationships to the federal centers. Sakha constantly expressed frustration to me about the ways that Muscovites and other European Russians assumed that Sakha rode on reindeers. Indeed, this was a common perception in western Russia, where many conversations with taxi drivers and other casual acquaintances often involved attempts on my part to convince them that Yakutsk is a fully modern city, there are no polar bears, and that no one there rides on reindeer. Many of my Sakha friends and acquaintances were very interested in disabusing me as well of any potential assumptions that I might hold about their relative backwardness as a people. I was reminded on many occasions of the anger that Nyurba residents felt after a Russian journalist came to Nyurba, was welcomed with excitement and hospitality, and proceeded to make a documentary about the poverty and backwardness she encountered. The frequency with which this story was recounted to me served to reassure me that my Nyurba residents were cognizant of the difference between me and this woman, but it also served as a warning and reminder of my obligations for the warmth with which I was received. It was also a reminder of the distinction between “primitive” and “close to nature.”

This insecurity about indigenous primitivity, also had ramifications for the indigenous environmental ethic that Sakha were imagined to represent. Sakha were willing to assign a certain kind of environmental ethic to small-numbered peoples, but they often distinguished this from their own environmentalism, suggesting that Evenki and Eveni environmentalism was an unreflected environmental ethic, arising from their simple and primitive dependence on the land. In this view, if indigenous environmentalism arises from primitiveness, Sakha

environmentalism is more philosophical, reflective of their integration with nature but also of a level of sophistication and self-reflection in their relationship with their surroundings.

Given a complex of political and discursive categories that constrained Sakha adoption of indigenous identities, a full embrace of global indigeneity has not emerged. While asserting Sakha natural environmental values, activists distanced themselves from the primitiveness of other small-numbered peoples. On the one hand, national discourses of indigeneity would have been hard to deploy in light of official categories excluding them from those populations more completely dependent upon a subsistence economy. On the other hand, in laying claim to a high degree of civilization, Sakha were uncomfortable with the primitiveness assigned to indigenous groups in official characterizations. As such, being “children of nature” came to mean something different by 2008, despite its echoes of romantic notions of international indigeneity.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

The matrix of political strategies of the post-Soviet Sakha Republic through which Sakha environmental imaginings emerged shed light on the ways global discourses interact with the particularities of local politics. In post-Soviet Siberia, like elsewhere in Asia (A Gray, Kingsbury, and RH (Robert H Barnes 1996; Li 2000), distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous are by no means straightforward and articulations of indigenous identities are neither natural nor inevitable, being contingent upon a variety of intersecting global and local processes and power configurations. In the Sakha Republic, articulations of harmony with nature, in many ways, resemble those of indigenous groups elsewhere, in that this harmony is supposed to arise from a dependence on the natural environment and is intertwined with a kind of indigenous spirituality. This indigenous ecological ethic was invoked in the course of 1990s protests against the diamond industry.

At the same time, the particularities of contemporary politics within the Russian Federation make an easy articulation of a fully indigenous identity difficult. During the 1990s, a Sakha ethnonationalist movement sought national-territorial sovereignty that would give regional political leaders civil control over the entire territory of the Sakha Republic,



including its natural resources. In the process, a different kind of environmental ethic from that articulated by international indigenous groups was asserted that aligned regional politics with the politics of various inter-governmental organizations like UNESCO, the Arctic Council and the Northern Forum. This environmental ethic focused less on subsistence strategies of local peoples and their dependence on the health of the environment and more on the fragility of northern ecosystems and protection of landscape. In this way, Sakha political leaders of the 1990s positioned themselves as the proper stewards of a national environment on the model of European nations-states. In the long run, however, this attempt at national-territorial legitimization was undermined by a federal campaign against local nationalisms that threatened the integrity of the federation.

Discourses of Sakha harmony with nature are fraught with contradiction as Sakha struggle with the implications of indigeneity in the global world. On the one hand, they assert a way to be children-of-nature that does not relegate them to the “savage slot.” On the other hand, they constantly struggle with the implications of their own primitiveness, contrasting their own identity with that of their “others,” the small-numbered peoples of the north, who can more easily be characterized as primitive and backward. In doing so, they also reproduce the meta-narratives of progress and civilization that reinforce their not-quite-modernness (cf. de la Cadena 2000).

This contradiction is intensified as national sovereignty aspirations are increasingly suppressed. Without “their own” territory Sakha struggle to make sense of their place in an increasingly global world. Where discourses may emerge in relationship with particular political vectors, they come to have broad resonances as individuals creatively imagine implications and ramifications of these discourses in their own lives. This is reflected in philosophical treatments of human-environment interactions that turn both to Sakha traditions and western philosophical traditions for inspiration. They go far beyond the simple appreciation of trees and animals to encompass a whole approach to life, implicated in all aspects of social life, including family and child care, gender relations, religion and politics. Individuals interpret the claim that Sakha are children of nature in multiple and varied ways as part of personal political concerns but also in affectual ways that assert a deeply felt moral and aesthetic attachment to certain forms of nature. Ultimately, discourses of Sakha closeness-to-nature emerged in dialogue with international discourses of indigeneity but they

do not simply reproduce those discourses. Rather, they both expand on and stand in tension with them.

## Conclusion

In the introduction to this dissertation, I introduced the idea of indigeneity, examining the various ways in which anthropologists have approached indigenous identity. Following De la Cadena and Starn (2007), I argued that indigeneity, like other kinds of ethnic and cultural identities, is inherently heterogeneous adhering unevenly to a range of diverse groups. At the same time, it is also a historically specific form of positioning that has arisen through transnational alliances and dialogues on the part of particular subaltern groups. As Anna Tsing (2007) argues, indigeneity can be seen as a genre of speech employed by a range of actors in order to translate specific concerns to a broad audience. Indigeneity in this sense is not a condition, but rather a “voice” to which many different groups have recourse in articulating political aspirations and grievances. While many actors seek to appropriate this voice, however, they are not always heard since speaking requires a receptive audience. Cruikshank (1997) also echoes this idea in her discussion of native storytelling in the Yukon. Indigenous actors pay attention to their audiences and shape their voice according to the genre conventions that can be heard.

The subsequent chapters have sought to chart the ways in which various Sakha actors have engaged with indigeneity as a discursive genre. It should be clear from this discussion that different individuals have found this “indigenous voice” useful in articulating their concerns and aspirations, but also for making sense of their current circumstances. At the same time, just because groups highlight their positioning as indigenous peoples in one context, does not mean that this identity remains constant through all contexts in which their representatives speak. Indeed, this is what theorists of indigeneity have meant when they insist that indigenous identity is *relative*: indigeneity can be seen as a kind of continuum in which some groups are more successful in claiming an indigenous identity, and other groups less so. At the same time, the idea of indigeneity itself is far from clear-cut, composed of heterogeneous and contradictory images and ideas. In so much as “indigenous” implies connectedness to the environment, an ancient culture and spiritual knowledge, Sakha cultural activists often embrace this identity. In so much as it implies primitivity and backwardness, they reject it. In doing so, they reproduce historically-sedimented ethnic and racial hierarchies. This in turn, also draws upon and reinforces the implicit hierarchies of

primitivity and civilization that shape indigenous-settler relations all over the world, what De La Cadena and Starn (2007) term a “grammar of analogous contrasts.” In this way, I have sought to shed light on the dialectic between the local and universal inherent in ideas of “global” indigeneity.

It is tempting to highlight the recent history of Sakha engagement with globally circulating discourses of indigeneity as a straightforward story of indigenous resistance to a powerful state. However, Sakha recognition of themselves as indigenous people can be seen as both a form of resistance and a means of capitulation to the dominance of the Russian state. In seeing themselves as indigenous, Sakha recognize themselves as unjustly oppressed by a colonial state. This stand in contrast both with former Soviet ideologies, which characterized Soviet nationalities as voluntarily united in a fraternal union led by Russians as the benevolent “elder brother,” and with increasingly powerful Russian state discourses that de-emphasize ethnicity altogether as a legitimate political identity. At the same time, by articulating their condition as one shared with other marginalized groups all over the world, Sakha activists suggest that this oppression may in fact be inevitable, part of what it means to be indigenous in the contemporary world. This, in turn, is reflective of global patterns in indigenous organizing, which are themselves characterized by a dialectic of marginalization and resistance. The conundrum for indigenous groups is that a shared acknowledgement of extreme marginality is the grounds for collective resistance and organizing, but yet this marginalization also implies clear limits to what is and is not attainable. For this reason, as Anna Tsing (2007) points out, some ethnic groups, especially those who seek more extensive territorial control and nation-state status, have rejected indigenous identity as too weak, citing the lack of strong claims to independent statehood among indigenous peoples.

The literature on indigeneity, like that on subalterity more generally, highlights this dialectic. On the one hand, a number of scholars have focused on the plight of indigenous and subaltern peoples, and have positioned their own writing in terms of advocacy or assistance for people, who otherwise have little to no voice in public discourse. On the other hand, a burgeoning literature on indigenous organizing has highlighted the emergence of indigeneity in the last couple decades as a powerful political voice that in fact makes use of marginality itself as a place of power. By claiming to speak from a position of extreme powerlessness, indigenous groups have succeeded in garnering sympathy from a broad

audience. But this, of course, carries numerous pitfalls as the assumed relationship between indigeneity and marginality creates a kind of paradox in which overcoming marginality relies on an maintaining that very marginality (e.g. Conklin 1997). Cattelino (2009) refers to this as the “double-bind” of indigenous sovereignty, pointing to the ways that Native American groups, who have successfully used their sovereignty to garner a modicum of wealth, become subject to criticism for inauthenticity and their sovereignty comes under attack. Indian wealth disrupts the assumed purity of indigenous political goals and casts these goals as a matter of political expediency and greed rather than noble resistance. For indigeneity to be powerful as a political identity, it often implies marginality.

This double-bind is clear in Sakha engagements with international discourses of indigeneity, and is also central to the only partial embrace and articulation of an indigenous identity. One could argue that a process of articulation of Sakha identity as “indigenous” had been underway since at least the 1960s and 70s as the global indigenous movement grew and Sakha intellectuals came to see the Sakha as an oppressed ethnic group within a colonial state. The advent of perestroika in the 1980s and the weakening of the central Soviet state, however, provided a moment of hope for Sakha political and cultural leaders, who sought to revive post-revolutionary claims to autonomy. As such, in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sakha political leaders strove to establish a “sovereign” nation-state that would protect Sakha cultural rights, but would be founded upon civic ideals acknowledged by the international community of nations. From the beginning of this process, they came under attack for nationalism, a long-standing pariah of Soviet ideology, and struggled with accusations of political expediency. For this reason, Sakha cultural activists have sought to distance themselves from “politics” as such, insisting that their aspirations are confined to supposedly extra-political concerns of cultural revitalization, community health, and environmental protection. These, in turn, resonate with the efforts of other indigenous groups to carve out a space for the assertion of “ethnic worth” in the face of marginalization (cf. Rogers 1999).

At the same time, as chapter 7 points out, Sakha are ambivalent about identifying as indigenous in the context of the Russian Federation, and these ambivalences point to the ongoing hierarchies that shape the experience of indigeneity—both as a local identity and as a transnational one. Sakha proudly make comparisons between themselves and American

Indian groups, who they see as relatively powerful, having wrested from the state both sovereignty and control over resources. At the same time, many cultural activists are quick to distinguish themselves from other Siberian indigenous groups, who are relatively more marginalized. Sakha indigeneity, they suggest, is somehow different. Namely, it is not as pitiful as those other groups, who are imagined as less able to cope with the challenges of modernity. It is this distinction, then, that distances Sakha activists from fully articulating an indigenous identity. It also reinforces ethnic and class distinctions that classify indigenes as inevitably marginal.

Ultimately, what I have sought to do in this dissertation is to confront the multivocality and instability of articulations of collectivity identity, and of indigenous identity in particular, and also to understand the specificity of indigenous identity articulations. I have sought to understand how a particular group of people could simultaneously be widely regarded as indigenous, by themselves and others, and yet stand outside the growing transnational network of indigenous political organizing. This has been an endeavor in some ways to understand how a group can be simultaneously indigenous, in the sense that it has come to be used globally, and also not indigenous, or other-than-indigenous. What is apparent from this examination is that indigeneity, like other forms of identity is inherently unstable and can be embraced by a great variety of groups and individuals within those groups. However, it is also the product of a particular historical moment, having traveled at uneven paces into different corners of the globe. In these travels, indigeneity as a global identity necessarily shifts and transforms itself; it is both a source of resistance and of accommodation. It can also be deployed in reproducing existing social hierarchies of class, ethnicity, and gender.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: The Influence of Globalization on the National Consciousness of the Sakha People: Culture and Nature (by Arkadii Spridonovich Maiakunov)

I have worked as a teacher for 38 years. And in the course of this time, I have sought to explain to those my listeners and to my pupils that a person cannot stand higher than nature. Nature is the head of everything/everyone. She knows herself what she does. She doesn't like it when someone interferes in her work. Nature doesn't do anything willy-nilly. She forewarns, gives people to understand that one musn't do something, or else there will be suffering. Our ancestors for many centuries understood this lesson well and never tried to interfere in the "work" of nature. In *Sakha-sire* [the land of the Sakha], there is permafrost. In some places the ice is 15 meters thick. She [nature] is that strong and therefore does not suffer rudeness. For this rudeness, she has answered loudly. She does not forgive mistakes. The ancestors of the Sakha thought of the earth as a living substance. And felt her. Before the arrival of the wandering Russian Cossacks, the Sakha people did not practice agriculture. But, at some point when they lived in the south, they did practice agriculture. The words we use today regarding agriculture attest to this fact. In this you may see for yourself [lists Sakha terms and translations]:

*Seliehinei*-wheat

*Taraan*-millet

*Ureen*-seed

*Tuorakh burduk*-grain

*Meekke burduk*-flour

*Tuutekh*-sheaf

*Kylaat*-hay-stack

*Kunda*-stackyard (gymno)

*Soghoochchu*-pestle

*Kelii*-mortar



Soghokh-mortar and pestle  
Suoruna-millstone  
Taghaan-trivet  
Khobordookh-frying pan  
Sukha-plow  
Lokh-wheel/roller (for use in grain agriculture)  
Tabyyka-hoe  
Khoruu-canal (as in an irrigation canal)  
Kurd'ekh-shovel  
Mankhaahai-granary  
Alar-grape garden  
Chakyr-unripe grape  
Uokhta-wild grape  
Tooromos-cucumber  
Salghamd'yy-turnip

They understood that if you open a layer of land, then the ice begins to melt and soon a lake will form. They also understood that demons—different diseases can emerge from pits (*kotlovanov*) and large chasms (*ovragi*) and breaks (*razlomov*) in the ground. Now we know that this is radon gas and other poisonous substances. They also knew that the earth has an active zone through which constantly move warm and cold winds. Under our earth, particular forces are acting that act vertically. Sometimes they erupt. In the folk epic, the *olonkho*, these are called evil-*abaahy* spirits.

Our ancestors obtained everything they needed from nature. This was clothing, food, housing, dishes. This was different necessary belonging, which they used in their daily life. And everything old, used-up, unnecessary was returned to nature. This is why they strived to be in harmony with nature. And they gave significant attention to each kind of work. They established connection only through the sacred fire. They put into the fire the hair of a young horse so that the spirit inhaled the burn scent and smoke, and also gave the best food, asked for help, and sang incantations. This is the custom.

If this custom is repeated every year, then it becomes a tradition. And from these traditions, faith is formed. If there is faith, then it is animated, equivalent to human, nature of things. And faith is religion. That means that the cult of work is a religion. And with this religion the culture of the Sakha people was formed. As the Sakha understand them, culture, religion and nature are interconnected.

The Sakha people have always strived to be closer to nature. For them, the silky grass, large forest, clear water, small insects, flying birds, swimming fish, running animals are all brothers in reasoning. They know more than man how life was formed on the earth, what happened in past centuries. They have much information, and we can make friends with them, use their information. And so, the ancestors of the Sakha knew that each human is a microcosmos. And this microcosmos is an exact copy of the macrocosmos. We thought that our ancestors were illiterate, but it appears that they knew more than we do about the nature of things. And so Mad (Iireeki) N'ukuus was a philosopher. At the time of the civil war, bandits burned him alive on the fire, like the Italian scholar Djordano Bruno. N'uukus was illiterate and poor. He never studied in school. But the Sakha people said that N'uukus has a "sky education-*khallaan uoreghe*," that is astrological. N'uukus was a very precise observer, a good conversationalist, and an excellent analyst. He was a different level of person than were illiterate people at that time. They didn't understand his stories and thought that he lied. And they gave him the label "mad-*iireeki*." That's why he was called Mad-Iirbit N'uukus. Iirbit N'uukus knew folklore well, he knew well our vital epic-olonkho. Olonkho is the ancient oral art of the Sakha people. In the Olonkho it is told about the origins of the earth and other planets, how the galaxy was formed, and much else. They say that he said that the earth formed from gases, that burned, then cooled down, that water gave the first life. That all things living and nonliving on the earth began their lives from water. And this is still maintained today. Yes, we see this is the development of the human and animal fetus.

Educatedness and education are two different things. Educatedness is the many-sided professional literacy, good knowledge of one's native language and the culture of one's native people; it is good upbringing in which you correctly use the customs and traditions not only of local, but also of other peoples, and it is the correct relationship to living nature. Without harmony with nature there cannot be a good life.

Many think that education is progress. But progress without good upbringing brings an unreconcilable loss to living nature. Because our industrialists, engineers, leading cadres are not well-raised. They are atheists, they are not believers, they consider themselves more educated and so do not observe the customs and traditions of the local population, and they don't even talk with the local population. Such rude relationship to the small-numbered local peoples is everywhere, in the USA, in Canada, in Russia, and in other more developed countries. The incorrect education brings a large, uncorrectable loss to the flora and fauna of the entire world. And Mother Earth suffers because of this. Through the whole galaxy, this is the only planet on which there is living nature. And we should preserve life on the earth and not perpetuate conflict. It wasn't us that created life on earth; it was nature that created it. Man never will be the king of nature. Nature is on its own the master of life. And people all over the world should follow the laws of nature, because we are children of nature. This is what we think of globalization. Globalization—if it follows the laws of nature and progress acknowledges the traditions and customs of local peoples, if it accepts a more thoughtful direction in order to preserve the ecological balance of nature, then it will be of use not only to local small-numbered peoples and to the Russian state, but also to the whole world.

Why has the ecological climate of the earth deteriorated so severely—it is the fault of progress. This is the result of thoughtless human action on nature. The Sakha people considered the laws of nature sacred. Therefore, for them the first thing in the upbringing of the growing generation, was the question of work education, then professional preparation and exit to people, and only after this, independent life. We see such an approach even among wild animals. For example, for wolves the first thing in raising their young is to be obedient and to unquestioningly follow the orders of their leader. Then they taught hunting technique and how to behave oneself in the pack. Only after that, did the beasts release their young to independent life. All of this is called the school of survival. And our present-day system of education has not tried to follow this path. As a result we have uneducatedness. Young people even after having studied so many years in school still have not been able to receive the proper vocational training. They have never been in a labor collective, they haven't seen how people work in a collective. They don't know what work is. After school, they entered into institutions of higher education and have received professions of various specialties. But in real life, having higher education and a specialty they become entirely

unprepared, illiterate people. Without vocational education, there is not real education. Escaping the laws of nature, violating the customs and traditions of the people, interfering with the development of one's native language, you don't give a person a real education. To be educated, that means to know well the native language and the traditions and customs of one's people, and also to be in harmony with nature. The Sakha people have this parable:

If a person doesn't know his ancestors, then they call him *ileen*, i.e. lost spirit, and they do not recognize him as a person. If a person does not know his native language, then they call him *munгнаakh*, i.e. they take him as a full-fledged orphan. And if a person does not know the customs and traditions of his people, then they call him *n'yukun*? i.e. such a person they call an uneducated and dim person, even if he has a higher education diploma.

And for the Nyurba center of children's scientific-technical arts, the first-order task is the development of technical creativity, abilities, and skills of the Yakut child, taking into account the nation-regional component. In this way, in teaching a child of Yakut nationality, an approach is necessary that corresponds with his concentrative way of thinking and that considers his perception. And we should correctly organize conditions for the planned development of the given abilities of the child with regard to technical arts.

Here it is important to note that the cycle of programs of the technical arts of Arkadii Spiridonovich Moiakunov-Moiokuun Indeev have been developed in accordance with national-regional component, and based on the methods of folk pedagogy, the personal observations of the author and for the child of Yakut nationality. The programs have a precise corresponding interconnection with the subjects of technical profile, and also the tracks of knowledge of the native language, national culture, and customs.

## **Appendix B: Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Yakut-Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic**

The Supreme Soviet of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, emphasizing that the status of autonomous republic limits its sovereign rights, does not correspond to the fundamental principles of a legal state, and has become a brake on the social economic development of the republic, recognizing the republic to be a full rights-bearing subject of the RSFSR and the USSR, acknowledging the historical responsibility for the fate of the entire multinational people of the republic, respecting the sovereign rights of all the peoples of the RSFSR and the USSR, speaking in favor of the renovation of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, acting in conformity with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other universally recognized international legal instruments, expressing the interests and will of all the peoples of the republic for self-determination, social-economic progress, cultural revival, rise in living standards, proclaims the state sovereignty of Yakutia and its conversion to the Yakut-Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic.

### *Article 1.*

The Yakut-Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic is a sovereign socialist state in the framework of a reconstituted RSFSR, created in the process of the historical development of the peoples living on its territory in the extreme climatic conditions of the Far North, and acting in conformity with the principles of self-determination on the basis of the free will of its citizens. The bearers of sovereignty and the source of state power in the Yakut-Sakha SSR are its people, comprised of citizens of the republic of all nationalities. The sovereignty of the people is realized on the basis of the Constitution of the Yakut-Sakha SSR directly, and also through representational organs—the Soviets of the people's delegates. The Supreme Soviet of the Yakut-Sakha SSR alone speaks in the name of the people. No single political party, social organization, or other group or person has the right to speak in the name of the people.

The Yakut-Sakha SSR, with other equal subjects, enters into the Federative Treaty, and also with other republic participates in the Union Treaty.

The Yakut-Sakha SSR retains all state powers on its territory, with the exception of those authorities, which it voluntary, on the basis of treaty, cedes to the jurisdiction of the RSFSR and the USSR and which exist with its participation.

*Article 2.*

The Constitution of the Yakut-Sakha SSR respects the Constitution of the RSFSR, the Constitution of the USSR, and retains the right of supremacy on the territory of the republic.

The constitutional principle of the state activities of the Republic is the division of legislative, executive, and judicial powers at the level of the Supreme Soviet of the Yakut-Sakha SSR.

The laws of the RSFSR and the USSR, accepted in conformity with the authorities voluntarily ceded to their jurisdiction, have supreme legal force on the territory of the Yakut-Sakha SSR.

The current acts of the RSFSR and the USSR, speaking in contradiction with the sovereign rights of the peoples of the republic, are suspended by the Supreme Soviet of the Republic. Discrepancy between the Yakut-Sakha SSR, RSFSR, and USSR in these cases is decided according to procedures established by the Federative and Union Treaties.

*Article 3.*

The Yakut-Sakha SSR has its own citizenry and preserves the honor, dignity, health, and legal interests of its citizens on the territory of the republic and beyond its borders. All citizens and individuals without citizenship, living on the territory of the republic, are guaranteed the equal rights and freedoms stipulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Constitutions of the RSFSR, USSR and Yakut-Sakha SSR.

The Yakut-Sakha SSR independently resolves all questions in the sphere of legislation about the use of languages, and about the development of culture and education. The Yakut and Russian languages are state languages on the territory of the republic.

*Article 4.*

The Yakut-Sakha SSR provisions the small-numbered peoples of the North in Yakutia the preservation of their primordial environs of habitation, self-determination, political and legal equality by means of the formation of national-territorial units, creates for them the conditions for the national, economic, cultural, and linguistic revival. It acknowledges the languages of the small-numbered peoples of the North as official languages in the locations of their habitation.

*Article 5.*

The basis of the economic system of the Yakut-Sakha SSR is comprised of diverse forms of property, including private and intellectual property.

The land, its substrate, waters, forests, flora and fauna, other natural resources, atmosphere and continental shelf within the territory of the Republic are its exclusive property.

Ownership of the means of production and the products of labor is determined and regulated on the basis of the Federative and Union Treaties and legislation of the Yakut-Sakha SSR.

All enterprises, organizations and establishments, found on the territory of the Republic, with the exception of those stipulated in the treaties with the RSFSR and USSR, are subject to the authority of the Yakut-Sakha SSR.

Enterprises found on the territory of the Yakut-Sakha SSR, pay rent for natural and labor resources, royalties, and taxes to the budget.

*Article 6.*

The territory of the Yakut-Sakha SSR is indivisible; it cannot be exchanged or used without the agreement of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic.

*Article 7.*

The Yakut-Sakha SSR enters directly into economic and other relationship with other subjects of the Federation, and independently establishes direct economic and cultural connections with foreign states. It forms its own currency fund, the size of which is stipulated in treaties with the RSFSR and USSR.

The external economic affairs of all enterprises and organizations found on the territory of the republic that are based on the use of its property and natural wealth, are regulated irrespective of their subordination to the laws of the Yakut-Sakha SSR.

*Article 8.*

The Yakut-Sakha SSR independently establishes the processes of organizing the protection of nature and rational use of natural resources on its territory, and participates in the realization of the state ecological programs of the RSFSR and USSR.



*Article 9.*

The Yakut-Sakha SSR reserves the right to self-determination of its national-state structure on the basis of the will of the citizens of Yakutia, and itself resolves questions of its administrative-territorial division.

*Article 10.*

The Yakut-Sakha SSR advocates for the reform and continual development of the Soviet federation as a union of sovereign socialist states. The legal striving of the citizens of Yakutia for its political and economic independence as a sovereign state should not be used by anyone for the aim of inciting interethnic hatreds, hostilities and conflicts, but used exclusively with the aim of harmonization of relations between peoples and the realization of their equal rights on the basis of internationalism and friendship of peoples.

The Yakut-Sakha SSR guarantees all citizens, political parties, societal organizations, popular movements and religious organizations, operating in the bounds of the Constitution of the Yakut-Sakha SSR, equal legal opportunities to participate in the administration of state and social affairs.

*Article 11.*

The present Declaration is the foundation for the development of a new Constitution of the Yakut-Sakha SSR, the conclusion of a treaty with the RSFSR, the participation in concluding a Union Treaty, and the development of republic legislation.

Ratified by the second session of the Supreme Soviet of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

Yakutsk, 27 September 1990.