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THE ALAAS: THE
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SAKHAS IN
CENTRAL-YAKUTIA

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The *alaas*: the interplay between environment and Sakhas in Central-Yakutia¹

Csaba Mészáros²

Abstract

Alaases, thermokarst depressions formed in the permafrost environment of Yakutia (north-eastern Siberia) provide fertile hayfields for the Sakha cattle economy. At this northern latitude, cattle breeding is in particular demand of nutritious fodder, because cows spend an average of nine months in winter-stables. Therefore, *alaases* are in the focus of Sakha environmental perception. Sakhas not only dwell at *alaases*, but through their economic activities, they modify and maintain them as well. This process is based on control and domination rather than on procurement of the environment. Villagers in Tobuluk (central Yakutia) consider the areas surrounding their village as controlled islands of *alaases* (hayfields) in a sea of uncontrolled forest. In this paper, I examine Sakha environmental perception in which landscapes and cardinal directions evoke and define each other and characterise those who reside there. Due to the subsequent transformations of Sakha economy and lifestyle by the Soviet and Russian state administration in the last 100 years (collectivisation, centralisation, and decollectivisation), the way Sakhas interact with their surroundings has transformed radically within the past four generations, causing profound differences in the way generations relate to, interact with, and understand *alaases*.

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1. Introduction

Although literature on cultural ecology and environmental anthropology has been rich in thorough studies since the 1960s (Steward 1955; Descola 1986), Eric Hirsch characterised the domain of landscape research in the introduction of his edited volume by pointing out that “landscape has received little overt anthropological treatment” (Hirsch 1996: 1). Research on dissimilar local systems of environmental perception and on culturally and historically constructed places has gradually become a focus of anthropological inquiry, (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1996; Ingold 2000; Low and Lawrence-Zuñiga 2003; Strathern and Stewart 2003; Johnson and Hunn 2010) and of Siberian studies as well (Habeck 2006a; Halemba 2006; Jordan 2011). This paper contributes to recent discussions of the human process of dwelling in various environments. In contemporary anthropological understanding, it has become more and more apparent that environment and physical space cannot be alienated from resident communities as a neutral container of human activities, but it is rather a ‘lived in’ world imbued with everyday activities, memories, and meanings. According to this interpretation, landscapes and places are not cut out of the hostile, surrounding environment through the mental act of humanisation, but rather, are composed in a process of co-existence between humans and non-humans, in a given territory, forming an intimate unity (Ingold 2000: 20).

Communities dwelling in a territory locate, perceive, and evaluate themselves and their actions in accordance with their local construction of landscapes and places (Ingold 2000). Therefore, culturally constructed landscapes provide a home for resident communities, and places present in historical narratives anchor collective memory (Cruikshank 2005; Cruikshank and Argounova 2000).

Environmental perception develops through direct experiences gained from everyday contacts and interactions with the immediate surroundings. This perception can be juxtaposed with a more global environmental knowledge (based on Euro-American concepts of what nature is) transmitted partly by mass-communication, which provides an outside perspective, “as if the viewer was detached from” the landscape (Karjalainen and Habeck 2004: 168). The interplay of these two perspectives provides resident communities with local environmental knowledge in a globalised world.

Theories on environmental perception were traditionally based on materials collected among hunter-gatherer (Bird-David 1990: 189) and pastoralist societies (Ingold 2000). Detailed information about the environmental perception of sedentary communities in Siberia is conspicuously limited. Although a series of studies with dissimilar approaches has recently tackled the problem of Sakha environmental perception (Takakura 2002; Crate 2006, 2008; Argounova-Low 2011), certain peculiarities of the perception of this traditionally sedentary group have remained unexplained.

At the same time, the human process of place-making effects the local environmental perception, as the environment that is ‘lived in’ encloses both culturally defined places and territories of minor interest. Hence, rather than questioning the validity of the Euro-American binary concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘society’ and problematising the specificities of the interface between local concepts of nature and society/culture, I find it more instructive to describe the local environmental perception in the village-community under survey by focusing on the difference between

interactions with and concepts of places visited, used, and communicated about both frequently and rarely.

One important characteristic of environmental perception in the village community I conducted fieldwork in is its fragmentary nature. For the inhabitants of my field site Tobuluk³ – and I argue for Sakhas more generally – the surrounding environment does not consist of a uniform totality formed by permanent human and non-human interactions; rather, it consists of a cluster of landscapes (ecotopes) controlled to varying degrees, and the surrounding territories do not provide an equal feeling of familiarity and safety for villagers in Tobuluk due to the dissimilar intensity and forms of interaction between landscapes and them. This distinctiveness of Sakha environmental perception can be explained by the traditional methods of local agricultural activities. Due to these methods, people in Tobuluk may feel at ease with unfamiliar, remote territories if the latter evoke the idea of homeland with the comforting landscape of their labour and residence. And, in contrast, some nearby unused territories may seem unfamiliar or even hostile for them.

The present article⁴ is based on data collected in Tobuluk, an ethnically uniform Sakha village of central Yakutia, and focuses on two interrelated research problems. First, I describe how the local inhabitants' environmental perception is based on a process of observing, interacting with, and communicating about the community's immediate environment. This process does not focus solely on landscape types, but forms a complex system in which landscapes and cardinal directions evoke and define each other and characterise those who reside there. According to local stereotypes attached to environmental perception in Tobuluk, the permanent interaction with a landscape-type deeply influences the cast of mind and the moral values of Sakhas and other ethnic groups.

Although environmental perception in less mobile, small-scale societies might create isolated but detailed islands of understanding environment (Brown 1983), Sakhas in Tobuluk normally localise themselves and define their immediate environment in the wider context of culturally determined macro-environment frames (the Republic of Yakutia, the Russian Federation, etc.) of which they do not have any direct sensory knowledge. To do so, instead of using a value-neutral longitudinal and latitudinal system, most people in Tobuluk generally apply a richly contextualised system of cardinal directions for positioning their environment of everyday interactions. I argue that in this complex system of environmental perception humans not only take an active role in transforming the surrounding world into landscapes, but the landscapes inform Tobuluk inhabitants about the qualities of local communities, especially with regard to their behaviour, major character traits, and ethnic affiliation. Since humans and landscapes can equally play an active role in this relationship, it is clear that Tobuluk environmental perception can be characterised as an 'interplay' between landscapes and communities rather than a one-sided process of encoding cultural meanings in a passive environment.

Secondly, I endeavour to focus on the temporality of the Tobuluk environmental perception. Due to the subsequent transformations of the village's economy and lifestyle by the Soviet and Russian state administration in the last 100 years (collectivisation, centralisation, and decollectivisation), the way Sakhas interact with their surroundings has transformed radically within the past four generations. One can detect profound differences in the way generations relate to, interact with, understand, and evaluate landscapes as a result of the relatively rapid and intense changes.

³ Due to sensitive data presented in this paper I use pseudonyms for localities and people.

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Moreover, the role of environmental knowledge is a new factor shaping local environmental perception after perestroika (Crate 2006). Environmental knowledge and consciousness transmitted by mass media and public education has increasingly effected the local environmental perception of juveniles and middle-aged people in the villages of Yakutia.

Finally, I argue that the study of Sakha environmental perception not only provides researchers with better insight into the environmental problems in Yakutia (Crate 2008b, 2011), it also contributes to a more detailed understanding of social formations and fragmentations in Yakutia by connecting environments with the immanent qualities of resident communities.

2. Environment, Ethnic Groups, and Agriculture in Yakutia

Before examining Tobuluk environmental perception as understood from data collected through fieldwork, it is worth contextualising the emic data by providing the conventional etic perspective on Yakutia's environment, ethnic groups, and traditional agricultural practices. Yakutia is known for one of the most extreme climatic conditions in the northern hemisphere; its frosty winters bring temperatures of around -60°C (an average of -42°C in January) and hot summers with temperatures sometimes reaching $+40^{\circ}\text{C}$. The first frosts may arrive as early as the end of August, and snow in central Yakutia normally disappears only in May. Due to this sharply continental, subarctic climate, the soil in Yakutia is predominantly frozen, thawing only in a one to two meter thick layer in central Yakutia in the summer. This permafrost determines most of Yakutia's terrain formation and vegetation. Although the overwhelming majority of Yakutia's territory is located in the permafrost zone, special thermokarst depressions characterise primarily central Yakutia's lowlands between the Lena and Aldan Rivers.

In the central Yakutian lowlands, 17 per cent of the total land area is covered with thermokarst depressions called *alaas* in Sakha (Katamura et al. 2006). The depression basin of an *alaas* may vary in size and depth. The biggest *alaases*, like the *Tüngülü* and *Mürü*, extend over more than 500 square kilometres each and enclose two or three villages, whilst the smallest may have a radius of less than 100 metres. These *alaases* – often considered micro-ecosystems (Crate 2006: 3) – normally consist of a central lake surrounded by steppe-like vegetation. *Alaases* end abruptly at the surrounding larch-tree taiga.

Although the formation of *alaases* has yet to be elucidated in detail, it is obvious that forest marshlands (*düöde*) and lakes are initially formed as a result of thermokarst processes – in other words, partial melting of the permafrost. Later, such lakes partially dry out or are artificially drained (Bosikov 1991: 112). The process of *alaas* formation has a cyclical pattern; the flat-water surfaces of an *alaas* lake expand over a number of decades, and then shrink in the following few decades, allowing the size of the surrounding hayfield to grow (Bychkova 2002: 100). Without anthropogenic impact (based on hay-economy), the permafrost table under the *alaas* is being restored and open meadows gradually turn back into larch-tree forests.

Alaases can also be found in smaller size and fewer numbers west of the central Yakutian lowlands in the Viliui River basin and to the north in the Yana and Indigirka River valleys. Due to the high demand for hayfields, Sakhas overwhelmingly reside in these four areas. Sakhas have been residing in central Yakutia since the 14th century and along the rivers Viliui, Indigirka, and Yana since the second half of the 17th century. However, the surrounding mountainous areas to the West, South, and East as well as the vast tundra of North Yakutia have traditionally been the homeland of

other, either reindeer-breeder or hunter-gatherer, autochthonous peoples like the Evenkis, the Evens, the Yukaghirs, and the Chukchis. The number of non-indigenous settlers has grown continuously since the 17th century due to immigration from western Russia and later the Soviet Union but reached its peak in 1989, when the overall number of immigrants outnumbered the population of indigenous peoples in Yakutia. These immigrants normally settled in the mineral-rich, mountainous peripheries of the eastern, southern, and western regions, the northern seaports of Yakutia, or the capital city Yakutsk.

The traditional Sakha economy, based on an extraordinary technique of horse and cattle breeding (Abramov and D'jakonov 1990; Vinokurov 2001; Granberg, Soini and Kantanen 2009), has adapted to the severe climatic conditions of Yakutia; at this northern latitude a household needs to collect an average of up to two tonnes of hay per animal (depending on the territory, the climate, and the quality of hayfields) to feed them between September and May. Consequently, hayfields are of immense importance, and Sakha agriculture depends on intensive hay production in the summer due to the high demand for fodder (Crate 2008a: 161). Although approximately half of the hay produced in Yakutia is collected at the *alaases* (Bosikov 1991: 25–27), there are other ecotopes (Hunn and Meilleur 2010) along the Lena, Viliui, Aldan, and Amga rivers that provide fertile hayfields for Sakha cattle breeding.

The fieldwork data presented in this paper were collected predominantly in Tobuluk, central Yakutia, within the Ust'-Aldan region, approximately 200 kilometres northeast of Yakutsk, in a village of 650 inhabitants (as of 2010). The village is located along the Tobuluk River, which flows to the north to reach the Aldan River, some 70 kilometres away, near the village of Taragaj. The fluvial basin of the river is spotted with *alaases* around the village of Tobuluk, but the number and size of *alaases* decreases steadily toward the northern end of the river's basin. There are no *alaases* around Taragaj. Fertile *alaases* are distributed rather unevenly over the roughly 1000 square kilometres within the Balyktaakh administrative unit, of which the village of Tobuluk is the centre. The most fertile, dry *alaases* are located to the west and south of the village. The territories to the east and north are rather swampy, criss-crossed by small creeks.

The village wherein the fieldwork data were collected is situated in the north-eastern part of the administrative territory, and the only road crossing the village comes from the west and leads north. Dirt roads of local importance connect the southern fertile *alaases* with the village, but the eastern areas are rather inaccessible. Agricultural output in the village of Tobuluk is based predominantly on cattle breeding. Following the collapse of the local state-farm system, Tobuluk households had two choices: either join one of the two local cooperative farms formed after the perestroika; or start a subsistence economy based on mutual and free-will cooperation among relatives. Susan Crate (2006) dubbed this second system "cow and kin" economy. It is based on the long-term cooperation between cattle breeding families bound predominantly by kinship. The two most fragile factors of running a lucrative household-based subsistence economy in Tobuluk are the success of the summertime hay production in July and early August, and the effectiveness of milking.

Households normally need fertile and dry hayfields near dirt-roads and summer camps with barns in the vicinity of rich pastures in order to profit from cattle breeding. If hayfields are wet and boggy with no passable roads, one has to invest much more time, power, and fuel in hay production. Bad working conditions (in some territories hay can only be collected with a scythe and pitchfork) make wet hayfields unprofitable. Furthermore, compared to hay collected from dry hayfields, hay from

wet hayfields will be much less nutritious – requiring more than three tonnes annually per cow. Sakhas therefore make a sharp distinction between low-quality hay from wet hayfields (*uu oto*), and high-quality, dry *alaas* hay (*alaas oto*). Low-quality hay has a negative impact on the fat content of a cow's milk, further decreasing the economic value of cattle breeding.

The lack of barns located at pastures causes a number of problems, mainly because households without summer camps and barns outside the village must use the winter stables in their yard in the village during the summer. Therefore, cows milked twice a day in these barns can only roam to the overgrazed, low-quality pastures around the village, and they do not produce enough milk. The other frequent problem is that cows in search of rich pastures roam far away and they do not return at the evening milking hour.

Since most households lack either optimal hayfields or summer camps with barns, cattle breeding is normally not very profitable. According to Darbasov's estimate, compared to the investments of cattle breeding, the returns from beef are around 53 per cent and from dairy products around 42 per cent in an average household in Yakutia (Darbasov, Egorov and Solov'ev 2000: 75). Households based on subsistence economy receive state subsidies according to the amount of milk they sell to the local, state-owned, milk-acquisition company. The only way a household can sustain cattle breeding in the long run in Tobuluk is to join one of the local cooperatives endowed with a better state subsidising system. Therefore, in 2010 more than two-thirds of Tobuluk cattle belonged to state-subsidised cooperative farms; only one young household in Tobuluk breeds cattle independently.

Due to these economic constraints, traditional household-based cattle breeding now only provides auxiliary income for local families. People depend much more on paid employment and state assistance rather than subsistence economy. Public sector incomes (as listed below) do not mutually exclude each other, people may receive salary, pension, and social assistance at the same time.

<i>Tobuluk</i>	<i>Number of recipients</i>	<i>Average income in rouble (as of 2009)</i>
Village administration	7	17,739.70
Secondary school	91	11,158.60
Local hospital	22	13,489.40
Social workers	20	9,914.40
Pension	123	6,121.50
Social assistance	72	5,791.60

Table 1: Public sector incomes and assistance in Tobuluk

Nowadays, traditional Sakha economic activities (including cattle breeding, hunting, fishing, etc.) outside the village contribute less and less to the household budgets and may even generate a loss. As a result, people (especially women) lack motivation and the opportunity to interact with the surrounding environment (including *alaases*) outside the village. Therefore, it is no surprise that for the majority of young people – in contrast to the older generations – a visit to the surrounding *alaases* during the two to three-week-long summertime hay making is a period of pointless toil rather than a jolly, much awaited, time of the year.

3. Making *alaas* a Sakha Landscape

In order to understand the environmental perception of villagers in Tobuluk, one must first closely examine the landscape of great economic and symbolic significance of the village's surroundings. The *alaas* is not just one of the many landscapes of Yakutia; it is the landscape providing home and shelter for the Sakhas. In Sakha, people often call *alaases* "mother *alaas*" (*ije alaas*), emphasising their affection towards this landscape. Big lakes within an *alaas* may be respected as well, and referred to as grandmothers (*ebe*), lady (*khotun*), or lord (*tojon*). In Tobuluk, some *alaases* are also anthropomorphised with the help of toponyms like Buluur Lord (*Tojon Buluur*) or Kuusa Grandma (*Kuusa ebeete*).

Alaases traditionally provide a residence for Sakhas in Yakutia, because the abundance of grass in *alaases* is indispensable for their cattle economy. However, in Sakha environmental perception, there are many different landscapes aside from the *alaas* that can produce fertile hayfields (*khoduha*), such as the wide, fluvial riverine prairies (*khocho*), small glades in the taiga (*yraahyja*), the dry hummocks in wetlands (*kyrdal*), large grasslands (*khonuu, syhyy*), and many others. While these landscapes (especially the *khocho*) may occupy an important place in Sakha environmental perception, the *alaas* is the only focus of Tobuluk inhabitants' environmental perception.

The categorisation of thermokarst depressions as *alaases* depends partly on the physical settings perceived sensually but also on the knowledge of Sakhas dwelling in the territory. In other words, *alaas* is the outcome of constant interaction between Sakhas and ecological processes of thermokarst formations. Therefore, the identification of this landscape depends as much on the view of the beholder as on the memory of the previously seen scenes (Verdi 2004: 360). Here, I will specify some of the major aspects of Tobuluk Sakhas perception of *alaases*.

First, for the villagers, an *alaas* is by no means an untouched, virgin landscape. On the contrary, it is the locale of Tobuluk inhabitants' everyday economy and their dwelling within the limitless, wild, and hostile taiga. It is the footprint of their presence, and the secure home of their cultural activities. People in Tobuluk therefore cognise *alaases* as the arena of their continuous presence, labour, and residence wherein their activities, experiences, and memories transform 'space' into 'places' (cf Basso 1988; Thornton 1997; Gray 2003). As a result, the *alaas* normally contains a number of elements of human constructions, namely huts (*ötökh*) or at least their abandoned ruins (*surt*), fences around the territory where haystacks are kept (*kürüö*), various stables (*khoton, titiik*), and horse tethering posts (*serge*). Contemporary constructions can be found in the *alaases* of Tobuluk, like memorials for victims of the Second World War, of the Russian Civil War or for the first members of the local *kolkhoz* (collective farms), electrical cables, or large barns for hundreds of cows built by the brigades of the former local state farm. There are few *alaases* around Tobuluk, which do not contain visible human constructions; at the very least, the buildings or the ruins of the buildings of an abandoned settlement. Therefore, many toponyms in Tobuluk denote *alaases* by referring to the presence of human architecture, such as *Balaghannaakh* (*alaas* with winter camp), *Buor uraha* (summer camp built of mud), *Büör surt* (kidney-shaped settlement), etc.

The eminent importance of *alaas* comes from the fact that it is a landscape under the control of Sakha communities. Sakhas not only dwell there, but through their economic activities, they also modify and maintain *alaases*. This attitude towards landscape is rather different from the way hunter-gatherers normally relate to their territories; Sakhas do not "procure" (Ingold 2000: 28) their environment, they dominate and transform it. Therefore, it is not trust in the "giving environment"

(Bird-David 1990) that best characterises the Sakha attitude towards *alaases*, but rather, permanent control and mutual interdependency. *Alaases* provide shelter and food for Sakhas only if Sakhas contribute with their own labour and refurbish them year by year. Nothing is ready-made in the *alaas*, and it is the continuous activities of Sakhas that make this landscape their home. At the same time, Sakhas are dependent on the hay, drinking water, fish, and venison provided by the *alaases*.

This mutual interdependency is manifested in the Sakha nutritional system as well. The eminent and preferred sources of Sakha nutrition are the fruits of the *alaas*. As a result, Sakhas prefer fish from the small *alaas* ponds (crucian carp and minnow) over salmon-like river fish (Maj 2006). Furthermore, they believe that dairy food blesses them with a long and healthy life (Mészáros 2008: 241; Everstov 1996: 22–24). Historical Sakha narratives claim that the food of the *alaas* – being superior to Evenki foods from the taiga – enabled Sakhas to conquer Yakutia and defeat local Evenki people who even envied their dairy products (Sehen Bolo 1994: 85). Moreover, Sakhas prefer to drink ‘ice-water’ melted from blocks of ice cut from the frozen *alaas* ponds in mid-autumn, even if in some cases they also may have the opportunity to fetch water directly from rivers. Sakha hunting is also based on *alaases*. Rather than hunt the moose, reindeer, or grouse (especially in central Yakutia) living in the forest, they watch for ducks and geese during the spring and autumn migrations when these birds stop on the small lakes and ponds of the *alaases*.

Toponyms around Tobuluk also often refer to the fact that *alaases* have an important role in the local economy. Some *alaas* names refer to the process of cattle breeding: *Ynakh alaaha* (Cow’s *alaas*), *Kyttaajy tierbehe* (Summertime cattle grid at Kyttaajy), *Ojbon küöle* (The lake of ice holes, where cows are watered in wintertime). Others emphasise the importance of hunting and fishing: *Andylaakh* (Rich in velvet scoter), *Kus büteje* (Full of ducks), *Ilimitte* (Net-fishing), and so on.

Local methods of fishing, hunting, collecting hay, and fetching water represent the way people in Tobuluk perceive *alaases* as territories they dominate and control. The Sakha economy leaves visible footprints on *alaases*: fences, huts, and stables are constructed for cattle breeding. Lakes are sometimes drastically modified by hunters. At Tobuluk, a few rush-filled, boggy lakeshores were bulldozed in the *sovkhos* (state farm) era in order to provide a better view of the open water for hunters. Permanent hunting blinds are located along the lakeshores. The most popular fishing method is to use floating nets fixed with wooden rods stuck in the mud of the lake. These rods are visible from a distance, informing local people whether or not the lake is being used for fishing. Even the production of fresh water provides visible marks on the *alaas* lakes, as blocks of ice cut from the lake in the autumn are left on the frozen surface of the lake, forming large pyramids in the winter.

It is clear that people in Tobuluk not only interact with, but dominate *alaases*. Thus, they refer to *alaases* as territories owned by (not only assigned to or procured by) them. Their ownership is based on two claims. Firstly, unlike other Siberian peoples, Sakhas have regarded the *alaases* they have occupied since at least the 17th century not only as territories they use, but as commodities which are subject to trade (Basharin 1956: 31). That is to say, an *alaas*, or part of an *alaas*, could be purchased for hay, cattle, and horses, and was a normal category of bride-wealth and dowry (Sleptsov 1989: 25–26). The *alaas* in Tobuluk, where a certain family by the name Ammosov (originating from the village of Kalyptaakh) resided before collectivisation, was a territory they had received as a dowry. Sakha understanding of landownership differs radically from the view of other indigenous peoples of Yakutia (for whom the land could never have been a commodity) (Ziker

2002; Ventsel 2005) and resulted in a unique system of taxation based on land tenure during the Tsarist era as well as specific methods of collectivisation and decollectivisation in central Yakutia.

Alaases, as protected areas, belonged to nuclear families before collectivisation. They were sacred places where ancestors lived and were buried. People born in Tobuluk before the centralisation following the Second World War (when villages were formed from the dispersed settlements) regularly visit and make sacrifices at the ruins of the settlement of their home *alaas*.

Until the centralisation, an *alaas* was normally identified by a group of Sakhas residing there. The word *tüölbe* in Sakha means both a cohesive group of people and a round-shaped meadow. The way Sakhas ask about the identity of a stranger “*Kimten kiinnekkhinij, khantan khaannakhhynyj?*” (From whom do you have your navel, from where do you have your blood?) shows that location may be as important in recognising a stranger as genealogy in Tobuluk. Similarly, the popular Sakha proverb “*Tuspa khocho oghoto, atyn alaas ychchata*” (He is the son of a separate hayfield, he is the descendant of another *alaas*) exemplifies that people were categorised not only by their kin-group, but by the *alaas* where they resided (Bravina 2002: 14).

Hence, it is no surprise that many *alaases* around Tobuluk are named after the people who resided there: *Maaha alaaha* (Mary’s *alaas*), *Siederep ulakhana* (Fedorov’s big *alaas*), or *Siederep achchygyja* (Fedorov’s small *alaas*). It is only *alaases* in contrast to forests, rivers, mountains, or hills that are identified and named after the Sakha forefathers who previously resided there (Bagdaryyn 1992). In Tobuluk, many *alaases* are named after the summer camp owned by a particular person: *Tümepej sajylyga* (Timofei’s summer camp), *Köstöküün sajylyga* (Konstantin’s summer camp), *Ystapaan sajylyga* (Stepan’s summer camp), and many others. In some cases, especially when the *alaas* is no longer in use, the villagers of Tobuluk are unsure from whom the *alaas* received its name. However, during disputes in Tobuluk, an individual’s *alaas* affiliation is a powerful argument in defence or explanation of someone’s deeds. For example, the head of a local cooperative farm was rumoured to have concealed the farm’s profit from other cooperative members, but some of the villagers supported the head by mentioning that she is from *Sytygan*, that is, from an *alaas* which has always belonged to local families of high esteem.

Accordingly, the *alaas* is not simply the outcome of a ‘social production’, embodied by a cluster of elements, but it is the result of a ‘social creation’ as well, since *alaases* are symbolically experienced places mediated by social processes and actions (such as rituals, labour, and contests) anchoring local historical knowledge. This knowledge transforms *alaases* into landscapes conveying identity. It can be claimed that people in Tobuluk not only dwell in this landscape-type, but that they constitute it by their local skills, knowledge, and the dynamics of their actions.

A popular Sakha proverb says that regions have stories, and *alaases* have names (*dojdu surakhtaakh, alaas aattaakh*). Therefore, an *alaas* is not a real *alaas* if it does not have a name, if nobody collects its hay or knows anything about its history. In Tobuluk, such a territory is either called grassland (*khonuu*) or a closed *alaas* (*bütej alaas*). In Sakha, abandoned meadows, which do not belong to anyone, are called *khongolloj sir*, usually these areas do not have their own names. Sakha village communities have always demarcated and reserved territories (*khongolloj sir*) suitable for hay production; these meadows are mowed in case of extraordinary wet or dry years or when immigrants arrive.

4. Interacting with *alaases* and Forests in Tobuluk

The link between *alaases* and resident groups was tightly sealed by the Tsarist state administration, which prohibited moving from one taxation unit to another, banned the selling of *alaases*, and applied land tenure taxation in central Yakutia from 1766 onwards (Tokarev, Gogolev and Gurvich 1957: 141; Basharin 1956: 55). The fact that households were forced to lease *alaases* from the state affirmed the Sakha perception of an *alaas* as a territory assigned to a certain group of people. This relationship changed twice in Tobuluk during the Soviet era. First, when *alaases* were assigned to collective farms between 1929 and 1931, and again later in 1974, when they were entirely nationalised by local state farms. Nevertheless, people in Tobuluk were aware even during the Soviet rule of the whereabouts of their own *alaases*. They not only visited these *alaases* in order to carry out ancestor worshipping rituals, but they maintained a sense of owning these territories as well, since the loosely controlled domains of local economy (like hunting and fishing) were regulated spatially according to the pre-soviet entitlement relations in Tobuluk. That means that during the *sovkhos* era people hunted ducks or fished only at the *alaases* where their ancestors had resided and paid tax before collectivisation, and the same is true today. If someone wants to fish or hunt in an *alaas* in Tobuluk belonging to someone else, then he has to first ask permission from those who are entitled to hunt and to fish there. This regulatory system is rather strict, not only in Tobuluk but in all of the relatively densely populated areas of central Yakutia where good fishing and hunting ponds are rather scarce.

According to local oral history, some parts of the *alaases* to the south of the village (*Mungur Khatyng* and *Ulakhan Alaas*) have been partially artificially drained in order to enlarge the surrounding hayfields. Also, *alaases* were often enlarged by burning the taiga and regular mowing to ensure that larch trees would not recapture the area. These techniques are not unique to Tobuluk: a Sakha legend describing their arrival to what is nowadays Yakutia mentions that the creation of *alaases* from forests by burning huge territories was one of the most important acts of the conquest.

When Sakhas arrived to the territory where they live now, the banks of rivers and the forests were rich in wild game. It is said that the Evenkis did not breed horses and cattle, they had only reindeer. Thus they lived at and rambled around territories where they could hunt for wild game and where their reindeer found food. Horse and cattle breeding Sakhas arrived and they settled in areas with hayfields. And the wetlands along with dark forests, where reindeer had forage, were set on fire. (Sehen Bolo 1994: 41–42. Original text in Sakha, translation by the author)

Many methods were used to enlarge *alaases* and hayfields. Deforestation and drainage of wet areas was a common way to enlarge and enrich *alaases* and hayfields in the pre-revolutionary and *sovkhos* era in Tobuluk. Unused, boggy territories were transformed into hayfields, which were then controlled and regularly used by state-farm brigades. In the pre-revolutionary era, households had exclusive rights to hayfields which they drained (*sejmelek sir*) as long as the head of the household was alive. Deforested areas (*soloohun sir*) were used exclusively by those who participated in the deforestation work. In Tobuluk, deforested and drained *alaases* were usually named after the individual who had the right to use these territories. Fertilising *alaases* was a common practice in the pre-*sovkhos* as well as the *sovkhos* era; however, new hayfields gained by deforestation or by drainage were owned by the state. After decollectivisation, due to the decreasing number of livestock, no new *alaases* were improved or enlarged by locals.

The Tobuluk environmental perception of local inhabitants (as among other villagers in central Yakutia) is focused very much on *alaases*, and thus forests around Tobuluk are strictly demarcated from them. Although some economic activities (like lumbering and berry picking) take place in forests, people tend to spend much less time in the forest than at the *alaases*. Consequently, there are very few visible signs of human presence (e.g. dirt roads) in the Tobuluk forest.

With the exception of specialists such as local horse herdsman, people only visit the forests in the close vicinity of their *alaases*. Therefore, berry picking is restricted to the forests surrounding Tobuluk. Close forests are over-picked; only forests by remote *alaases*, which are visited by few families, are abundant with berries. The same problem characterises lumbering. Far-away forests with poor-quality dirt roads leading to a remote *alaas* are only occasionally lumbered because of the difficulty and cost of arranging transportation. Thus, forests around the village and the big *alaases* (as well as along the main roads) are over-lumbered, and high-quality wood is becoming scarce. As hunting in Tobuluk is nowadays much more a means of recreation than an activity of economic significance, the way people behave outside the village has changed. Hunters eat tinned meat and pasta, and drink tea or vodka in the *alaas* huts during the days of hunting, and thus no special skills are required for them while living outside the village. They travel frequently between the village and the *alaas* hut, having a nap at home rather than outside the village. Furthermore, it is important to note that neither trappers nor hunters travel long distances in the forests. Instead, they usually go to their legitimate hunting area (the *alaas* belonging to them) and spend most of their time there. As a result, the overwhelming majority of local hunters have only a minimal knowledge of the forests of Tobuluk, and this knowledge is restricted to the areas of the *alaases* they visit regularly.

Therefore, while a rich system of toponyms describes *alaases* around Tobuluk, hardly any place names describe parts of the forest. Consequently, the *alaases* are the main points of orientation, and Tobuluk people usually explain the whereabouts of a place by mentioning the name of *alaases* on the way. Among *alaases*, those of eminent economic importance with functioning *sovkhos* barns and big summer camps are the key locales of orientation outside the village, while abandoned unused *alaases* gradually come to merge with the forests cognitively. The villagers consider the areas surrounding Tobuluk as controlled islands of *alaases* in a sea of uncontrolled forest. The cluster of Tobuluk *alaases* is filled with connecting roads that cut through the forests only to reach another *alaas*. Another striking difference between the local perception of forests and *alaases* is that no communities are identified with or related to parts of the forest. Whereas *alaases* are mentally connected with a group of people known to the villagers, there are no stories or legends told about the forest. The perception of the *alaas* is established by a system of communication, where narratives about previous human activities influence the way Tobuluk people perceive and interact with *alaases*.

5. Communication among Tobuluk Inhabitants and the *alaas*

Villagers not only observe and utilise *alaases*, the focal point of their environmental perception, but they frequently communicate about them as well. Communication about landscape anchors local knowledge (cf. Basso 1988: 100–101; Low 1996: 361–362) and is part of the local epistemological system. Narratives concerning *alaases* in Tobuluk transmit information about past human actions and sometimes provide etiological explanations of the special physical features of *alaases*. To the

south of Tobuluk are three, strangely shaped *alaases* called the big dead horse (*Ulakhan at ölbüt*), the small dead horse (*Achchygyj at ölbüt*), and the skin of the foal (*Kulun tiriite*). The names and shapes of these *alaases* are explained through stories about the death of horses. One of the most fertile *alaases* to the west of the village is called the rotten *alaas* (*Sytygan*). This name preserves the memory of a fierce battle between two Sakha tribes that left many dead soldiers unburied and rotting in the meadow. Historical narratives about this battle and the long war between the feuding tribes are well-known in central Yakutia, and are also incorporated in major collections of Sakha legends (Sehen Bolo 1994).

On the road leading to *Sytygan*, there is a small *alaas* called *Bulgun'n'akhtaakh* (meaning 'hilly'), which is well-known in Tobuluk because of the ritual purification performed a long time ago by a local shaman, who captured seven evil spirits (*kuhaghan tyyn*) by trapping them in a spirit trap (*ojuun ajata*). According to Anastasiia, who was born in *Sytygan* and spends the summer there, the seven spirit are still trapped on top of the middle hill of *Bulgun'n'akhtaakh*, and therefore no one dares to climb it. There are *alaases* around Tobuluk where the spirits of the deceased ancestors reside and threaten anybody who intrudes. Normally, only the spirits of those who have died in unusual ways transform into evil spirits (*üör*) and turn the sheltering *alaas* into a hostile place (*setteekh sir*). Some *alaases* to the east of Tobuluk, not far from the small creek *Tandygy*, are rumoured to be such places. One of the best known *setteekh sir* in the territory of the administrative unit is actually located at the very heart of the village of Tobuluk in the yard of the orthodox temple (today a museum), which used to be a cemetery in the 19th century. Moreover, a few place names around Tobuluk refer to past events that have now nearly vanished from the local historical knowledge: *D'akhtar yald'ybyt* (A woman became sick), *Bie ölbüt* (A mare died), *Khoro syhyyta* (Meadow of the Khoro clan).

Historical knowledge about *alaases* is not only transmitted orally: a huge corpus of locally written texts about the history of kin-groups and their residence is at the disposal of villagers in Tobuluk. In 2002, Auntie Roza (born in 1934) wrote a manuscript with the intention of enumerating her kinsmen who formerly resided on the territory of the *Tabalaakh* and *Mokhsoghollookh alaases*. In this history, she focused on the collectivisation and the relocation of her kinsmen from the surrounding smaller *alaases* to the new *kolkhoz* centre. Aprooska (born in 1952), who works at the local museum, also compiled the history her family. In her manuscript, she precisely pointed out the *alaases* where her ancestors resided. In order to elucidate the richness of this corpus, I shall only mention that in Tobuluk I recorded over a thousand pages of memoirs and family histories.

Not only are historical narratives bound to *alaases*, but there is an abundant body of hunting and fishing stories connected to them as well. I also recorded an unusual story about the maiden-spirit of the *alaas* (*tüüngngü kyys*) with whom a lad can fall in love while making hay and having a nap at the hayworkers hut in the *alaas*. The affection towards this maiden grows whilst the lad loses his hay-making strength. An informant of mine (born in 1947) in Tobuluk mentioned that in his childhood he imagined all the heroes of the Soviet era literature residing at certain corners of the *alaas* where he and his family resided. Furthermore, dream narratives from Tobuluk as well as the work of a Sakha psychologist (Nohsorova 1993: 1–2) demonstrate that the *alaas* provides a typical scenery in Sakha dreams.

Besides narratives mentioned above, riddles, proverbs, and songs play an important role in transmitting knowledge about *alaases*. In Tobuluk, it is fairly common to open a song book during

family dinners. Most of the songs are written about *alaases* and landscapes familiar to village dwellers.

The texts of these songs refer as much to the sight as to the scent and sound of the *alaas*, pointing to the fact that all of the senses are involved in perceiving the *alaas*. One popular song performed regularly by a local singer and song writer, Semen, in the local house of culture, was about an *alaas*. “*Min alaaspar kellim, alaaspar/ Mangnajgy kötörü kytary/ Köghönü, küöregeji kytary(...)* *Min alaaspar kellim, alaaspar/ N’irejin merijiirin isteeri/ Kulunchuk kistiirin isteeri (...)*” (“I arrived at my *alaas*, together with the first birds, together with the ducks and larks (...) I arrived at my *alaas*, in order to listen to the bleating of calves and the neighing of foals.”)⁵. Moreover, the scent of fresh hay and springtime larch buds characterises the *alaas* in local songs. My informants often mentioned the taste of the air, the touch of the grass, the characteristic sounds and even the immanent power of the *alaas*. This immanent power is one of the Sakha shaman’s main resources (Yamada 2004: 224–225), and thus, the *alaas* is respected and feared by the Sakhas.

The *alaas* landscape tells a great deal about Sakha communities; not only do the Tobuluk people define, utilise and communicate about *alaases*, but local *alaases* affect and modify the character of local dwellers as well. *Alaases* convey different character traits and have a varying impact on resident communities. Some *alaases* convey a cheerful atmosphere, others are more serious (*d’ohun-maany*), and some are outright dangerous.

According to Nikolai, the local history teacher in Tobuluk, people living on small *alaases* (which are characteristic for Tobuluk), due to the enclosure of the landscape, possess an introverted, reticent, and enduring character, as opposed to the cheerful and careless character of the Taragaj people to the north where one finds no *alaases* but only riverside wetlands and forest. This peculiar mentality of *alaas* dwellers is described in Sakha with the idioms “fence man” (*kürüö kihi*) or “reserved man” (*bütej kihi*).

Around Tobuluk, fertile *alaases* are scarce and there has always been a fierce competition for their ownership. According to the villagers, this competition causes tensions, especially in densely populated areas like central Yakutia. Therefore, *alaases* are often described as something very much in demand (*byld’ahyk*). The scarcity of *alaases* results in a rather competitive behaviour, and people in Tobuluk often mention that the biggest deficiency of their character is jealousy (*orduk sanaahyn*). Varvara (born in 1953) mentioned to me that *alaas* people always think about the future and compare their wealth with someone else’s, and this is the main difference between Sakhas and Evenkis.

The *alaas* possess an immanent power that local people claim is hard to understand and canalise. This power can be embodied by a beautiful girl or remain shapeless. Notwithstanding, this power must be respected, and therefore, it is strictly forbidden to shout, run, or curse when being at an *alaas*. If someone does not obey these rules, he or she may easily break his or her legs, or fall ill. This power has a great effect on the people permanently residing at *alaases*. Nowadays it is very rare that someone spends the winter outside the village. People usually visit the *alaases* for longer periods only in the summertime. Mikhail (born in 1947), however, spent four subsequent winters at his *alaas* (*Tan’n’arang*) summer camp between 1998 and 2002, and was thus rumoured to have gained the power to heal cattle and people connected with this *alaas*. However, during the winter of 2002 he fell asleep in his *alaas* hut and did not wake up for three days. His niece found him and

⁵ Translation by the author

carried him back to the village. Although Mikhail would like to spend the winters at the *alaas* hut, his niece now forbids him from visiting his hut alone in the winter.

Mikhail is the best milker in the whole republic and holds the Lenin prize for the Hero of Socialist Labour for his excellent output.⁶ In the village, people firmly believe that his cattle breeding skills partly originate from the *alaas* where he has worked over the past 30 years. His nicknames, *Ynakh Miise* (Cow Misha) and *Kyys Miise* (Girl Misha), point to his excellence in milking, which is traditionally referred to as women's work.

According to one of Mikhail's stories, the *Tan'n'arang alaas* served as a spiritual medium for him. In 1999, a female shaman (*udaghan*) visited the village in order to heal a lake next to the village. Mikhail stayed at his *alaas* that evening and did not go to the village for the shamanic séance. However, when collecting the cows that night, he saw a large bird at the edge of the *alaas* in a big larch tree staring at him. Later, after going to bed, he woke up from his sleep and saw a woman enter his *alaas* hut and approach him. Frightened by the unknown woman, he kicked her out. The next morning he entered the village and met the shaman woman. The woman laughed at him and told him that both the bird and the unknown woman was actually her visiting him to witness his strength in his own *alaas*.

The more intensive and intimate the interaction between villagers and 'their' *alaas* is, the more profoundly do the *alaases* modify their behaviour and cognition. Therefore, for the people of Tobuluk the *alaas* is not only the focal point of their environmental perception, but it is part of their identity and an important constituent of their idea about homeland. They often refer to themselves as the people who adapt to, dwell in, and can be identified with the *alaas*. As a result, the people of Tobuluk position themselves in accordance with the *alaases* in the macro environment of Yakutia and Russia, as laid out in the next section.

6. Locating the *alaas* and the People of the *alaas*

Not only people in Tobuluk, but Sakhas in many other communities believe that *alaases* are to be found only in Yakutia, and that they are usually occupied by Sakhas only. In Tobuluk, as in many places in central Yakutia, people believe that *alaases* are not characteristic of the entire territory of Yakutia, but are only widespread between the Lena and Aldan Rivers. Since it is only the *alaas* landscape that is identified with Sakhas in Tobuluk, territories and peoples beyond the *alaas*-rich lowlands of central Yakutia are commonly imagined and regarded to be dissimilar from their homeland. Many villagers have travelled to various regions in Yakutia, and some have spent their holiday in other regions of Russia or abroad (in China, Bulgaria, Turkey, Hungary, etc.). Thus, the world outside the village is certainly not a vast, unknown area. It is a rarely experienced, yet meaningful macro environment, providing a context for the local environmental perception in Tobuluk. Occasional travel (which was much more frequent in the Soviet era) and mass media convey information about the world beyond the borders of the administrative unit, but so do traditional narratives transmitted by local means of communication (both in oral and written forms). Therefore, the perception of the immediate environment of continuous interaction is interpreted within the macro frame of the outside world. Ethnic groups, lifestyles, and landscapes

⁶ This award has been introduced in 1938 in the Soviet Union honouring outstanding achievements in economy. In order to distinguish it from the State Lenin prize, the Hero of Socialist Labour prize forms a hammer and a sickle, instead of the portrait of Lenin.

are associated with areas beyond central Yakutia providing a meaningful frame contextualising local first-hand experience of *alaases*.

Of particular interest in this respect are cardinal directions and local notions connected with them. In Tobuluk, cardinal directions help local inhabitants situate their immediate environment (the territory administered by the village authority) both spatially and culturally. People may orientate themselves, find paths between *alaases*, and correlate the whereabouts of places to their village with the help of cardinal directions. The process of locating the village along with its focal landscape, the *alaas*, in Yakutia and in Russia contributes significantly to the self-identification of the villagers. Therefore, cardinal directions, in the context of the outside world, do not strictly focus on pointing out the direction of a territory, but rather provide a rich cultural context and a means of valorisation of barely known territories for the villagers.

Within the territory of the village, the idea of cardinal directions does not contribute significantly to the perception of landscapes. In Tobuluk, *alaases* around the village are perceived according to the way people interact with them. People identified with the *alaases* are members of the village community, and a large corpus of oral and written texts anchor local knowledge about *alaases* and people. As a result, assessments of landscapes and people conveyed by cardinal directions are of minor importance in the context of the village. For instance, if an *alaas* is located north of the village, then the notion of ‘north’ is not connected to it at all. In the frame of the village, villagers describe directions and places by referencing nearby *alaases*, and hence, cardinal directions provide culturally neutral points of orientation of minor importance. Although clusters of *alaases* may be labelled with cardinal directions (the southern *alaases* [*soghuruu alaastar*], the *alaases* of the western creek [*argha ürekh alaastara*]), these labels do not convey a meaning other than the approximate location of the *alaases*. At the same time, there are *alaases* determined by the flow of the Tobuluk River, like the low *alaases* (*allaraa alaastar*) or the upper *alaases* (*üöhee alaastar*).

When leaving the familiar territory of the village and the surrounding landscapes, cardinal directions have an increasing importance in assessing landscapes and peoples. The administrative border of the village does not strictly demarcate the well-known and used landscapes from the less-known and less-used landscapes; familiar places slowly transit into unfamiliar territories. An area that lies further from the village is less frequently observed by villagers and less knowledge is accumulated about it. In unison with this process, cardinal directions gradually lose their neutrality when people in Tobuluk assess distant landscapes and peoples.

Cardinal directions are as much historical as geographical constructions in the Tobuluk system of environmental perception. Just as *alaases* are identified with human groups and characterised by the historical narratives tied to them, cardinal directions are imbued with memories and identities. Historical legends on the ethnogenesis of Sakhas has contextualised the meaning of cardinal directions, as well as the subsequent wars between Sakha political formations, the memory of Russia’s colonisation, and the Soviet-era modernisation. Therefore, cultural constructions of north, east, south, and west in the Tobuluk environmental perception represent a historically rich, stratified, changing, and incoherent collection of ideas and assessments. Yet, this system helps villagers locate and determine themselves and their environment in the broader context of Yakutia and Russia. In order to examine this system more closely, I will enumerate cardinal directions and provide the meanings they are connoted with in Tobuluk. In the environmental perception of Tobuluk’s and, generally speaking, central Yakutia’s rural inhabitants, cardinal directions are not

neutral. Traditionally, east and south are connoted with positive values whereas north and west are endowed with negative meanings (Kolodesnikov 2000; Bravina 2002).

The word south (*soghuruu*) originally meant upward in Sakha (reflecting the fact that rivers normally flow from south to north in Yakutia). South is regarded as the homeland of warm weather, summertime, and the migrating birds in Tobuluk. The migration of birds is very important for local people, since hunting in the village focuses almost exclusively on ducks and geese. Although there are two hunting seasons (the spring migration in late April and May, and the autumn migration in September) it is only the spring migration that attracts local hunters to their *alaases* and lakes, since the autumn hunting season is much colder. Springtime birds migrate from the south to the north, and in Tobuluk hunters often joke that the best ducks and geese have already been killed by the people living in the south (implicitly, Russians). Life seems much easier for villagers in the south, and I will never forget the true astonishment of the local volleyball trainer, Maksim, when we saw an all-Russian news report that many people somewhere in India froze to death at a temperature of only -2°C .

The cardinal direction of south is strongly bound to the idea of the Sakha homeland, which is reinforced by public education, popular science books, and oral legends. Sakhas refer to the south as a homeland, *khoro* or the khoro land (*khoro dojdu*). This land, according to Sakhas, is the area from where they originate. One of the three legendary ancestors of Sakhas, the forefather of the *khoro* tribe, is called *Uluu Khoro* (Mighty Khoro). According to oral tradition, *Uluu Khoro* moved on an ox to central Yakutia from the south along the Aldan River (Sehen Bolo 1994, Ergis 1974). Khoro people from the south not only form a separate group of Sakhas, but they relate to the gods of the upper world with a special language, *khoro*. The connection between south and the gods of the upper world is also based on the assumption that south means upwards. Sakha shamans use a language called *khoro* during rituals to communicate with supernatural beings. Nowadays, double-talk is called *khoro* in Sakha. In Tobuluk, Nikolai, the local history teacher, mentioned that the Khoro clan is actually of Mongol origin, and nearby place names also of Mongol origin, such as *Nokhoj* and *Cherigtej*, demonstrate that Mongols of the Khoro tribe lived in the Ust'-Aldan region.

Russia's colonisation in Yakutia has added new connotations to the meaning of 'south' – it became the cardinal direction from where immigrants and colonisers arrived. Russians, Tatars, and many other colonisers immigrated to the southern part of Yakutia in the 18th century. State bureaucrats, merchants, and Cossacks settled along the Lena and Amga Rivers, next to the main roads used by the imperial mail service. The climate in these areas is reasonably milder than in other parts of Yakutia, enabling newcomers to introduce cereal cultures (rye and barley) in the fluvial basins of the rivers, attracting settlers from Russia. As a result, intermarriage has become common between newcomers and local Sakhas, and people from the southern part of Yakutia are neither referred to as Russians nor as Sakhas but as *baahynajs*, half-Russian half-Sakha people. The Sakha word *baahynaj* refers to the agricultural activity in those southern areas as it is derived from the Russian word *pashnia*, meaning 'ploughland'. Thus, the southern part of Yakutia, and the cardinal direction of the south are identified with *baahynajs* in Tobuluk. As they are not considered pure Sakhas, *baahynajs* are rumoured to have rather unpleasant character traits. First of all, as descendants of merchants they are considered very agile (sometimes aggressive) and cunning. As a student, Tolia, the gym teacher in the secondary school of Tobuluk, lived in the same dormitory with *baahynaj* students coming from the village of *Nömügü* in south Yakutia. He was keen to tell

stories about the fights he had with bad-tempered *baahynajs*. As *baahynajs* are not trustworthy, the southern part of Yakutia is regarded as rather dangerous.

Colonisation changed the connotation of ‘south’ from a different point of view as well. Since the only road leading to Yakutia from the administrative centres of Russia led from south to north, the idea of south has been associated with the idea of centrality. Senior citizens especially use the term *soghuruu* for centre. If someone says: “I am going to the south” (*soghuruu bardym*) it actually means that he or she intends to visit the regional centre, Boroghon, which is actually west of Tobuluk, geographically speaking.

The typical southern landscapes are either ploughlands or forests. The forests around Tobuluk are dominated by larch trees (*tiit mas*). The southern regions, however, are rich in a variety of trees, including pine trees, according to villagers. In Tobuluk, pine trees associated with south have a positive impact on humans as their wood is brighter and lighter than larch, and air in pine forests and pine buildings is said to be healthy.

The cardinal direction north (*khotu*) is also richly connoted with meanings. The original meaning of the word “*khotu*” is downward or downstream, and phrases in modern Sakha reflect this; *ürekh khotu* means down the river, and *süürük khotu* can be translated as downstream. North is the homeland of frost and evil spirits. Fedor, the oldest resident of the Tobuluk River basin (born in 1911) told me in 2002 that there are two kinds of evil spirits, those that appear at the coldest time of the year (*sülükün*), and those that come from the north (*kuhaghan tyyn*).

Northern territories are characterised by mountains, and therefore, areas north of Aldan are called *d’aangy*, which means mountain. This mountainous landscape, along with the treeless tundra, lacks hayfields and does not fit the Sakha livelihood and economy. As a result, these landscapes evoke the idea of winter and frost among Sakhas, and the presence of reindeer breeders. Although Sakhas occupy the coldest area in the northern hemisphere, north is never associated with the idea of the Sakha homeland. North is rather perceived as the area of *tongus* (a general denotation of Evenkis, Evens, and Yukaghirs) peoples.

Taragaj lies only 70 kilometres north of Tobuluk, at the mouth of the Tobuluk River, and is inhabited exclusively by Sakhas. It is often mockingly said in Tobuluk that people from Taragaj are Evenkis because they have no *alaases* and the mountainous territory associated with Evenkis begins just beyond the village, on the other side of the Aldan River. Between the years 1972 and 1985 there was a reindeer breeding brigade attached to the Taragaj state farm run by Evenkis coming from the village of Sebien Küöl. By the assumed Evenki origin of people living in Taragaj, villagers in Tobuluk explain why there are comparatively many healers in Taragaj, because Evenkis in Tobuluk are presumed to have shamanic skills.

Whereas south evokes the idea of centre, north is traditionally connected with the idea of peripheries and uncivilised people. This might explain why, from the Tobuluk perspective, territories occupied by Evenkis are automatically considered north, and why Aprooska said that I have been to the north when I gave her a short account of my fieldwork in the Evenki village of Kaptagas, which is, in fact, located to the south-east of Tobuluk. Sakhas living in the north are called *siencher*, which means metis of mixed Sakha and Evenki origin, owing to the identification of north and the peripheries with Evenkis. Furthermore, northern Sakhas are thought to have the stereotype character traits of Evenkis. These character traits, called *maad’ym* in Sakha (meaning ‘I kill you’ in Evenki) include aptness to take offence, being dangerous and unpredictable, flirtatious and eager to make fun of everything. Alcoholism and aggression are also associated with Evenkis

and northerners. I often heard the formula that an Evenki is not a real man unless he has spent a few years in jail (*khaajyyga syld'ybatakh kihi tongustarga er kihi aatyn sükpet baghajy*). As a result, if someone comes from the north (from the peripheries or territories where Evenkis are supposed to reside) they may have difficulties settling in in Tobuluk, regardless of their actual ethnic affiliation. Mikhail, who came to Tobuluk from the Ust'-Maia region in 1982, told me how difficult it was for him to get used to the constant mocking about his origin.

The north is not only associated with virgin, untouched landscapes, but with industrialised environments as well. The Tobuluk perspective on northern Yakutia gradually changed with the Soviet-era modernisation and the Cultural Revolution in the north (Slezkine 1992). Not only were salaries better in the north, but people had much better access to state services (transportation, alimentation, healthcare, holidays, etc.) than in central Yakutia. In the Soviet Union, the north was an imagined and virgin territory with abundant natural resources associated with “the idea of cold periphery and a place for hopes and dreamers” (Stammler-Gossmann 2007: 58), a territory ready to be conquered and dominated by the peoples of the Soviet Union (Habeck 2006b: 61). Industrialisation, understood as the conquest of the north (*osvoenie severa*), changed Yakutia's map. New mining settlements and industrial centres rapidly grew in territories previously occupied by reindeer breeders (Tichotsky 2000: 2). Now in Tobuluk, north is not only identified with the vast tundra and enormous mountain ridges but also with mines, factories, and pollution.

'East' (*ilin*) is of eminent importance in the Tobuluk environmental perception. The word “*ilin*” also means frontal and future. The entrance of the traditional Sakha house (*balaghan*) is normally oriented to the east, the windows facing to the south, and a barn is attached to the north side. According to oral history, as represented in major collections of legends and myths, east is the direction where good-willing gods reside, and therefore this direction evokes positive feelings among Sakhas (Reshetnikova 2005; Kolodesnikov 2000).

At the same time, in this part of central Yakutia (the territory between the Lena and the Aldan) east is connoted with the idea of homeland. The east not only provides a home for Sakhas, but it is the home of *alaases* as well. Central Yakutia, the area characterised by the *alaas* landscape, is called the Eastern Side (*Ilin Enger*) in Sakha. According to historical legends and public education in Tobuluk, *Ilin Enger* was the first territory where Sakhas arriving from the south resided. All other Sakhas living in various regions of Yakutia and beyond are said to have come from *Ilin Enger*. Therefore, in Tobuluk, *Ilin Enger* is regarded to be the cradle of 'real' Sakha culture and economy in Yakutia and a territory where only Sakhas reside.

Being the historical homeland of Sakhas, this area is also called central land (*kiin dojdu*) in Sakha, and people living there are called the central or navel Sakhas (*kiin sakhalar*). As a result, the notion of east correlates with the idea of centrality as well. Furthermore, centrality also means superiority. According to Tobuluk villagers, the *alaases* of central Yakutia provide hay of higher nutritive quality than any other region in Yakutia. In Tobuluk, people are aware that their *alaases* are fertile, but they regard the *alaases* of the Churapchy region (in the very centre of *Ilin Enger*) as even better. Nikolai Savvich, who was born in Churapchy, told me that the *alaases* of Churapchy are very dry, and thus not only grass grows there but all kinds of flowers as well, making Churapchy milk and butter taste sweeter and more intense. In the main market of Yakutsk, beef is advertised to buyers with the claim that it comes from either Ust'-Aldan or Churapchy.

Ilin Enger as a region of agriculture in Yakutia has never been the focus of Soviet modernisation and industrialisation. Therefore, compared with other territories in Yakutia, the rivers and meadows

here were less polluted during the Soviet era. Due to the ever-increasing environmental knowledge transmitted by public education and mass communication, people in Tobuluk are more and more aware that the climate and environment of *Ilin Enger* are unique. Villagers are proud that winter is always a bit harsher in Tobuluk than in Yakutsk and regularly describe their homeland as a land of severe nature (*tyjys ajylghalaakh dojdu*). They often boast of the extremely low minimum temperatures measured in Tobuluk, as compared to those on the official TV weather reports. Cold and permafrost environments are evaluated positively nowadays in the village because these characteristics hinder a variety of parasites from becoming widespread in Tobuluk. Mosquitoes and midges, locally known insects, are less harmful and less feared than ticks, which are prevalent in most of the regions of Russia. Also, people are aware that locally processed food in Tobuluk is ecologically clean (*ekoloogicheskaj chiistaj*), and it tastes better than imported food.

The symbolic meaning of the cardinal direction ‘west’ (*argha*) is probably the most problematic in Tobuluk. *Argha*, in accordance with the orientation of the *balaghan*, means rearward, posterior, and the territory behind the house. According to mythological ideas, now present only in the school books on Sakha literature and national culture, *argha* is the homeland of evil creatures (*abaahy*) and cold winds. Western winds are also called black western wind (*khara saappaas*), indicating that it is harmful for horses and cattle, since many diseases in Sakha are described as ‘black’.

However, nowadays the west is usually associated with the group of Sakhas residing at the Viliui River (*Bülüü*). There are two competing explanations about the origin of Sakhas at the Viliui River. One of them argues that Viliui Sakhas migrated to their current settlements from central Yakutia after the start of Russian colonisation (Ivanov 1992). However, based on oral poetry collected at the Viliui River, other researchers argue that Viliui Sakhas reached the river by migrating from the south, independently from the Sakhas of central Yakutia. In their opinion, Viliui Sakhas represent a separate group of Sakhas (Ksenofontov 1992).

Although the Viliui Sakha economy is very similar to that of central Yakutia, based on cattle and horse breeding and annual hay production, the people of central Yakutia think it is not identical. For them, the landscape of the Viliui area is not associated with hayfields and *alaases*, but rather with forests. Consequently, one of the names for Sakha inhabited areas along the Viliui River is western forest (*argha tya*) in Tobuluk and in central Yakutia. Labelling the valley of the Viliui River as a forest makes Tobuluk people think that this area is not completely suitable for Sakha economy. Although western Yakutia is called the fat Viliui (*sya Bülüü*) or fence Viliui (*bütej Bülüü*) in Tobuluk, pointing out the fact that people living there actually do collect hay and breed cattle, residents of the Viliui River are much more often denoted as fishermen of the Viliui River (*Bülüü balyksyttara*) or fish eaters of the Viliui River (*Bülüü symahyttara*). The word *symahyt* not only expresses the fact that one eats processed fish, but it also indicates that this person is poor and does not own enough cattle.

Since the landscape of western Yakutia is identified with forests, the so-called fish eater people residing there cannot be cognised as ‘true’ Sakhas; the landscape of Sakha dwelling is the *alaas*, and Sakha diet is based on beef and dairy food. Therefore, inhabitants along the Viliui River are sometimes pejoratively referred to as the Evenkis of the Viliui River (*Bülüü tongustara*). The western dialect of Sakha is mocked in Tobuluk because of its strange vocabulary and forms of expressing politeness, along with the funny melodic way people speak in. Furthermore, the Viliui people are often the butt of jokes due to their behaviour. Sargylaana, who moved from Suntar (the westernmost region of the Viliui River) to Ust’-Aldan region due to marriage, is a well-known

secondary school teacher in the region. She embodies for many in Tobuluk the true Evenki behaviour with her energetic, unpredictable, and talkative character. Most people agree that people from the Viliui region speak Sakha, but sometimes deny their Sakha identity.

In Tobuluk, cardinal directions not only locate and contextualise the immediate environment of the village in Yakutia, but they also define landscapes and residents associated with them. Both the ethnic affiliation and the major character traits of those who dwell in a particular landscape are stereotypically defined. Landscape types like forests, ploughlands, and *alaases*, as well as cardinal directions, are not only compared, but are ranked as well. In Tobuluk, the centrality of east and the *alaases* are associated with the presence of Sakhas, whereas north points to the periphery and to the Evenkis. *Alaases* are perceived in the frame of the environment that villagers regularly interact with; they provide a landmark of self-identification in the macro frame of Yakutia.

Perhaps this characterisation is interrelated with the phenomenon of Sakha regional characters (*ulus* mentality) first described by Balzer (2004: 243–244).⁷ *Ulus* mentality is shorthand for stereotypical behaviour and demarcates conflicting groups of Sakhas from one another. Separation and opposition between Sakhas of various regions is called *uluustaahyn* in Sakha and is structured by cardinal directions and landscape types. The most notorious opposition is between Sakhas from the east and west of Yakutia, which sometimes culminates in cruel clashes between student gangs from different regions in the city of Yakutsk. At the same time, neither *ulus* mentalities nor environmental perception constitute an unchangeable system. Generations perceive and interact differently with the *alaas* and associate different resident groups and character traits with it. The perception of the *alaas* depends as much on the age of the beholder as on his or her ethnic affiliation or residence in Yakutia.

7. The Temporality of the *alaas*

Owing to economic and administrative transformations over the past 100 years, the lifestyle of people in Tobuluk has changed profoundly. Here I will describe how changes in lifestyle modified the interaction between *alaases* and villagers. Differences in the perception of the *alaas* as a landscape depend very much on the previous interactions and experiences of beholders, and these may create conflicts between groups bearing different memories and identities (cf. Massey 1998: 156–157). In the ethnically uniform Sakha village of Tobuluk, differences in perceiving *alaases* do not stem from dissimilarities of the ethnic affiliation of villagers but from the differing lifestyles of generations. Those born before the post-war centralisation were raised at *alaases*, while those who worked in *sovkhos* brigades spent only three months a year at the *alaases*, and those who were born after the decollectivisation have even less experience with *alaases*. Besides its appearance, the setting of *alaases* has undergone profound changes during the subsequent economic transformations. Nowadays, there are no winter camps and no examples of traditional Sakha architecture – only their ruins have remained. At the same time, huge barns were constructed for hundreds of cows, electric lines were erected, and roads were built. Hence, it is no surprise that *alaas* perception has changed in time. Differences in perceiving and interacting with *alaases* result in divergent lifestyles and economic strategies between generations within the village. In order to examine the temporality of the *alaas*, I will shortly describe the impact of major economic changes on people's interaction with *alaases* in Tobuluk.

⁷ Today, *ulus* is the name of administrative units (regions) in Yakutia (Sakha Republic).

Land tenure paid for *alaases* in the pre-revolutionary era provided Tobuluk residents with the opportunity to not only dwell in but to own *alaases* as well. Until the onset of collectivisation in 1929–31, few people resided at the *alaases* of the administrative unit (*ulus*), where the village of Tobuluk was later, in 1945, established as the central settlement. In 1900, 170 winter camps and 150 summer camps stood on the territory, all located in or close to the *alaases*. Usually, an *alaas* did not belong to a sole household but was divided among many. Especially after the 1917 distribution of hayfields, the overwhelming majority of Tobuluk households used small and dispersed hayfields in Tobuluk (Gabyshev 1929: 14).

	<i>0–5 tonne</i>	<i>5–10 tonne</i>	<i>10–20 tonne</i>
Number of households	44	81	20
Number of hayfields	298	740	259
Average number of hayfields per households	6.7	9.1	12.95
Total area of hayfields	171.92 ha	606.5 ha	246 ha
Average size of hayfield	0.585 ha	1.22 ha	1.05 ha

Table 2: Hay collected in the administrative unit of which Tobuluk is now the centre (as of 1917)

Loosely cooperating neighbours formed residential groups of 10 to 20 households, called *tüölbe*. Winter settlements were located close to the best *alaases*, and summer settlements were dispersed over the least accessible pasturelands. Hay was preferably collected at rich *alaases* near to the winter settlement to avoid lengthy transport to the barns in winter. Pastures were separated and partially fenced off from hayfields in order to hinder cattle from entering and grazing on the high-quality grass. As a result, summer camps and herds were located on territories that were more difficult to access, near rivers and creeks (*ürekh baha*) where the quality of grass was much worse, and not exactly at *alaases*. *Alaases* were used equally during the winter (when people resided there) and summer (when men collected hay there) before collectivisation.

At the time of collectivisation, clusters of winter camps, the *tüölbe*, formed small *kolkhozes*, and *alaases* became host to initial *kolkhoz* centres called *sugulaan*. *Sugulaan* settlements were no longer perceived as winter camps. They morphed into permanent settlements as brigades, not families, moved to work in the summer to the former household summer camps. At the same time, pastures surrounding the *alaases* became less regularly visited by locals (especially women).

Owing to the heavy losses the administrative unit of present-day Tobuluk suffered in the Second World War (82 men, i.e. approximately 60 percent of all the men called to serve), the previous system of agricultural production could not be maintained. The process of centralisation aimed at making production more effective, and at controlling the local workforce more systematically.

First, a large *kolkhoz* was formed in 1945 from the initially nine smaller ones in Tobuluk (the new *kolkhoz* centre and the local school were located at the territory of the present-day village). Over the next few years, families moved into the area next to the school and the *kolkhoz* centre and built houses. Hence, the village of Tobuluk was born. From that time, *alaases* did not function as permanent locations of residence but were used by the brigades of the united *kolkhoz* as summer camps. Winter camps were refurbished to summer camps, and people working for *kolkhoz*-brigades visited the *alaases* only for two or three months in the summer. Along with this process, former

summer settlements were abandoned and some *alaases* were used as pastures. In 1974, the *kolkhoz* was organised into a *sovkhos* embracing five villages, and hayfields were officially nationalised by the state. Due to the increasing number of salaried jobs in the village, fewer and fewer people worked in the *sovkhos*, and *alaases* were visited only by those people who were specialised in cattle breeding (mainly tractor drivers and milkers).

Pre-collectivisation (residential groups) in this territory	<i>tüölbe</i> <i>Sugulaans</i> and <i>kolkhoz</i> - centres between 1929– 1945	<i>Sovkhos</i> brigade summer camps between 1945–1999
Tan'n'arang, Manchaarylaakh	Ubahalaakh	Mechta
Sytygan	Sytygan	Sytygan
Kyttaajy	Kyttaajy	Kyttaajy (only used for collecting hay)
Ulakhan alaas	Tandinskij	Sardanga/Jubilejnaj
Mungur Khatyng	Mungur Khatyng	– (abandoned)
Bulgun'n'akhtaakh	Tandygy	– (abandoned)
Üöhee alaastar	Keskil	– (abandoned)
Mokhsoghollookh, Balaghannaakh	Tabalaakh	Tabalaakh (until 1985)
Düöde, Küörüme	Sulus	Küörüme (from 1987)

Table 3: The transformation of residential groups into collectives and state-farm units

Between 1992 and 1999 during the gradual collapse of the *sovkhos* in Tobuluk, the number of cattle decreased by approximately 30 per cent. State-owned hayfields were assigned to local households, and the *sovkhos* summer camps were abandoned. From that time on, the *alaas* has been perceived by many villagers (especially juveniles) not so much as a place they dwell in but rather as a place they visit once a year to work. Young people normally do not know stories about *alaases* and sometimes they do not even know their names. Tolik (born in 1985) told me that he hates making hay, and therefore he opened a shop in the village and refused to breed cattle. Girls are especially unattracted to *alaases* and cattle, and just like in other areas of Siberia they prefer to move to the city. It is especially shameful for a young girl if the smell of barn is noticeable on her. Young guys often mock hard-working girls in Tobuluk by saying that “you stink like a barn”. Hay production is a common source of conflict between fathers and sons. Many young people do not think breeding cattle makes any sense and they are very reluctant to get involved in collecting hay. Summertime hay work seems to be a senseless obligation for young people, and therefore they take any opportunity to avoid it. Many students travel from Yakutsk to their home village as late as possible in order to postpone or skip their participation in the hay collection.

Some young people, however, do not mind summertime hay work as long as they do not have to stay overnight at the *alaases* and do not have to mow manually. I know of one teenager who even eagerly awaited the hay work so he could drive his father's tractor; other young men were attracted by the possibility of hunting and fishing by the way at the *alaas* lakes when collecting hay. Collecting hay was much less popular among girls in Tobuluk, and most of the student-aged daughters remained in Yakutsk for the most part of the summer. Parents – usually highly concerned

about the education and career of their children – normally do everything to spare their daughters from working in the barns and collecting hay.

As a result, the *alaas* is a landscape that is not a focal point for young people in Tobuluk, and by no means can one argue that their *alaas* perception is based on an intimate relation or long-standing interaction with the landscape. People who were not raised at *alaases* normally do not carry out rituals for the ancestors there, because the hayfields assigned to their families during the process of decollectivisation usually were not the hayfields where their parents resided. Young people may visit their ancestral *alaases* when they go hunting for ducks and geese. They focus on the demarcation of the village from its surroundings, from what they have come to perceive as nature (*ajylgha*), rather than on the difference between the *alaas* and the forest. *Alaases* thus fade into the surrounding forests in the local youth's environmental perception.

At the same time, environmentalism contributes more and more effectively to the local environmental knowledge. Environmental consciousness has been enhanced by mass media and by the local public school. In the past ten years a few school projects were introduced in the village in connection with environmental activism. The initiators of these projects are local secondary school and university teachers originating from the village. In 2005, a summer camp was built to the southwest of the village at a small knoll at the edge of the forest. The summer camp for the pupils was built in traditional Sakha *balaghan* style (nowadays used only for barns), not in the Russian log-house style. Since then, kids spend two weeks every year in the summer and are taught various subjects including biology and geography.

Besides running the summer camp, the local school organises summertime hikes for its pupils. The main organisers of these trips are Nikolai, the local history teacher, and Konstantin, a biology lecturer at the university in Yakutsk. These trips are locally called expeditions and are very popular among the kids. The expeditions usually go from Tobuluk to the north, Tobuluk ending at Taragaj or the other side of the Aldan River. The two major foci of the expeditions are archaeology and ecology. During expeditions, the children receive lectures about their region's ecology. Lectures about history and archaeology deal mainly with the *alaases*, but the forest receives the most attention. Nikolai, the main organiser, told me that they go to Taragaj every year because of the plentiful forests and the 'richer nature' (*ajylghata orduk*).

Forest, according to the perspective transmitted by the local school, is no longer perceived as a hostile and "empty" space spotted by strictly demarcated and meaningful *alaases* where the Sakhas dwell. Local environmental perception has undergone profound changes due to the decreasing interaction between *alaases* and villagers. Environmentalism is transmitting a novel perspective on the Euro-American concept, what nature is, partly inconsistent with the traditional Tobuluk livelihoods and perceptions. Nowadays, it is not *alaases* and forests that are opposed to each other, but the realm of the village and the surroundings, perceived as 'nature' beyond. The idea of safeguarding local flora and fauna, and especially forests, has not been entirely interiorised by the older villagers in Tobuluk, since it contradicts with their perception of the environment. A good example of this is garbage management in the village. While people do not normally leave litter at their *alaases* and *alaas* huts, they do throw garbage away at resting places in the forest along the roads. In 2009, schoolboys attending a summer camp built a large garbage bin at one of the resting places, yet the villagers seem to ignore it. Seemingly the peculiarities of traditional Tobuluk environmental perception have gradually been blurred by a rather rigid and uniform perspective on 'nature', one that does not really fit local practices of interacting with the immediate environment.

8. Conclusion

The *alaas* has been the focus of Tobuluk environmental perception. The close relation and frequent interaction with *alaases* endows Tobuluk environmental perception with a distinct character, according to which the surrounding environment is perceived as ‘islands’ in the forest rather than a gradually changing, contiguous space of various landscapes. The fragmentary structure of Tobuluk environmental perception can be explained by the Sakha cattle economy, which markedly differs from the reindeer breeding and hunter-gatherer livelihoods in other parts of Yakutia. Owing to this economy, people in Tobuluk have not only dwelt in *alaases*, but they dominated, controlled and owned them. The formation of *alaases* is not understood as a process independent of human actions among Sakhas; on the contrary, without the obvious presence of human dwellings, economy, and labour, thermokarst depressions are not necessarily identified as *alaases*. Therefore villagers born before centralisation in Tobuluk and local *alaases* “embrace an irreducible system” in which villagers are part of *alaases*, and *alaases* are part of villagers (Descola and Palsson 1996: 18).

Sakha legends normally refer to *alaases* not as a landscape just out there, but rather as something which Sakha forefathers have created, or at least contributed to in its creation. Therefore, *alaases* are hard to detach from their residents, who not only dwell there, but who constitute it as well. Regardless of the idea that *alaases* are under human control, the relationship with *alaases* can be affectionate and intimate. People in Tobuluk usually respect *alaases* and speak about their impact on their behaviour and mind-set. This impact can be overwhelming and may profoundly modify one’s personality of someone who is sensitive to it and spends a lot of time in an *alaas*. Thus, Tobuluk environmental perception not only connects certain values with *alaases*, but also significantly contributes to the lifestyle and habits of resident groups (cf. Low 2003: 11). This interplay between humans and their environment has often been interpreted as the foundation of specific epistemological systems characteristic to hunter-gatherer societies (Willerslev 2007: 31), but it also has an immense importance among the sedentary Sakhas as well.

The interplay between *alaases* and the people of Tobuluk can be understood in the frames of village communities and on the basis of permanent interaction between the immediate environment and human dwellers. The act of locating and determining the whereabouts of *alaases* inside Yakutia by referring to the symbolically loaded cardinal directions contributes to the patterns of social and ethnic segmentation of Yakutia. In the process of identifying landscapes characteristic to regions of Yakutia (determined by cardinal directions), Sakhas subscribe to the design of ethnic stereotypes and also form the basis of regional identities. Discourses on landscape in Yakutia are therefore difficult to separate from discourses about stereotypes on Yakutia’s regions and ethnic groups.

Due to the temporality of *alaas* perception, varying greatly by generation, there is not a single perspective on the *alaas*. Every space is given a meaning by the actions attached to it, therefore, the change in interaction with *alaases* generates a different attitude among members of the younger generation. Knowledge about *alaases* and the people attached to them is changing and no longer based on day-to-day interaction and narratives performed regularly, but on public education, reified memories, and written texts. As a result, the intimacy elderly people feel towards hay collecting and fishing on their own *alaas* is no longer present among young people. For the younger generation, the notion of *alaas* hardly connotes the idea of ancestors, shelter, and culture, but is

more and more merging with the idea of a 'hostile' and untamed 'natural' environment as opposed to the realm of the village.

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