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THE ROLE OF CARDINAL DIRECTIONS IN SAKHA ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION¹

Environmental perception of sedentary societies usually creates isolated islands of understanding environment (Brown 1983). Sakhas of northeastern Siberia normally localize themselves and define their immediate environment in the wider context of culturally determined macro-environment frames (the Republic of Yakutia, the Russian Federation, Asia etc.) of which they normally do not have any direct sensory knowledge. To do so, besides using the abstract longitudinal and latitudinal system based European geographical concepts, Sakhas generally apply a richly contextualized system of cardinal directions as well for positioning their immediate environment. Communities localize themselves within the macro frame of the outside world, and ethnic groups, lifestyles, and landscapes are associated with cardinal directions,

Based on linguistic data, folklore texts, and on empirical data collected through subsequent fieldworks in central and eastern Yakutia between 2002 and 2010 I examine the role of cardinal directions in Sakha environmental perception. I argue, that the assessment of cardinal directions is fairly uniform in the environmental perception of Sakha communities inhabiting a vast area, and dwelling in highly dissimilar landscapes. It affirms that Sakha national culture is not an artificial conglomerate of various cultural phenomena created by local intelligentsia, but an organic system enrooted in the local culture of remote Sakha communities. Secondly I argue this unique Sakha system of orientation differs radically from the modernist and abstract European ideas on cardinal directions. Therefore Sakha system of orientation is part of Sakha national culture as well.

Cardinal directions help Sakhas situate their immediate environment both spatially and culturally. The process of locating the lived in world in Yakutia and in Russia contributes significantly to the self-identification of Sakha people. 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 valorization of barely known territories. Administrative borders do not strictly demarcate the well-known and used landscapes from the less-known and less-used landscapes; familiar places slowly transit into unfamiliar territories. In unison with this process, cardinal directions gradually lose their neutrality when Sakhas assess distant landscapes and peoples.

Cardinal directions are as much historical as geographical constructions in the Sakha system of environmental perception, and are imbued with memories and identities. Historical legends on the ethnogenesis of Sakhas has contextualized the meaning of cardinal directions, as well as the

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subsequent wars between Sakha political formations, the memory of the unification with the Russian Empire, and the Soviet-era modernization. Therefore, cultural constructions of north, east, south, and west in Sakha environmental perception represent a historically rich, stratified, changing, and incoherent collection of ideas and assessments. Yet, this system helps Sakhas to 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 Sakha world-view. In Sakha environmental perception 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 upstream in Sakha (reflecting the fact that major rivers usually flow from south to north in Yakutia). South is regarded as the homeland of warm weather, summertime, and the migrating birds in Sakha.. Although there are two hunting seasons (the spring migration in late April and May, and the autumn migration in September) it is the spring migration that usually attracts hunters in central Yakutia, since the autumn hunting season is much colder.

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, the khoro land (*khoro DOJDU*). According to Sakha folklore, this 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. Some people in Ust'-Aldan region believe that the Khoro clan is actually of Mongol origin, and nearby place names of Mongol origin, such as *Nokhoj* and *Cherigtej*, demonstrate that Mongols of the Khoro tribe lived in their region.

Unification with Russia has added new connotations to the meaning of 'south' in Sakha– it became the cardinal direction from where immigrants and state administrators arrived. Russians, Tatars, and many other newcomers 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 hops) 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 *pashnja*, meaning

'ploughland'. Thus, the southern part of Yakutia, and the cardinal direction of the south are identified with *baahynajs* in Yakutia.

The incorporation of Yakutia in Russia changed the connotation of 'south' from a different point of view as well. Since the only road leading to Yakutia from the administrative centers 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 center. If someone says: "I am going to the south" (*soghuruu bardym*) it actually means that he or she intends to visit the regional centre, regardless of its actual direction geographically speaking.

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, they show up either at the coldest time of the year (*sülükün*), or come from the north (*kuhagan tyyn*).

Northern territories are characterized 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 in Sakha) peoples.

Whereas south evokes the idea of centre, north is traditionally connected with the idea of peripheries and uncivilized people. This might explain why, from Sakha perspective, territories occupied by Evenkis are automatically considered north. Sakhas living in the north may be called *siencher*, which means métis of mixed Sakha and Evenki origin, owing to the identification of north and the peripheries with Evenkis. Furthermore, northern Sakhas are often thought to have the stereotype character traits of Evenkis.

The north is not only associated with virgin, untouched landscapes, but with industrialized environments as well. The Sakha perspective on northern Yakutia gradually changed with the Soviet-era modernization 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 2006: 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 among Sakhas, 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 Sakha 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 characterized 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, among Sakhas in central Yakutia, *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 people in central Yakutia *alaases* of central Yakutia provide hay of higher nutritive quality than any other region in Yakutia. In Yakutia, 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 modernization and industrialization. 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 central Yakutia are more and more aware that the climate and environment of *Ilin Enger* are unique, and people regularly describe their homeland as a land of severe nature (*tyjys ajylghalaakh dojdu*). Cold and permafrost environments are evaluated positively nowadays in the village because these characteristics hinder a variety of parasites from becoming widespread in Yakutia. 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 Yakutia is ecologically clean (*ekologicheskaj chiistaj*), and it tastes better than imported food.

The symbolic meaning of the cardinal direction ‘west’ (*argha*) is probably the most problematic in Sakha. *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. The color black normally indicates destructive and dangerous quality connected with the evil spirit of lower world.

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

Although the Vilyui Sakha economy is very similar to that of central Yakutia, based on cattle and horse breeding and annual hay production, in Sakha folklore it is not identical. In Sakha legends, the landscape of the Vilyui area is not always associated with hayfields, but occasionally with forests as well. Consequently, one of the names for Sakha inhabited areas along the Vilyui River is western forest (*argha tyä*) in Sakha legends. Labelling the valley of the Vilyui River as a forest makes people think that this area is not completely suitable for Sakha economy. Although western Yakutia is called the fat Vilyui (*sya Bülüü*) or fence Vilyui (*bütej Bülüü*) in Tobuluk, pointing out the fact that people living there actually do collect hay and breed cattle, residents of the Vilyui River are sometimes denoted as fishermen of the Vilyui River (*Bülüü balyksyttara*) or fish eaters of the Vilyui River (*Bülüü symahyttara*), and inhabitants along the Vilyui River are sometimes pejoratively referred to as the Evenkis of the Vilyui River (*Bülüü tongustara*). The western dialect of Sakha is mocked in central Yakutia because of its strange vocabulary style, along with the funny melodic way people speak in.

In Sakha, cardinal directions not only locate and contextualize immediate environments of villages 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 central Yakutia 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.

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