

Ferguson, Jenanne. *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practice in the City* (Borderlands and Transcultural Studies Series). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 336 pages. \$65.00 (hardcover, ebook) ISBN 978-1-4962-0888-0. ISBN 978-1-4962-1239-9.

Anthropologist Jenanne Ferguson's monograph *Words Like Birds*, the latest offering from the University of Nebraska Press's "Borderlands and Transcultural Series," offers an insightful and informed view of the remarkable resilience of the Sakha people and language. The Sakha are a Turkic-speaking people residing in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in Northern Siberia. Siberia has been identified as an important linguistic "hot-spot," with a high concentration of linguistic and cultural diversity. Most of the languages and cultures of Siberia other than Russian, however, are facing extinction. Sakha language and culture remains a notable exception to this trend. Ferguson's research focuses on Sakha language practices and ideologies in the republic capital Yakutsk, examining how Sakha language and culture have managed to survive, adapt, and thrive in post-Soviet space.

The book begins with a first-person account of Sakha language practices in Yakutsk during Soviet times. Although Sakha language was never explicitly banned, ethnic Sakha experienced an unspoken taboo against using their native language in public spaces. Decades of Soviet policies valorizing the Russian language resulted in a de facto suppression of Sakha language in the city. Ferguson details the process of revitalization that has taken place in the decades since the end of the USSR. Her account makes an invaluable contribution both to our understanding of the Sakha language and culture and to the growing body of academic research about the process of language revitalization. Ferguson introduces the main focus of many of her chapters through direct quotes from her ethnic Sakha informants. These first-person narratives provide the reader with a visceral connection to the residents of Yakutsk and their views about Sakha language and culture. Ferguson explores the core beliefs and practices that have led to the remarkable resilience of the Sakha language and culture. The result is a compelling, informed, and vital analysis of language revitalization from the bottom up.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the main themes of the book and situates Yakutsk and the Sakha language and people in time and space. The aim of the book is to show how changes in the way Sakha perceive their own language and culture, their "language ideologies," have contributed to the revalorization of Sakha language and culture. The title of the book, "Words like birds," is an iconic reference to the Sakha belief in the spiritual power of their language, which has proven essential to Sakha revalorization. In this chapter Ferguson also introduces readers to the ways in which Sakha language practices have adapted to contemporary urban life, a topic she explores more in-depth in subsequent chapters. Sakha have not only revived traditional practices, both cultural and linguistic, but they have been able to adapt them to urban life, ensuring their

continuing relevance and importance. Ferguson ends the chapter with a description of the ethnographic methods she used for her research.

Chapter 2, “Sakha under the Tsars and beyond,” presents an historical overview of language contact in the region. The discussion is framed by an account of the revival and expansion of the *Yhynakh* celebration, a celebration of the summer solstice, and its continued relevance to Sakha life (49-53). This festival, banned in Soviet times, has undergone a renaissance in recent years, and serves as an icon for the revival of Sakha language and culture. Ferguson traces the evolution of Sakha language prestige, providing a concise summary of Soviet policies that valorized Russian and led to the de facto Soviet taboo against Sakha language and Sakha cultural practices. The second half of the chapter details the tactics and strategies used by Sakha to resist Russian cultural and linguistic dominance during the Soviet years.

Chapter 3 examines Sakha communicative practices in the post-Soviet period. She begins the chapter by describing how attitudes towards the Sakha language and culture shifted in this period, fostering the process of Sakha revitalization initiated in the 1990s (83-97). The first post-Soviet president of the republic, Nikolaev, helped shift public consciousness by involving Sakha community leaders in a comprehensive effort to bring about Sakha language revitalization. At the same time, Yakutsk itself began a demographic transformation as ethnic Sakha from rural areas moved to the city in increasing numbers, replacing ethnic Russians who began to leave the republic at the end of the 1980s. These events contributed to a shift in attitudes towards the Sakha language. The Soviet view of Sakha culture as “backward” and “less civilized” was replaced by a reconnection with Sakha cultural roots and in a shared belief in the aesthetic value of Sakha language. In this chapter Ferguson presents a concise and insightful description of the complex factors at play in Sakha revalorization. One might, however, object to her description of the state of secondary and elementary school education in Yakutsk as “bilingual” (113). Research conducted in Yakutsk in 2017 (Joan F. Chevalier, 2018, “School-based linguistic and cultural revitalization as a local practice,” *Nationality Papers* Vol. 45:4) revealed that there are only a handful of schools in the city where Sakha is used as the language of instruction more than two to three times a week. Recent federal education policies and updated federal education standards have reduced the number of hours available for Sakha language instruction in elementary and secondary curricula to no more than three.

Chapter 4, “One drop along a great artery,” details how Sakha who live in Yakutsk maintain robust Sakha language repertoires. Ferguson shows that urban Sakha maintain important social connections with their rural hometowns. These connections to their homelands help to maintain linguistic ideologies that revalorize Sakha. While urban Sakha are all bilingual in Russian, speaking Sakha has become an essential element of their cultural identity.

In Chapter 5 “Sakhalyy in the city” Ferguson analyses the phenomenon of language mixing in Yakutsk. The process of revalorization fostered the emergence of a “syncretic register” in Yakutsk. This syncretic register, which typifies urban

informal speech in Yakutsk, features mixing of Russian and Sakha. While rural speech is still considered “purer,” mixing both languages in the speech of Sakha residents has become accepted and widespread. The acceptance of code mixing in urban speech is yet another example of the resilience and adaptability of Sakha and their languages.

In Chapter 6 Ferguson focuses on the impact of individual and family decisions on the trajectory of Sakha language in recent years. This chapter features eyewitness accounts, detailing “linguistic trajectories,” giving voice to ethnic Sakha who were silenced during the Soviet period.

Chapter 7 presents a fascinating account of how Sakha cultural and oral practices have been adapted to urban spaces and contemporary life. She details the creativity with which Sakha youth are experimenting with cultural and linguistic practices in Yakutsk. Ferguson also explores the growing use of the Sakha language on the Internet and details how online media have become a “third” place for maintaining and developing community.

Ferguson’s *Words Like Birds* is a skillfully written, thoroughly documented, cogent analysis of Sakha linguistic adaptation and survival. The image of “words as birds,” as language perpetually adapting and changing is an effective metaphor for the adaptability and resilience of Sakha language and culture.

Joan F. Chevalier
United States Naval Academy
Annapolis, MD, USA
chevalie@usna.edu