

# Religion and Indigeneity at Yhyakh

**Liudmila Nikanorova**

*A dissertation for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor – May 2019*



Front page photo: Nikanorova, Liudmila. 2017. *Algyschyt at the Tuymaada Yhyakh*.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Each summer in the Sakha Republic (Russia), hundreds of thousands of people celebrate an event called yhyakh. This dissertation explores articulations, performances, and translations of the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘indigeneity’ at and around contemporary yhyakhs. It focuses particularly on how yhyakh is understood and performed by its participants, on the motivations of the actors who promote different yhyakhs, and on a wide variety of circulating narratives. The study is ethnographic in method and based on fieldwork at and around the Tuymaada Yhyakh and the Olongkho Yhyakh from 2016 to 2018. Using articulation theory and heuristic models of religion-making and indigenous-making, the analysis unpacks how ‘religion’ and ‘indigeneity’ appear as descriptors, aspects, and parts of yhyakh. Yhyakh has attracted scholarly interest since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This attention has only increased after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as the celebration of yhyakh has expanded rapidly and become a major rallying point of the Sakha revitalization movements. In both historical and contemporary contexts, scholars have categorized yhyakh as, for example, a ‘shamanic ceremony’, a ‘religious ritual’, the ‘Sakha national day’, and an ‘indigenous festival’. My ethnographic material reveals a much broader variety of understandings of yhyakh, including ‘healing’, a ‘family holiday’, and a ‘day when Sakha feel Sakha’. By exploring how yhyakh and its practices are translated *towards* and *away from* ‘religion’ and ‘indigeneity’, not only by scholars but also by a wide range of other actors, I show how categorizing are powerful acts with far-reaching effects both for those who categorize and for that which is categorized.

Key words: yhyakh, Sakha people, religion, indigeneity, articulations, translations, performances.

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## Notes on transliteration

The system of transliteration of Russian words follows *Sibirica* style. Soft and hard signs from the Russian language are recognized with one apostrophe ', such as *titul'nyi*.

The transliteration of Sakha words follows *Sibirica* style as well, with exceptions of Sakha characters that do not exist in Russian. For these Sakha characters I use Turkic Latin<sup>2</sup> transliteration:

Sakha Letter	Turkic Latin transliteration	IPA <sup>3</sup>
Ҕ ҕ	Ğ ğ	/ɣ, ɞ/
Ө ө	Ö ö	/ø/
Һ һ	H h	/h/
Ү ү	Ü ü	/y/
Ҥ ҥ	Ñ ñ	/ŋ/

Exceptions are made in the cases where there are other established ways of transliterating Russian and Sakha proper names, such as 'Yakutia' and 'olongkho'.

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<sup>2</sup> The Sakha language belongs to the Turkic language family, which was the reason for my choice of Turkic Latin transliteration style.

<sup>3</sup> International Phonetic Alphabet.





## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

The first memory I have of celebrating yhyakh is in the village Khocho in 1995 when I was five years old. Khocho is a small village with a population of just over 500 people, and my family lived there before moving to the capital city Yakutsk. I remember the yhyakh area with tablecloths on the ground covered with cooked horsemeat, horse intestines, *kumys* (Sakha beverage made of fermented mare's milk), *mors* (Russian non-alcoholic drink made of berries), and a variety of baked sweets. A family photo of the occasion reminds me that I wore a long Sakha dress. None of the adults or other children in the photographs had Sakha costumes.

The next yhyakh that I can recall was in 2002 when my aunt took me to the Tuymaada Yhyakh in Yakutsk. We saw Sakha sports competitions, went to concerts and bought *kumys* from the market. I do not remember anybody else except the dancers on the stage dressed in Sakha costumes. In the autumn of that year, my mother found an advertisement in the local newspaper, where they were recruiting for a school with Sakha as the main language of instruction and a strong emphasis on math and physics. I passed the entrance exam and at the age of twelve, for the first time, I was taught in Sakha at school. Since it was a Sakha school, it had a tradition of celebrating the end of the school year by organizing yhyakh. For six years, I attended school yhyakhs, which took place in an open field outside Yakutsk. We played games, ate Sakha food, participated in sports competitions and shared our excitement before our summer holidays began. All pupils attending yhyakh were encouraged to have Sakha costumes. Most of us wore Sakha dresses for the annual competition of the best Sakha dress and for the group photo.

In 2011, I was volunteering for an international summer school in Yakutsk.<sup>4</sup> For local students like me, this was an opportunity to practise English as well as help international students to practise their Russian or Sakha. Since Tuymaada Yhyakh is one of the biggest events in the Sakha Republic, international students were interested in attending it. They were especially looking forward to *Kün Kōrsüü* (Sa.) ('sun greeting'), which took place around 3 a.m.<sup>5</sup> A crowd of thousands, including all of my group, raised hands towards the rising sun. I discovered a new side of yhyakh by attending *Kün Kōrsüü* for the first time. On the one hand, it felt like a massive party with hundreds of youngsters dancing, smuggling in alcohol and drinking, and on the other hand, like a mysterious experience of greeting the first rays of sunlight with a view over the fields that blended with forest on the horizon. Since I was guiding international students, I remember hoping that Tuymaada Yhyakh would be exotic enough for them. Little did I know how exotic it would turn out to be for me too.

I attended yhyakhs every year when I lived in Yakutsk, whether it was a school yhyakh, Tuymaada Yhyakh, or the hospital yhyakh, where my mother works. It is quite common for various institutions and companies to arrange their own yhyakhs. Among the most common elements of all yhyakhs that I attended were sharing food and socializing, which felt like essential aspects of yhyakh.

While obtaining a bachelor's degree in History at the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, I took an online course provided by the University of the Arctic<sup>6</sup>. During the course, I learnt about the concept of indigenous peoples and that Sakha were categorized as one in English speaking milieus. This raised a number of questions in my mind and motivated me to apply for a master's program in indigenous studies at the University of Tromsø. I moved to Norway in 2012 and was introduced to the history of indigenous peoples movements. There I learnt about the notions of the right to self-determination and recognition of indigenous peoples by their nation-states.

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<sup>4</sup> International Siberian Summer School "Nature. People. Culture" at the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. Since the majority of students applied through the international exchange program "north2north," the students were mainly from Finland, Norway and Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Tuymaada Yhyakh is celebrated at the end of June when the sun rises around 3 a.m. in Yakutsk.

<sup>6</sup> The University of the Arctic (UARctic) is a cooperative network of universities, colleges, research institutes and other organizations concerned with education and research in and about the North. <https://www.uarctic.org/> (accessed April 3, 2019).

In 2016, I received a PhD position in religious studies and joined an international project called “Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks” (INREL)<sup>7</sup> at the Arctic University of Norway, based on a project proposal focusing on yhyakh as an indigenous event with religious elements and dimensions. That same year I returned to Yakutsk for the first of three successive field trips, all of which focused on religion and indigeneity, but in different ways than I had initially planned. Partly, and based on my return as a scholar, these concepts proved to be more problematic.

I suggested a study of the event, yhyakh, in my project proposal because I saw the potential of the topic to contribute to the discussion on how indigenous people employ various approaches and strategies to present and perform their practices, and also to explore whether and how these practices are framed around the concepts of religion and indigeneity. I did not think of yhyakh as a religious or indigenous event during my upbringing. However, it is often portrayed as a shamanic and religious ritual, especially in media and scholarship. My frustration over contradicting descriptions and opinions about yhyakh has resulted in questions such as: What makes this event recognizable as a religious or indigenous practice for some participants and spectators? What motivates and demotivates Sakha people to employ religious and indigenous terminology in describing yhyakh? In a constant battle of trying not to be caught up by pre-established scholarly definitions and perspectives, I have tried to pay careful attention to the usages, presence, absence, benefits and limitations of categories, including my own, and to look closely and to learn from the ethnographic material.

## **Research purpose and research questions**

Arising from the two fields that have shaped my academic background and my approach, indigenous studies and religious studies, the **research purpose** of this dissertation is to make a case study of yhyakh and to analyse the material with a focus on the articulations, performances and translations of indigeneity and religion at and around yhyakh. I will outline my understanding of the concepts of articulation, performance, translation, indigeneity, and

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<sup>7</sup> Kraft, Siv Ellen and Bjørn Ola Tafjord, Gregory D. Alles, Arkotong Longkumer, Greg Johnson, Afe Adogame, Rosalind Hackett. 2015. “Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks.” [https://en.uit.no/forskning/forskningsgrupper/gruppe?p\\_document\\_id=383890](https://en.uit.no/forskning/forskningsgrupper/gruppe?p_document_id=383890) (accessed April 3, 2019).

religion later, in a section about the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. Throughout the research process, I made use of the following **research questions** as guidelines to help me stay focused:

1. How is yhyakh understood and performed by its participants?
2. Which actors are involved in the organization of yhyakhs and what are their motivations?
3. What narratives circulate at and about yhyakh?

Each of these questions addresses particular aspects of yhyakh and the variety of analytical and methodological tools employed. The first question targets the opinions of people who attend yhyakhs based on the methods of interview and participant-observation, which I discuss in the first two chapters of the dissertation. The second question focuses on the people and institutions that contribute actively, or through their work, to the development of yhyakh, where interview and text analysis are the methods used to gather information. The third question identifies and describes narratives about yhyakh and at various yhyakhs. Finally, analytical observations and conversations opened by the research questions are summarized in the concluding discussion.

### **Situating the study**

Below I present a short overview of my study with an aim of situating it geographically, along with a brief contextualization of the field. All of the aspects below-discussed will be expanded and more closely discussed in the analytical chapters of the dissertation.

Sakha are a Turkic speaking people who live mainly in the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, which is situated in the northeast of Siberia, Russia. The current population of Sakha is about 500.000, 95% of which speak Sakha according to the last census.<sup>8</sup> The origin of Sakha is a disputed topic.<sup>9</sup> According to the dominant narrative, Sakha migrated north from the Lake

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<sup>8</sup> Russian Federal State Statistics Service. 2011. "2010 All-Russian Population Census, 1." [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm) (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Since there are no written sources for Sakha history prior to the arrival of Russians, the pre-Russian history of Sakha is a strongly debated issue discussed among others by Ksenofontov 1937; Okladnikov 1955; Konstantinov 1975; Gogolev 1993; Bravina 1996; Alekseev 1996; and Bravina 2008.

Baikal and settled in the current territories of the Sakha Republic in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Gogolev 1993). However, it was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that Sakha territories were formally registered by the newly arrived Russians. Pyotr Beketov, a Russian Cossack, established a fortress named Yakutsk in 1632, which is the official year of what is described in Russian as the “voluntary incorporation of Sakha to the Russian state.”<sup>10</sup> During the multiple administrative reforms of the Imperial period of Russia, Sakha has been a part of the Siberian Governorate (1708) and Irkutsk Governorate (1782) until the Yakutsk Oblast was created in 1805 (Gogolev 2000).

With the arrival of the Russians, the notion of Christianity began spreading among the Sakha. Although Sakha had been exposed to Christianity since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, mass baptisms began only at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, according to the historian Filatov (2000: 113). In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bishop St Innokenti (Veniaminov) initiated translations of the Bible and a number of other theological texts into Sakha, which according to Filatov (2000: 113) began “the genuine Christianization” of the Sakha. These processes, however, were soon interrupted by the establishment of the Soviet Union. After the October Revolution in 1917, the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialistic Republic was established on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1922.<sup>11</sup> It was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when a Sakha national revival occurred as a result of the emerging Sakha intelligentsia. Sakha activists were passionate about recovering Sakha historical memory. Those who were the most engaged were accused of nationalism and sentenced to death during the Stalinist repression.<sup>12</sup> Today the publications of Sakha intelligentsia from the 1920s are broadly recognized as important texts for Sakha revival and are extensively used by Sakha activists.

The last major historical change that the Sakha people witnessed was the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What the anthropologist Marjorie Balzer (1996a: 104) defines as “the Sakha cultural revival” began before the Gorbachev era and intensified in the late 1980s. After the declaration of Sakha sovereignty in 1990, the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic was recognized

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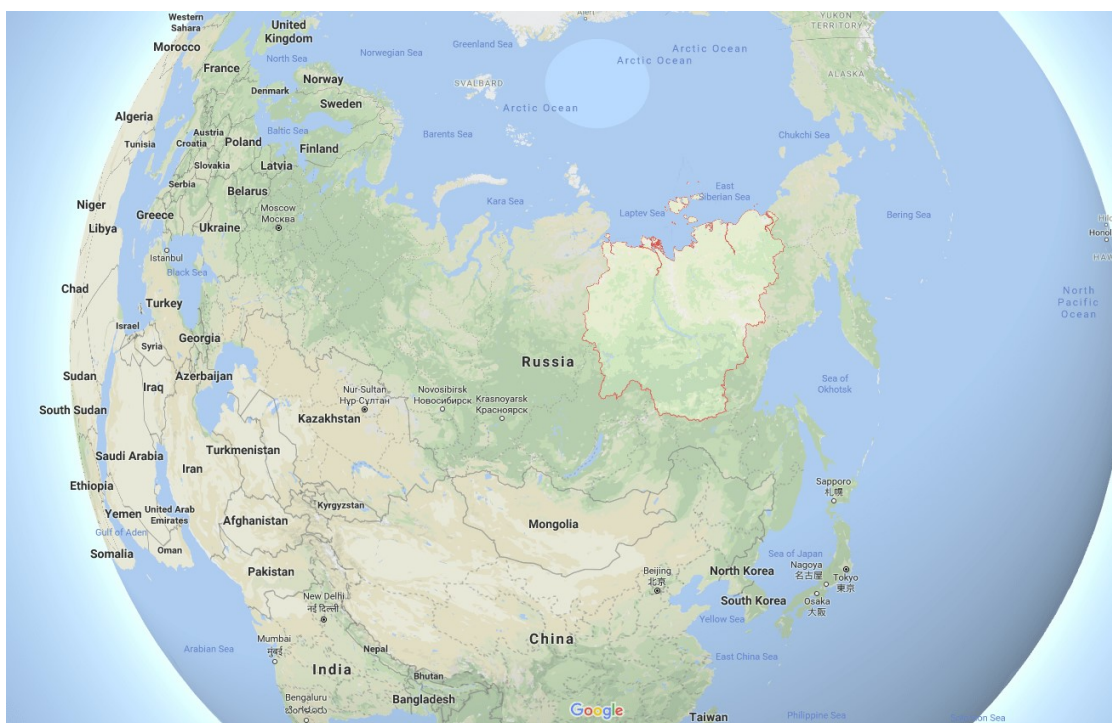
<sup>10</sup> Today Yakutsk is the capital city of the Sakha republic with a population of about 270.000 people in 2010.

<sup>11</sup> On April 27, 1922, the Presidium of the All Russian Central Executive Committee issued a decree forming the Yakut ASSR as part of the RSFSR.

<sup>12</sup> Sakha writers and activists Gavriil Ksenofontov, Platon Slepsov-Oyuunsky, Aleksei Kulakovsky and Anempodist Sofronov were amongst the victims of the Stalinist repression (Antonov 1998).



under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation in 1992. This was a key moment, when for the first time the endonym ‘Sakha’ (the name is created and used by the ethnic group itself) was used as the official name of the Republic and the exonym ‘Yakutia’ (the name that had been created by another group of people, in this case, Russians) was put in brackets – the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic. Balzer (1996a: 103) argues that this name change “marked the determination to negotiate a more ‘sovereign’ path of Sakha, yet still within the framework of Russia.” Since the exonym ‘Yakuts’ has been used in official documents and academia for several centuries, one can often get confused by the frequent changes in use between ‘Sakha’ and ‘Yakut’ in scholarship and media. As the reader may have noticed by now, I will use the endonym ‘Sakha’ throughout this dissertation.



*Map 1. The Sakha Republic.<sup>13</sup>*

After the declaration of Sakha sovereignty a number of important events happened for the Sakha, including the establishment of the Sakha Parliament, the adoption of a Sakha

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<sup>13</sup> Google Maps. “Sakha Republic.” <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Sakha+Republic,+Russia/@63.3055568,109.0327055,3z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x5beb1a032f51336b:0x32e00a48a227d58e!8m2!3d66.7613451!4d124.1237531?hl=en> (accessed April 3, 2019),

Constitution (1993), the recognition of Sakha as an official language within the Republic, and the declaration of yhyakh as the national day of the Sakha people in 1991.

The Sakha Republic is home not only to Sakha but also to Russians (Ru. *russkie*) who currently constitute 38% of the Republic's population.<sup>14</sup> Although Sakha and Russians make the majority of the Republic's population, those who have inhabited the region for the longest time are the Evenk, Even, Dolgan, Chukchi and Yukaghir peoples. Together, they represent 6 % of the Republic's population and are recognized by the Russian legislation as the small-numbered *korennye* (Ru.) ('rooted', 'indigenous') peoples of the North.<sup>15</sup> Sakha, Russians, Evenk, Even, Dolgan, Chukchi and Yukaghir peoples live in the 34 *uluus* (administrative territory in the Sakha Republic) and two city-regions (Yakutsk and Zhatai) of the Republic. There are no specifically designated areas for Russians, Sakha or *korennye* peoples. However, some *uluus* have larger representation of some groups than the others, for example there is a larger population of Even people at Eveno-Bytantaiskii *uluus*.

*Korennye* is frequently translated as 'indigenous'. Such a translation motivates Evenk, Even, Dolgan, Chukchi and Yukaghir peoples to participate in the international events for indigenous peoples and invites scholars to write about them and their practices as indigenous. Only groups whose population is below 50, 000 can claim the status of the small-numbered *korennye* peoples of the North in Russia, which excludes the Sakha people from this category.<sup>16</sup> In the Russian legislature, Sakha belong to a category not known in international law – a 'titular nation' (Ru. *titul'naiia natsiia*). 'Titular nation' or 'titular nationality' are peoples, who have their own administrative unit, for example a 'republic', named after them (e.g. Republic Sakha (Yakutia); Komi Republic; Republic of Tuva). According to anthropologist Stammer-Gossmann (2009: 73) this division between 'small' and 'large', in the terminology, for 'indigenous' peoples, is inherited from the hierarchic subordination of Soviet Union republics, autonomous republics and the subdivisions established within them.

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<sup>14</sup> In this context, I am using Russians (Ru. *russkie*) to mean an East Slavic ethnic group.

<sup>15</sup> Russian Federal State Statistics Service. 2011. "2010 All-Russian Population Census, 1." [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm) (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> The Russian Government. 2000. The Decree № 255 "On the Unified Register of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the Russian Federation from 24<sup>th</sup> March." <http://base.garant.ru/181870.htm> (accessed April 3, 2019).

Sakha practices have been given different names by international, Russian and Sakha scholars ever since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and this diversity continues to this day. Various contemporary surveys attempt to measure the religious demography of the Sakha Republic by describing, inconsistently, Sakha practices as shamanism, paganism, animism, or Tengrism.<sup>17</sup> Despite the lack of an established definition of Sakha practices, very few acknowledge their complexity and instead attempt to suggest and advocate their chosen categories. I address this and other issues connected with the notion of ‘religion’ in the context of yhyakh throughout this dissertation.

The first written records of yhyakhs date back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, they were not celebrated consistently, and have depended largely on the political situation in Russia. After all, the Sakha have been sharing a political, economic and cultural history with Russia for centuries. Since the very first records of Sakha people contained descriptions of yhyakhs, it has contributed to the idea that yhyakh is an ancient practice and has existed as an event since time immemorial.

For this dissertation, I have primarily visited and studied the two public annual yhyakhs: the Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh. Tuymaada Yhyakh is the first public yhyakh in Yakutsk that took place in 1991. It was named after Tuymaada valley where Yakutsk city is situated. Within a few years, Tuymaada Yhyakh developed into a very large event, rich in performances, ceremonies, entertainment shows, political speeches and sports competitions. The second yhyakh discussed in this project is dedicated to the recognition of the Sakha epic style *olongkho* by UNESCO – Olongkho Yhyakh. Organized first in 2007, Olongkho Yhyakh has become one of the first yhyakhs on a republic wide scale. Numerous yhyakhs take place annually in the Sakha Republic today, among which Tuymaada Yhyakh

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<sup>17</sup> According to the Information Centre under the President of Sakha Republic, the religious demography of the Republic in 2006 was as follows: Orthodox: 44.9%, Shamanism: 26.2%, Non-religious: 23.0%, New religious movements: 2.4%, Islam: 1.2%, Buddhism: 1.0%, Protestantism: 0.9%, Catholicism: 0.4%. [http://www.religare.ru/2\\_43720.html](http://www.religare.ru/2_43720.html) (accessed April 3, 2019). According to a 2012 survey, 37.8% of the population of Yakutia adheres to the Russian Orthodox Church, 13% to Tengrism or Yakut shamanism, 2% to Islam, 1% are unaffiliated Christians, 1% to forms of Protestantism, and 0.4% to Tibetan Buddhism. In addition, 26% of the population deems itself atheist, 17% is "spiritual but not religious," and 1.8% follows other religions or did not give an answer to the question. Research service "Sreda". 2012. "Atlas of Religions and Nationalities in Russia." <http://sreda.org/en/arena> (accessed April 3, 2019).

alone gathers 180,000 people. Intrigued by the development, complexity and attendance of these two yhyakhs, I chose them to be the main case studies for this dissertation.

### **Previous research: studying yhyakh**

Interest in yhyakh is present in the written sources about the Sakha people from the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first written records of yhyakh were left by travellers and ethnographers who observed and analyzed the Sakha people and their practices from a European Christian perspective, including Eberhart Isbrand Ides, Philipp Strahlenberg and Gerhard Müller (Ksenofontov 1937).

The study of Sakha practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including yhyakh, was dominated by political exiles, who were sent to Siberia. This period is characterized by Sakha practices increasingly being viewed as 'shamanic'. Years, sometimes decades, of exile created conditions for educated political activists to observe and learn the Sakha language, nature and way of life. Ivan Khudyakov (1890), Wacław Sieroszewski (1896) and Vasily Troshchansky (1903) are among those who conducted the most fundamental and detailed ethnographic accounts of the Sakha people from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the exploratory expeditions to the North of Russia continued, including the Jesup North Pacific expedition to northern Asia, initiated by the American Museum of Natural History. One of the members of this expedition, the Russian ethnographer Waldemar Jochelson, published the first scholarly work devoted exclusively to yhyakh, *Kumiss Festivals of the Yakut and the Decoration of Kumiss Vessels* (1906).

In general, ethnographic accounts of yhyakhs from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were written by non-Sakha travellers, ethnographers and exiles who observed yhyakhs, which were quite often performed on their request for the purpose of recording the event. This period of research *on* Sakha people is characterized by the dominant at that time colonial approach in scholarship. Despite, at times, the outdated research attitudes displayed in these works, the ethnographic descriptions of Sakha practices are important and valuable sources of information and are used by scholars and Sakha revivalists today.

It was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the first generation of Sakha with a university degree did research in the field of Sakha ethnography. One of them, Gavriil Ksenofontov,

devoted most of his academic life to recording Sakha folklore, searching for the origin of the Sakha people and analysing Sakha practices. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is also the time when the Soviet regime was established. Access to free higher education for Sakha and closed national borders led to a dominance of Russian and Sakha scholars in Soviet Sakha ethnography. One of the most prominent contemporary Sakha ethnographers, Anatoly Gogolev (1980; 1993; 2000), did his research in this period. Gogolev inspired several generations of Sakha historians and his research has considerable influence to this day. Since yhyakh was not widely celebrated during the Soviet period, there were not many studies on it.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union caused a major shift in the study of yhyakh. Sakha scholars were liberated from Marxist theories and politics, and the national borders were open again for international scholars to do research in the Sakha Republic and for Sakha to train and work abroad. These events make contemporary scholarship on yhyakh very diverse.

A group of Sakha scholars, united by a common interest in reviving yhyakh, have individually and jointly published a number of articles and books both for academic and general audiences. Ekaterina Romanova, a Sakha historian, is perhaps the most prominent scholar on yhyakh. Her numerous publications (Romanova 1994; 2012; 2017), extensive and long term fieldwork, access to archival materials and multiple references to her work by other scholars make her one of the most influential figures in the study of yhyakh. Vil'yam Yakovlev (2015), a Sakha architect and ethnographer, who built the ethno-architectural area Us Khatyn for the Tuymaada Yhyakh; Afanasy Fedorov (2011), a Sakha lecturer, who opened a school for *algyschyt*<sup>18</sup> training; and Svetlana Petrova (2017), a scholar who focuses on the Sakha traditional clothing, are among the most active Sakha scholars who academically and practically work in the revitalization of yhyakhs.

Last, but not least, there is a group of contemporary international scholars whose work is focused on the processes of Sakha revitalization and analysis of Sakha practices. One of the first international scholars to conduct research in Siberia, including the Sakha Republic, already from the 1980s, is the American anthropologist Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (2005). Balzer's research is in social theory, inter-ethnic relations, religion, the growth of nationalism,

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<sup>18</sup> *Algyschyt* is person performing *algys* practice. *Algyschyt* is an expert of special good-will words, master of singing these words; someone, who is known for effectivity of his/her good-will words and recognized for his/her eloquence.



and anthropology of the Russian Federation. Another important scholar is Eleanor Peers from the United Kingdom, whose work is among the most significant contemporary analysis of Sakha practices, including yhyakh in English (Peers 2009; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). The majority of international scholars who are interested in Sakha practices come with a background in social anthropology, including Takako Yamada (1999) and Susan Crate (2006). The last couple of decades has witnessed an increasing interest in research of yhyakh, both from the Sakha and international scholars. The line between the two types of scholarships is fading because of the globalization of research in the Sakha Republic.

This brief overview of previous research on yhyakh has intended to demonstrate the continuity of academic interest in yhyakh and to situate this dissertation, indicating that it is far from being the first and certainly not the last study of yhyakh. My hope is to contribute to this research from the discipline of religious studies, and through this study yhyakh will be seen from a fresh perspective, opening up new questions and reflections.

## **Theoretical framework**

In 2015, the research project “Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks” (INREL) was established with an aim to study articulations of indigenous religion(s) in different contexts around the world. I approach indigenous religion(s) as a discourse, in line with the INREL project, which is one of the academic types of uses of ‘indigenous religion(s)’ identified by Tafjord (2017b: 40).<sup>19</sup> Tafjord’s typology of ‘indigenous religion(s)’ is an indication of how scholars may use the same words but mean different things. Although he focuses only on the phrase ‘indigenous religion(s)’, I approach his study as a reminder to stay reflexive over the chosen vocabularies because, as he puts it, “they do dramatic work in the lives of people and things” (Tafjord 2017b: 25).

In the INREL context, indigenous religions (in the plural) is a reference to distinct communities around the world, who identify some of their practices or whose practices are identified by others as indigenous religion. Indigenous religion (in the singular) refers to a

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<sup>19</sup> The academic types of uses are: Indigenous religion(s) 1. as a class of religions; 2. as an ethno-political concept; 3. as a theological concept; 4. as an archaeological and evolutionary concept; 5. as an aesthetical concept; 6. as a geographically and historically contingent relational concept; 7. as a discourse; 8. as material entities and lived religion (Tafjord 2017b: 26).

“globalizing discourse, consisting of notions of an indigenous *we* and a flexible, but fairly standardized, vocabulary of assumed similarities” (Kraft et al 2015: 1). One of the major INREL interests of the project is to study dynamics of indigenous religion (in the singular) and indigenous religions (in the plural) and the way they impact each other (Kraft et al 2015: 1). The members of the INREL project reflect on this relationship in their research which is based on extensive fieldwork, contextualized case studies and careful comparison.<sup>20</sup>

The research by the INREL group members greatly contributed to the development of my scholarly perspectives, whose studies “indicate the widespread reach of discourses on indigenous religion(s), particularly on global or transnational levels, as well as hinting towards some of their main locations (U.N. forums, protest events, tourism, festivals, music, academia, and so on) (Johnson and Kraft 2017: 5).” Siv Ellen Kraft’s analysis of indigenous spirituality based on the case of Norwegian Sápmi (2009; 2010; 2015; 2016) and her research on the U.N.-discourses on indigenous religion (2017) motivated me to be attentive to the role of tone, terms and vocabulary employed in describing practices as ‘indigenous’ and ‘religious’. Another major impact to this study is Bjørn Ola Tafjord’s critical approach on the translations and uses of ‘indigenous’ and ‘religion’, as well as on the role of scholars and academic uses of ‘indigenous religion(s)’ (2013; 2016; 2017a; 2017b). Tafjord’s interest in the theoretical contexts in which defining processes take place, instead of solely focusing on definitions, inspired a strong emphasis on reflexivity for this dissertation. One of the shared commonalities among the INREL group members is the attention placed on the agency of different actors (individuals, local communities, state authorities and international institutions), who take part in defining, claiming and approving practices as indigenous and religious (Alles 2017; Alles and Tafjord 2017; 2018; Johnson 2017; and Longkumer 2017). Together these contextually rich studies helped to situate myself in the research field of indigenous religion.

The impact of being a part of the INREL project is demonstrated by my choice of theoretical and methodological strategies. For instance, I was inspired by the historian James Clifford and employed his formula of articulation-performance-translation as a tool to approach my empirical material in a grounded and explorative way. Together these three theoretical

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<sup>20</sup> See key publications: Alles 2017; Alles and Tafjord 2017; 2018; Johnson 2017; Johnson and Kraft 2017; 2018; Kraft 2009; 2010; 2015; 2016; Longkumer 2017; 2018; Tafjord 2013; 2016; 2017a; 2017b.

concepts comprise what Clifford (2013: 45) refers to as “a portable toolkit for thinking nonreductively about social and cultural change”.

Another theoretical approach that I draw on is the model of religion-making developed by the historians of religion Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair. They describe religion-making as the processes of “reification and institutionalization of certain ideas, social formations, and practices as ‘religious’ in the conventional Western meaning of the term” (2011: 3). I have adapted this same model for approaching ‘indigenous-making’ in my empirical material.

### **Articulation**

Articulation theory has helped steer the explorative approach of this thesis through its emphasis on diversity and complexity, and its rejection of pre-conceived definitions, moralizing dichotomies and notions of authenticity. Departing from Stuart Hall’s (1986) understanding of articulation theory, Clifford describes research on articulations as a process which is attentive to harmonizing and conflicting, dominant and marginal, established and contested narratives (Clifford 2013: 41, 60). A number of scholars have explored further the potential of articulation theory in various ethnographic studies (e.g. Johnson 2008; Yeh 2007).

As I understand it, the theory encourages the researcher to stay attentive to the pre-established concepts that one meets along the way during research. Treating the central terms of this study – yhyakh, indigeneity, religion – as multidimensional concepts that are constantly being used in a variety of ways, materialized, and contested, will demonstrate their dynamics, as well as recognizing the agency of different actors that activate and incorporate these concepts for their own needs and purposes.

Articulation theory has inspired me to explore, with equal curiosity and respect different understandings of yhyakh that I have come across in my empirical field. In other words, as Clifford points out, “the question of authenticity is secondary in articulation theory” (2013: 61). Instead of searching for an authentic yhyakh or Sakha religion, my focus is on questions such as “What, which, how is yhyakh viewed as authentic and by whom?” It is important to recognize the power of authenticity claims as an instrument to legitimize certain politics and practices. Clifford (2013: 62) argues that it is more useful to recognize that

“communities can and must reconfigure themselves, drawing selectively on remembered pasts” because often such claims reflect the current struggles, needs and hopes of peoples and institutions that make these claims, all of which is important to take into consideration when reflecting upon these practices. Clifford describes such grounded analysis as ethnographic realism, which is multifaceted:

Realism works with “big-enough,” more-than-local, narratives: histories that travel and translate, but without cumulating in a coherent destiny, progressive or apocalyptic. Realism works self-consciously with partial histories, alert to their constitutive tensions (Clifford 2013: 40–41).

To paraphrase Clifford, moving away from holistic approaches and grand explanatory narratives, articulation theory encourages rich, dialogical and unfinished descriptions, where analysis is simultaneously ethnographic, historical, and political.<sup>21</sup> I have aimed for a project that is “big enough” to present the broader historical and political context, and “small-enough” to offer ethnographically rich descriptions of particular aspects of yhyakh.

## **Performance**

Clifford continues to focus on the complexity of social processes by employing the theoretical concept of performance. Arguing that performance is a reflexive act attuned to its audiences, Clifford (2013: 47) writes that “cultural subjects discover themselves and make themselves legible for powerful audiences that dispose of attractive resources and coercive power.” Along similar lines, Graham and Penny argue in *Performing Indigeneity* (2014):

Participants’ reflexivity, their accountability to themselves and their audiences, enables performers to calibrate and recalibrate, to adjust to contexts, including

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<sup>21</sup> In *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, Clifford (2013: 54) theorizes the notion of indigeneity and argues that “to think of indigeneity as ‘articulated’ is to recognize the diversity of cultures and histories that currently make claims under this banner”. By rejecting claims that indigeneity is essentially about primordial attachments (such as ancestral “laws”, continuous traditions, spirituality, respect for Mother Earth) or is exclusively the result of a post-sixties identity politics, Clifford (2013: 54) encourages researchers’ acceptance of the complexity of the term, its history and usages.

memories of past performances, their immediate situation, and their expectations for the future (Graham and Penny 2014: 2).<sup>22</sup>

This approach to performance focuses on the self-awareness and agency of performers, as well as on the role of recognition by the people and institutions in power. It also helps to see performances not as calculated or invented in the sense of insincere and fictitious acts, but as conscious, reflected and oriented. The emphasis is on the dynamic nature of identities and recognizable categories that complement articulation theory.

Narratives, images, and meanings emerge, circulate, and feed each other during performative acts. The sites of performances, in my case, include political speeches, ceremonies, practices, and interviews at and around yhyakhs. People, or cultural subjects according to Clifford, name and define themselves as well as being named and defined by others, based on a variety of recognizable characteristics. Seeing these processes as parallel to the establishment of certain politics and orders that create opportunities or challenges for certain identities and categories, helps to recognize both the potential impact of such politics and the agency of people as active decision-makers.<sup>23</sup> My task here is to stay attentive to the identities that cultural subjects claim and oppose without questioning their rights or eligibility for such claims. Instead, I attempt to see these categories and identities as constantly being filled with various meanings and understandings, which leads us to the third theoretical concept that I employ for this study – translation.

### **Translation**

Translation according to Clifford (2013: 48) “keeps researchers focused on cultural truths that are continuously ‘carried across,’ transformed and reinvented in practice.” My research is conducted in three languages: Sakha, Russian and English.<sup>24</sup> Each of these languages carries distinct and specific grammars, contents and contexts. In addition, I relate to languages of

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<sup>22</sup> Graham and Penny (2014: 4) on the example of indigeneity, argue that people achieve, accomplish, and even improvise different identities through performances and performative acts, in the same way, that people perform gender, race, class, and ethnicity.

<sup>23</sup> I find this particularly important considering the history of research *on* Sakha, where the agency of Sakha people was not always taken seriously, which was, likely, a result of the categorizing a Sakha as “primitive people” by earlier scholars, f.e. Jochelson (1906).

<sup>24</sup> And Norwegian, although invisible in this text, it is the main working language at the University of Tromsø.

scholarship, legal institutions and media. Translations between different languages are an integral and important aspect of my research.

Bjørn Ola Tafjord (2017a; 2017b), based on years of fieldwork among the Bribri people in Talamanca, Costa Rica, analyses the processes of translations by applying the concepts of directionality and domains. Approaching the notions of 'religion' and 'indigeneity' as domains and translations as directional processes, Tafjord describes how Bribri people translate their practices *away from* and *towards* these domains. He suggests that translations depend on political situations and historical contexts, where Bribris attempt to translate their practices in the most helpful and effective ways for themselves. This observation demonstrates not only the agency of Bribri people and their analyses of their situations but also the power of the categories that they translate their practices into.

The processes of translation come with a number of decisions. Translations are never neutral. For example, the Sakha word *algyschyt* has been translated as 'shaman', 'religious expert', 'white shaman', 'good shaman', 'white benevolent priest', 'white oyuun' and 'aiyy shaman' in English, by different scholars and media-sources. Each of these translations creates certain images and expectations of who or what an *algyschyt* can be. The anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena exemplifies and analyses the role of translation in *Earth Beings* (2015), where she argues that to create analogies is to erase differences. Analogies are inescapable when translations are made. One thing is to erase differences; another is to conduct research based on the erased differences, which I wish to avoid. By that, however, I do not mean to provide "correct" translations but to be attentive to conscious and unconscious choices behind all translations.

When I apply Tafjord's understanding of directionality, I think of religion and indigeneity as domains and destinations, where practices can be translated *towards* and *away from*. For example, words such as religion, spirituality, shamanism, ceremonies, rituals, gods, deities, blessing, priest, purification, sacrifice can be seen as translations *towards* the domain of religion. Words such as ancestors, harmony with nature, healing, antiquity, traditions, colonization, assimilation, shaman can be seen as translations *into* or *towards* indigeneity. Like any process, translation has different degrees of intensity. While some translations can be heavily leaning *towards* religion or indigeneity, others can be less obvious.

Concepts carry specific histories, contexts, and limitations that need to be recognized and reflected upon. For example, the translation of '*algyschyt*' to 'shaman' connects and equalizes *algyschyt* with other practitioners around the world who identify themselves or are identified by others as shamans. The translation to 'religious expert' creates analogies among others with Christian priests and Imams. These two translations create different analogies of *algyschyt*, that have one aspect in common – the silencing of qualities that are specific to *algyschyt*. At the same time, when *algyschyt* is translated to shaman, the concept shaman may get also be filled with the qualities of a *algyschyt*. Enriched by the Sakha *algyschyt*, shaman may then continue to produce and iterate its assumed qualities while travelling across different languages and practices.<sup>25</sup>

One of the strategies that I have employed in this project was to use Sakha terms like *algyschyt* in the text and add a description in footnote below, as a temporary solution before the reader is introduced to the understandings of *algyschyt* by people and institutions encountered during this research, and through these is given a multisided description of the term.

### **My vocabulary**

Since I analyse different actors' language repertoires of religion and indigeneity, I myself have tried to use a more neutral vocabulary such as practices, things, practitioners, and events in addition to Sakha concepts like *yhyakh* and *algyschyt*. There are no completely neutral terms, but some are more neutral than others. The intention here is not necessarily to hide behind a comfortable vocabulary but to separate the object of analysis from the working language of analysis as much as possible.

During the first year of my research, I referred to the Tuymaada Yhyakh as a festival. I found it neutral enough to apply in comparison to other descriptions of *yhyakh* as for example a ritual or a holiday. However, during my first fieldtrip, I was explicitly corrected. I used the Russian word '*festival*', which at first glance may seem to be identical to English 'festival'.

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<sup>25</sup> I also recognize the potential overlaps of seemingly identical words, which can have different meanings and usages. For example, English *shaman*, Russian *шаман*, and Norwegian *sjaman* recall specific associations that vary from one another, although they sound similar.

However, Russian *festival*' creates stronger associations with ideas of a party, concerts, discotheque and drinking. As a result, my word choice offended one of my interviewees for whom Tuymaada Yhyakh was a sacred ritual (Ru. *sviashchennyi ritual*). Since then when I speak Sakha or Russian I refer to yhyakh only as yhyakh, whereas in English, I use yhyakh or the word 'event' in situations when I need to describe yhyakh. Similarly, I attempt to reflect on other descriptive words of mine that lead to certain associations and categorizations.

### **Religion-making**

In order to situate and roughly systematize articulations, performances, and translations of religion and indigeneity, I use the model of "religion-making" developed by Dressler and Mandair (2011). Departing from social constructivist and post-colonial approaches, and inspired by the studies of Edward Said (1978), Jonathan Z. Smith (1988), Talal Asad (1993, 2003), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2011), Dressler and Mandair suggest three different levels of religion-making:

(1) *religion-making from above*, that is as a strategy from a position of power, where religion becomes an instrument of governmentality, a means to legitimize certain politics and positions of power; (2) *religion-making from below*, that is, as a politics where particular social groups in a subordinate position draw on a religionist discourse to re-establish their identities as legitimate social formations distinguishable from other social formations through tropes of religious difference and/ or claims for certain rights; and (3) *religion-making from (a pretended) outside*, that is, scholarly discourses on religion that provide legitimacy to the first two processes of religion-making by systematizing and thus normalizing the religious/secular binary and its derivatives (Dressler and Mandair 2011: 21).

Dressler has in a more recent publication (2019) added a fourth level, which he calls *religion-making in cultural encounters and negotiations*. He argues that "studies of intercultural exchanges from the age of early modern imperialism to the age of colonialism have contributed greatly to our understanding of the dynamic character through which modern notions of religion and consecutively also secularities have emerged globally" (Dressler 2019:



15).<sup>26</sup> Finally, Dressler and Mandair discuss linkages between these levels and discourses and how some or all of them can be intertwined.

This model can be seen as a result and continuation of a postcolonial approach that opposes the assumption that religion is a category that can be universally applied. Without assuming that the Sakha have religion, all the more so a specific kind of religion, I have explored how people and institutions in power define certain Sakha practices as religious; how and for what purposes subordinate social groups and regular visitors to yhyakhs appropriate and claim religion; how scholars categorize practices and practitioners at yhyakh and yhyakh itself as religious; how the knowledge produced by scholars is used; and how and in what cultural encounters and negotiations the notion of religion appears at and around yhyakhs. I choose to apply this model heuristically because it allows me to approach my broad field of yhyakhs without reducing it into these limiting categories.

### **Indigenous-making**

Indigeneity like religion is a complex concept with its history, impact, limitations, and can – like religion – be seen as produced from *above, below, a pretended outside and in cultural encounters*. Adapting Dressler and Mandair’s model of religion-making I define indigenous-making as:

processes of reification and institutionalization of certain ideas, social formations, and practices as [indigenous] in the conventional Western meaning of the term, thereby subordinating them to a particular knowledge regime of [indigeneity] and its political, cultural philosophical, and historical interventions (cf. Dressler and Mandair 2011: 3).

By “conventional Western meaning of the term”, I mean globalizing discourses of indigeneity, anchored in the United Nations and related organizations, and connected to the development of the international indigenous people’s movements. The UN system has developed an understanding of indigenous peoples based on a number of criteria that can be combined in different ways:

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<sup>26</sup> Dressler discusses extensively the processes of secularization as intertwined with the processes of religionization, which I believe is an important and useful approach (2019: 5). However, for this dissertation, and in order to limit the scope, I leave the notion of secularization in the Sakha context for another time.

- Self-identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
- Distinct social, economic or political systems
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs
- Form non-dominant groups of society
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.<sup>27</sup>

International institutions, nongovernmental organizations, nation-states, scholarship, and various peoples around the world who claim indigeneity often depart from this particular discourse on indigeneity. This, however, should not be read as a reduction of indigeneity to being exclusively the result of the international movements that began in the 1960s. A number of scholars challenge this perspective because it brushes aside long histories of the resistance of peoples who today are recognized as indigenous (Clifford 2013: 54, Graham and Penny 2014: 4–6).

Without going into the debate on when, how, by whom and in which circumstances indigeneity became what it is today, I explore indigeneity at and around yhyakhs, adapting the levels of Dressler and Mandair's model of analysing religion-making: (1) *indigenous-making from above*, how authoritative discourses and positions in power articulate indigeneity at and around yhyakhs; (2) *indigenous-making from below*, how regular visitors of yhyakhs articulate indigeneity; (3) *indigenous-making from (a pretended) outside*, how do scholars articulate indigeneity in studies of yhyakhs; and (4) *indigenous-making in cultural encounters and negotiations*, in which cultural encounters at and around yhyakhs indigeneity is articulated.

## **Method and material**

Within the chosen theoretical and methodological framework, methods that focus on individual and public articulations, performances and translations were employed for this study. This research is qualitative and based on ethnographic methods (fieldwork, participant

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<sup>27</sup> United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. "Who are indigenous peoples?" [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session\\_factsheet1.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf) (accessed April 3, 2019).

observation, interviews) and textual analyses. All these methods are aimed to represent the variety of voices from single individuals to scholarly works and legal institutions. The attempt here is to approach these voices with respect and to give space to different opinions regardless of their status, yet with consideration to their impact.

### **Fieldwork**

Instead of having one longer field trip, I had three short-term visits: June–July 2016; May–June 2017; and June–July 2018. Since the research is on an annual event, participating at different yhyakhs throughout the three-year period allowed me to gather more comparative data. In addition, there was a time in between to reflect on the event and things that I had missed, and that I could focus on the next year.

The main research involved two yhaykhs that I decided to focus on: Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh. The advantage of conducting fieldwork at such events was their limitation in space and time. Yhyakhs were usually fenced around with clear signs for entrance and exit, which functioned as physical borders for my fieldwork. Both Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh each lasted two days, which also limited the time of the fieldwork. Although attending yhyakhs was the core of my fieldwork, time spent in Yakutsk prior and after yhyakhs was essential in terms of contextualizing, reaching people who did not attend yhyakhs, and contacting people and institutions that were involved in organizing the yhyakhs.

The first step necessary to get the most out of the fieldwork was to prepare for it in advance. From a practical point of view, this included the preparation of informed consent for the potential participants of research, a list of institutions that I intended to visit and to contact them in advance, and other practicalities such as organizing the logistics, accommodation and equipment needed for the fieldwork. From the point of view of gaining prior knowledge about yhyakh and Sakha practices, I went for a balance of not being completely unread (in hope to be taken seriously and having some preliminary knowledge), and not being too over-read either to avoid a position of an unteachable intruder, in words of religious studies scholar Ronald Grimes (2014: 38). I undertook my first field trip five months after I began the research. I had with me a preliminary questionnaire for the interviews and a set of tasks that I hoped to fulfil during the first visit to yhyakh as a researcher. I managed to

achieve some of the things that I planned and some I did not. In times of frustration and failure, I was comforted by the idea that I had two more visits to Yakutsk and two more years of attending Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh. Having these three ‘chances’ helped me to reflect, set new questions and fill the gaps of information I might have missed from the previous years.

### **Participant observation**

The first thing that came to my mind when I began this study was to learn about yhyakh by visiting yhyakhs. The method of participant observation for this task was essential. By observing anything and everything, participating in as many things as possible, documenting on all devices I had, and staying at yhyakhs as long as I could, I found a method that was the most effective, yet intense and challenging. Partly, it had to do with the feeling that I was missing out on so much of what was happening, despite all my attempts to capture yhyakhs in as many diverse ways as possible. Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh are very large events, both in space and content. Eventually, I realized the impossibility of covering everything and decided to focus on one thing at a time and stay present in the one particular activity or event that I was participating in. Another strategy was to focus on the things that particularly interested me, which were the articulations and performances of indigeneity and religion, yet without letting them completely limit my observations.

Each year I practised my observation skills and multisensory attentiveness. Smells and sounds accompanied visual perceptions of the yhyakhs. For example, in 2017 a group of women fried *alaad’y* (Sa.) (small pancakes) at the opening ceremony of Tuymaada Yhyakh. When I talked to the organizers from Yakutsk City Hall, they told me that it was done in order to create a particular atmosphere to yhyakh, where the smell of *alaad’y* was an important part of the event.<sup>28</sup>

Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh are public events that are organized by Sakha authorities and guarded by patrolling police. All these things made me feel comfortable and safe to observe, document and participate at yhyakhs. For the sake of experiencing yhyakh, I

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with the representative of Yakutsk City Hall, who was one of the organizers of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. The interview took place in Yakutsk City Hall in Summer, 2016.

stayed with friends overnight at Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2016. This resulted in us running away from a gang of drunk men. That night taught me that it is important to set boundaries for participant observation and step back to avoid situations that can be uncomfortable and even dangerous. As Ronald Grimes (2014: 46) puts it “there are real gains and losses from every fieldwork choice, particularly the choice to participate or not”.

## **Interviews**

For qualitative research, the method of interviewing is valuable as it allows a respondent to present her/his understanding in all its depth and complexity. Most of the interviews have been anonymized, except for the public speakers.

I was particularly proud of my invention of an interview space – my researcher tent. In 2016, I set up a tent in the camping site of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Outside the tent, I hanged posters in Sakha, Russian and English with information about the research and a request for participants to volunteer in the project. I prepared a list of questions, a consent forms, recorder and small bags with candy as a gift to potential interviewees who spent their time and energy to be interviewed for the project. My mother and aunts convinced me to bring meat, *alaad’y* and *kumys* to offer interviewees. I placed food and drinks on my tablecloth, even though I doubted that people would accept homemade food from a stranger. By the time the tent was ready, it blended in with the other tents around. In total, thirteen people volunteered and entered the tent. Each interview began with a question: “Could you please tell me about yhyakh and the role it has for you?” (Ru. *Вы можете пожалуйста рассказать про ысыах и о его значении для Вас? Са. Ыһыах туһунан баһаалыста кэпсиэххит дуо уонна ыһыах суолтатын эйиэхэбэ?)* It was enough to start and keep most of the conversations going. I attempted to conduct interviews without using defining and descriptive concepts about yhyakh and Sakha practices. I was primarily focused on my interviewees’ vocabulary: on which terms they used, how they named things, and what they meant and understood by the terms they used.

All interviews in the researcher tent were in Sakha or in mixture of Sakha and Russian. The majority of volunteers were middle aged Sakha women and an average interview lasted for thirty minutes. The *kumys* and *alaad’y* were appreciated, as well as the gift bags. The

researcher tent with Sakha meals and drinks, and me in Sakha dress created an image of a regular tent at yhyakh. The only thing that sat my tent apart were the posters outside. Grimes (2014: 47) argues that “interviewing leads to conversations in which speakers take turns performing”. I definitely felt myself performing a Sakha researcher, on the one hand, blending into the surrounding environment, and on the other hand, visually clarifying that this is a researcher tent, where volunteers become active participants of research.

In 2017 and 2018, I prioritized participating and observing events happening at yhyakhs and did not set a researcher tent. I hoped that I could approach people directly, but it did not work. Those whom I approached were either in a hurry or felt too intimidated to be asked directly and the few interviews I undertook lasted no more than a few minutes.

Interviews that I conducted outside the yhyakhs were with the organizers and promoters of the yhyakhs, representatives of religious organizations, scholars, and people who actively decided not attend a yhyakh. All interviews were semi-structured guided by a number of core questions with room to expand unexpected topics if they occurred.

### **Texts**

Lastly, I integrated the text-analysis of media sources, legal documents and scholarly work. I agree with Grimes (2014: 55) who argues that “most of the rituals that most of us study are embedded in documents, the primary methods, even for fieldworkers, is not running a recorder but reading books and articles.” After all, most of the knowledge about yhyakh is in the written texts.

Media-sources, such as Wikipedia, newspapers, news-sites, and WhatsApp group messages have an important place in representing, translating and communicating yhyakh, by and for Sakha and non-Sakha audiences. Legal documents have mainly been employed in my discussion about the recognition of Sakha religious organizations by the Sakha Ministry of Justice. I treat the criteria and definitions used by the Ministry of Justice as one of the multiple voices about Sakha practices. Similarly, I approach the visions of Sakha religious organizations and scholars of yhyakh.

My strategy in working with texts is to look at the author’s background. Journalists, politicians, lawyers and scholars do not possess any less important, nor any more important

voices than others I discuss in this dissertation. Acknowledging the impact of the voices of those in power, I wish to treat them equally to the voices of my interviewees that I met during the fieldwork. I hope that this variety will enable me to show yhyakh from various perspectives and grasp its various roles.

This was the overview of methods employed in this dissertation. The interviewees, media texts, legal documents and scholarly work will be discussed extensively in the following chapters.

### **Indigenous methodologies**

Methodology, applied to the practices of peoples that recognize themselves and/or are recognized by others as indigenous, has been emerging alongside the movements for indigenous peoples' rights. A relatively new field of indigenous methodology theorists continues to develop (Linda Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Bagele Chilisa 2012). The core principles of indigenous methodologies stand for the decolonization of research (Smith 1999), incorporation of indigenous (local) ways of doing things (Chilisa 2012), and movement from the research *on* indigenous people to research *with* indigenous people (Saugestad 2013).

One of the central debates in indigenous methodologies is the position of the researcher, which is often divided into either an insider or an outsider approach. While I will argue that one can be an insider and an outsider in a number of different ways in the same field of research, I will acknowledge that my position might easily be classified as an insider. My ethnicity and nationality is Sakha; I speak Sakha as my mother tongue; I was born, grew up and spent most of my life in the Sakha Republic; and, most importantly, I identify as Sakha. However, I am also doing research in religious studies, where the position of an insider takes another turn. My religious affiliation, or lack of it, has continuously put me into uncomfortable situations during fieldwork in Yakutsk. First, my ethnic belonging to Sakha was taken as a signifier of a believer and practitioner; second, I was expected not only to understand intuitively and make sense of Sakha practices and things but also to actively contribute to the search for and revitalization of Sakha practices. I constantly had to maintain a balance between not raising unintended expectations and, at the same time, stay open and inclusive to various understandings and statements. I did not always succeed in this.

The romanticization of Sakha ways of life, the search for authentic Sakha traditions, critiques and judgements of contemporary ways of being and doing things are all contributing to a static vision of the Sakha, that erases the complexity, diversity, fluidity and depth present among the Sakha, as in any other society. I would like to note here that one can use and be an advocate or opponent of indigenous methodologies regardless of whether one belongs to the indigenous group or not.

In addition to my self-identification as Sakha, there are a number of other factors that influenced my research to varying degrees, for example, my age (late twenties), gender (female), mother tongue (Sakha), the place where my family is from (Khocho village), and the place where I grew up (Yakutsk). In some instances, I felt these are advantages (mainly language and having a family from Khocho with a diaspora network in Yakutsk), but also some disadvantages (my gender and young age) in some situations. Despite the fact that doing fieldwork as a young woman in her home community invited paternalistic attitudes towards me from the majority of interviewees, I preferred this rather than the other way around (being paternalistic myself towards other Sakha), which would be more challenging for me to handle ethically. Another feature of doing research at home, mentioned by the researcher Victoria Peemot is that at least 40% of fieldwork time goes to family, relatives and friends, though this can also offer a core support group who are willing to assist and help at any time.<sup>29</sup>

This reflection on indigenous methodologies and the debate of insider/outsider positions in regard to both indigenous studies and religious studies is meant to demonstrate acknowledgement of my particular position, and will hopefully contribute to the transparency of this research.

## **Structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation is organized into six chapters. The first chapter outlines the contexts, the theoretical and the methodological approaches, and situates the study of yhyakh. The next two chapters discuss Tuymaada Yhyakhs and Olongkho Yhyakhs visited by me. In Chapter 2,

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<sup>29</sup> Victoria Peemot. 2018. "Learning to be an anthropologist and remaining 'native'." Seminar Religions in the Arctic: Sources Criticisms and Comparisons. 10-12 September. University of Bergen.

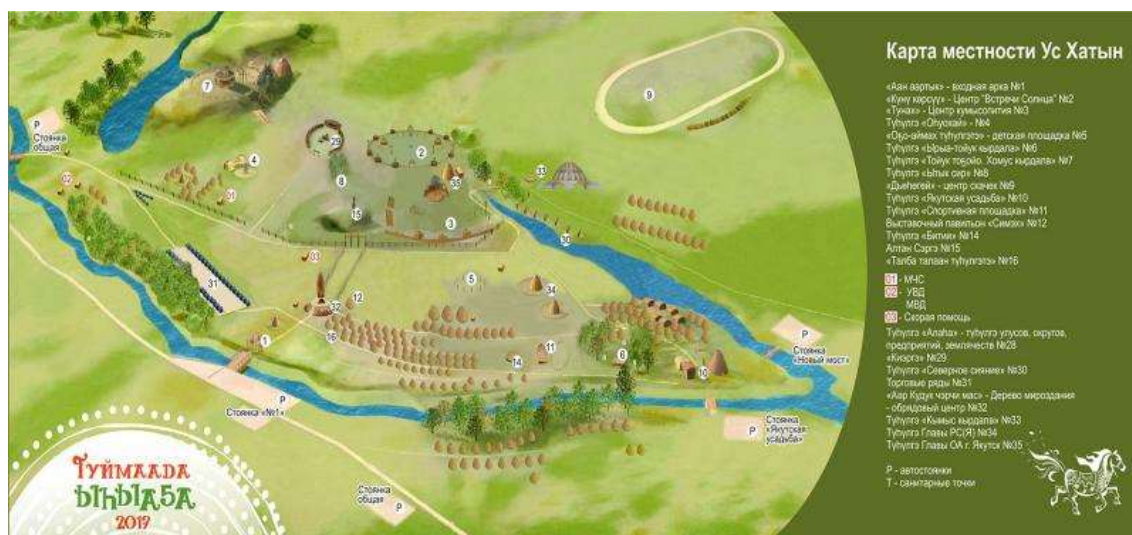


*Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016–2018*, I share my observations, methods and analysis of the yhyakh with the largest attendance. The aim of the chapter is to allow readers to learn about yhyakh from my conversations with the visitors. Chapter 3, *Olongkho Yhyakh 2016–2018*, looks at the relatively newly emerged Olongkho Yhyakh, and approaches it as an example of the global recognition of Sakha practices and the impact of such an important acknowledgement. In Chapter 4, *Yhyakh and Sakha religions*, in addition to the methods of interviewing and participant-observation, I examine legal documents in order to discuss how various groups claim Sakha religion and the tools they use in this process. In Chapter 5, *Yhyakh in scholarly writings*, readers are introduced to the scholarly understandings of yhyakh and the backgrounds of scholars whose work today is used for the revitalization and legitimization of yhyakh and Sakha practices more generally. Lastly, understandings of yhyakh from the previous chapters, and tentative answers to my research questions, are discussed in Chapter 6, *Concluding reflections*.



## Chapter 2. Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016–2018

The first Tuymaada Yhyakh took place at Yakutsk City’s Hippodrome in 1991, the same year that the 21<sup>st</sup> of June was announced as the day of yhyakh and the ‘national day’ (Ru. *natsional’nyi prazdnik*) of the Sakha Republic. Growing numbers of visitors and limited capacity of the Hippodrome forced organizers to search for a new location. Sakha architect Vil’yam Yakovlev developed the design of the ethno-architectural area “Us Khatyn”, which means ‘Three Birches’ in Sakha. Yakutsk City Hall approved the plan. The first Tuymaada Yhyakh at Us Khatyn took place in 1998 and continues to be held there to this day (see map 2). The association of Tuymaada Yhyakh and Us Khatyn is so strong that the organizers count the anniversary of the Tuymaada Yhyakh not from the year it was first organized in 1991, but from the year it moved to Us Khatyn.



Map 2. Map of Us Khatyn from the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2017.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> This map was developed by Yakutsk City Hall and was distributed for free to the visitors of the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2017.

Tuymaada Yhyakh is celebrated annually on the last weekend of June. I visited the event to conduct fieldwork in 2016, 2017 and 2018. Based on these field trips, this chapter puts forward my observations of the event and conversations with people, who generously shared their experiences, thoughts and time with me. An opportunity to visit the event several times allowed me to use different research methods and concentrate on particular elements of yhyakh each year.

Tuymaada Yhyakh is massive both in its scale and content. The challenge was to find a balance between attempting to present the richness and diversity of the event and at the same time ensure that I was focused on my research goal. I made two decisions that helped me to achieve this.

The first was my decision to attend the events that were explicitly framed around performances and vocabularies characteristic to my notions of religion and indigeneity, for example those events described as ‘ceremony’ (Ru. *tseremoniia*), ‘ritual’ (Ru. *ritual*), and ‘indigenous’ (Ru. *korennnye*). This strategy helped me when I was doing participant-observation at the Tuymaada Yhyakhs. Second, I imagined myself as a search engine programmed to detect and identify certain words and narratives that circulated in speeches, commentaries, interviews and conversations at yhyakh. For this task, despite being particularly tuned to the articulations of indigeneity and religion, it was also important for me to stay open to other, at times, unexpected, interpretations of yhyakh and Sakha practices.

The chapter follows my visits to the Tuymaada Yhyakhs more or less chronologically, and offers reflections on the experiences I had. The empirical materials and observations presented in this chapter led to the topics that are explored in the following chapters.

## **Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016**

Five months into my PhD studies, I arrived at Yakutsk airport, where I saw a large poster advertising Tuymaada Yhyakh in English, Russian and Sakha. I had less than a month to prepare for the first Tuymaada Yhyakh that I was about to visit as a researcher.

A tent, a researcher tent, external phone chargers, printed posters, sunglasses, food, water, a Sakha dress, warm clothes, a sleeping bag, bags with gifts and mosquito repellent

were packed into my big camping backpack, purchased from a second-hand store in Norway. One of my eight uncles suggested that I could put my tent at the *tühülge* (Sa. *түһүлгэ*; Ru. *мюсюлгэ*) of his company within the area of Us Khatyn.

*Tühülge* is a designated area at yhyakh that can belong to a family, company, group of friends or any other group of people. Some *tühülge* are designed, built and decorated prior to yhyakh, whereas some are not and consist of only one tablecloth around which people sit. *Tühülge* can be with or without a fence, where a group of people can socialize, rest, sleep and share a meal together. Us Khatyn itself is also a *tühülge* because it is an area where Tuymaada Yhyakh takes place and it consists of smaller *tühülge*. For instance, at Us Khatyn there were 83 designated *tühülge* in 2016: 35 *tühülge* for the districts outside Yakutsk city; 8 *tühülge* for the Yakutsk city districts, and 40 *tühülge* for various companies, organizations and unions from Yakutsk. The term *tühülge* denotes a specific phenomenon at yhyakh and is hard to translate.

My uncle drove me to Us Khatyn on a Friday evening, the 24<sup>th</sup> June, one night before the start of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Although the 21<sup>st</sup> June is the official day of yhyakh, the Tuymaada Yhyakh is celebrated on the last weekend of June regardless of the date. There is only one road that leads to Us Khatyn from Yakutsk, which causes long traffic jams throughout the two days of celebration. On a normal day, it would take half an hour to drive the 25 km between Yakutsk and Us Khatyn. During the weekend of Tuymaada Yhyakh, the same journey might take several hours. Arriving a night earlier was my attempt to avoid being caught up in the traffic jam.

When we arrived at Us Khatyn, there were hundreds of people working on the preparations – food stands, stage building and decorating the area. Some looked stressed and tired, others relaxed and excited. It took us almost half an hour to walk from the main stage at Us Khatyn to the *tühülge* of my uncle's workplace. It was one of the most remote *tühülge*. I was pleased with this location, hoping that it would be quieter there compared to other *tühülge*. I was warmly welcomed by Maria, a lady in her early 50s, who was the director of the company.

My uncle left to drive back to the city, and I followed Maria to the campfire, where some men were preparing firewood and the women were rinsing horse meat and its inner organs (see image 1).



*Image 1. Preparation of horse meat and its inner organs at a tühülge.*

When I asked Maria why she and her employees arrive the night before the Tuymaada Yhyakh, she answered:

Our company usually buys one horse prior to yhyakh. We cook horsemeat, intestines and heart all night on the campfire. It takes time, but it is the best way of doing it. If we clean horse intestines ourselves, we can be sure that it is done properly and that no one will get an upset stomach (Maria, director of the company).

The process of preparing this food is not simple. The removal of stones from horse intestines requires the skills to identify the stones accurately and the patience to do this thoroughly. I asked if I could help with something but was told that I could just sit and relax. They had asked me before whether I had ever cleaned intestinal stones, to which I answered that I had not. I guess I was not of much help without previous knowledge and practice. I thought that I could help with preparing the firewood, but it seemed that the men had that under control. Only later did I realize how some tasks were divided according to gender. I insisted on helping with cleaning the dishes, which was at least a small contribution.

By the time the inner organs and meat were cleaned, cooked and ready, the sun was already up. I put up my tent and had a couple of hours sleep before the alarm rang. Maria and



her employees were awake and had worked all night. When I approached people by the fire, they joked that the night campfire transitioned into a breakfast spot. Maria and her employees placed a lot of importance on the horse meat being cleaned correctly, which according to them was one of the most important aspects of celebrating yhyakh. After breakfast, I went to the central area of Us Khatyn to put up my *researcher tent* (see image 2).



*Image 2. Researcher tent.*

The tent was supposed to serve as a shelter from the sun both for me and my potential interviewees. It can get very hot, above 30 degrees Celsius, at the end of June in Yakutsk. I hoped that people would seek refuge in the tent. My mother and aunts had prepared food and *kumys*<sup>31</sup> that I could offer to anyone entering my tent. I hoped that with food and drinks people would feel more comfortable and stay longer. Consequently, I could have a more in-depth interview, unlike if I were to approach them in the middle of walking across the Us Khatyn. I hoped that having posters with short descriptions of the project and my research

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<sup>31</sup> Although *kumys* is a summer beverage, due to the development of *kumys* production among the Sakha, *kumys* is gradually more available off season in the markets during the winter months.

outside the researcher tent would give the people passing by a chance to read it and choose to participate in the project (see image 3).



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The expected result of this project is a PhD dissertation, which will be published in 2019 at the Arctic University of Norway (Tromsø). The dissertation is a part of the international project "INREL. Indigenous religion(s): local grounds and global networks".

Image 3. Posters on the researcher tent.

Within just a few hours Us Khatyn transformed drastically. Everything seemed to be ready to welcome the first visitors to the Tuymaada Yhyakh. The Us Khatyn area was filled with the smells of *alaad'y*, freshly cut hay and *tüpte* (Sa.) (smoke from the dried horse manure). Among Sakha people *tüpte* is known to be a mosquito repellent. Tents and booths were set up and ready to sell food, handicrafts, souvenirs and art to the visitors.

The official program of the Tuymaada Yhyakh was squeezed into two pages of text written in small font. It served as a reminder to me that it would be impossible to attend even half of the 98 events that appeared in the programme (see image 4). This year there was a Second International Kumys festival planned called "Aiyg aha", a contest of the Sakha national cuisine "Salamaat<sup>32</sup>-2016", a sports competition "Dygyn oonn'uulara"<sup>33</sup>, horse racing

<sup>32</sup> *Salamaat* (Sa. *Саламаат*) is a Sakha dish commonly made from butter, flour and salt. Often, but not always, it is used as a dip for *alaad'y* during the Aiyg Ceremony (see below). *Salamaat* is known to be used by Sakha women after childbirth because it is believed to be rich in nutrients. It is important for Sakha that the butter for *salamaat* is made from a Sakha breed of cattle.

<sup>33</sup> *Dygyn oonn'uulara* (Sa.) ('Games of Dygyn'). Dygyn Darkhan is a legendary forefather of the Sakha.



“D’öhögöi onn’uulara”<sup>34</sup>, and the first International festival of videobloggers “INSTA-VINE FEST” to name a few. I decided to focus on interviewing people at the researcher tent and then select some events to attend.



Image 4. The program of events at the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016.

## Algy

Us Khatyn has several official entrances. At each entrance, guests are welcomed by a group of women dressed in Sakha *khaladai*<sup>35</sup>, who were waving their *debiir*<sup>36</sup> while wishing the visitors a good yhyakh. The main entrance, called *Toion Aan* (Sa.) (‘Master doors’), has two entries on the sides and one exit in the middle (see image 5). A man dressed in Sakha costume was instructing women to enter via the left side and men via the right. Both entries had a construction similar to a fireplace, where instead of the firewood, there was *tüpte*. Some went

<sup>34</sup> D’öhögöi onn’uulara (Sa.) (‘Games of D’öhögöi’). D’öhögöi Aiy is often articulated as a patron of horses and horse breeding for the Sakha.

<sup>35</sup> *Khaladai* (Sa. *Халадай*) is a spacious long Sakha dress for women with long sleeves.

<sup>36</sup> *Debiir* (Sa. *дэбйиур*) is a fan made of horsehair. It is a tool used by Sakha to wave away mosquitoes. *Debiir* is also a part of Sakha costume and is used both by men, women and children.

straight through the entrance, some made a circle around the construction with *tüpte*, and other walked three times around the *tüpte*.



Image 5. Entrance to the Tuymaada Yhyakh.

When entering Us Khatyn, one had a choice of either heading further forward or turning to the left, where *algys* was offered to the visitors. The official program of Tuymaada Yhyakh described *algys* as a *sier-tuom* in Sakha and *tseremonia* in Russian, which both are often translated into ‘ceremony’ or ‘ritual’ in English. At least half of the visitors went directly towards the *algys*. The *tühülge*, where *algys* was offered, had an entrance where a woman dressed in *khaladai* was giving out wood sticks. She was instructing people to burn the sticks in one of the nine fireplaces on the way to the *uraha*, which is a cone-shaped wooden Sakha construction. Each fireplace with *tüpte* symbolized one of the nine *khallaan* (Sa.) (‘sky’, ‘heaven’), inhabited by twelve *aiyy*<sup>37</sup>. Visitors were asked to read the descriptions of each

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<sup>37</sup> *Aiyy* is a generic name of upper creatures, embodying the good matter/nature/being. There are twelve *aiyy* that were defined at the *algys*:

1. *Aiyyhyt* (Sa. *Айыыһыт*), lives in the first *khallaan*.
2. *Ieiehsit* (Sa. *Иэйэхсүт*), lives in the second *khallaan*.



*khallaan* and choose the *aiyy* whose patronage one needed the most and to burn the wooden sticks on the chosen fireplace. Although the text was in Sakha, there were non-Sakha people too who selected an *aiyy*. It did not seem that everyone read the descriptions fully, and since the queue was getting longer, most of the visitors were quick to put their wooden sticks on the fire, and move on. I took pictures of the *aiyy* descriptions and moved together with the crowd (see image 6).



Үрдүк Үрүг Өркөн Өй,  
Ытык ыйаабынан  
Улуу дьаһалынан  
Үрдүк Үрүг Аар Айбылары  
Бастагы халлаантан  
Тохсус халлаанга дылы  
Бу курдук олохтообут эбит:

**Үрдүк Үрүг Аар Тойону**  
Сир-Халлаан Аар Кырдыаҕаһа ааттаан  
Үрдүк Үрүг Айбылары  
Көрдүн-иһиттин диэн,  
Үгүс-үтүмэн үлэлэрин  
Үүннээн-тэһииннээн,  
Бйан-бырдаан, ыатаран,  
Ыпсаран биэрэргэ  
Ыбылы ыйахтаан  
Сарыал тырымнаах,  
Сырдык сылдыайдаах  
Толомон манган ньуурдаах,  
Тулхадыйбат тутуллаах  
Куолуйар тохсус халлаанга  
Кэриллээхтик кэрэһилээн  
Олордубут эбит.

Image 6. Description of *Ürüng Aar Toion* in Sakha.<sup>38</sup>

On the way to the *uraha* I saw a horse with a Sakha ornamented cap attached to a *serge* (Sa. *сэргэ*; Ru. *коновязь*), a Sakha hitching post for horses. The cap is also used as a decorative symbol of horse breeding among Sakha. There were 99 *serge* built at Us Khatyn to represent

3. D'öhögöi Aiyy (Sa. *Дьөһөгөй айыы*), lives in the third *khallaan*.

4. Khotoi Aiyy (Sa. *Хотой Айыы*), lives in the fourth *khallaan*.

5. Uлуу Suorun (Sa. *Улуу Суорун*), lives in the fifth *khallaan*.

6. Suñ D'aahyn Toion (Sa. *Сүһ Дьааһын Тойон*), lives in the sixth *khallaan*.

7. Таһа Toion (Sa. *Таһа Тойон*), 8. Bilge Toion (Sa. 'Билгэ Тойон'), 9. D'үлҕа Toion (Sa. *Дьылҕа Тойон*), live in the seventh *khallaan*.

10. Odun Haan (Sa. *Одун Хаан*), 11. Чуһыс Haan (Sa. *Чуһыс Хаан*), live in the eighth *khallaan*.

12. Uруһ Аар Toion (Sa. *Үрүһ Аар Тойон*), lives in the ninth *khallaan*.

<sup>38</sup> This is an example of one of the descriptions. I have not translated this primarily because it is in poetic language and to attempt a translation would be to lose some of the meaning.

the importance of horse breeding for Sakha people. Further in, there was a table with three women in *khaladai* selling books about *aiyy*. I purchased a copy of each book. Before I left the table, I was asked if I was interested in an amulet (Ru. *amulet*), which was a piece of laminated paper with an image of a golden horse. When I asked about the price, I was told that there was no fixed price. I looked around and saw that most of the people were putting 50 rubles in the box. I did the same.

The crowd was moving towards the big white *uraha* called Archy D'iete (Sa.) ('House of Archy'), where *algys* took place (see image 7).<sup>39</sup> The organizers were letting groups of about 30-40 people enter at a time, where they stayed for about ten minutes.



*Image 7. Algys at uraha Archy D'iete.*

When my turn came, I was warned that it was not permitted to film, record or take pictures during the *algys*. Once the group was inside, the door was closed. We were asked to take a

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<sup>39</sup> Archy D'iete is a place where *algys* is performed and offered to the general population. There are also 'Centres of Spiritual Culture' (Ru. *tseñtr dukhovnoy kul'tury*) called Archy D'iete in several towns and villages in the Sakha Republic, including Yakutsk.

seat on the wooden benches, close our eyes, and to keep them closed until told otherwise. Three elderly Sakha ladies, in light coloured *khaladai* and head covers, one by one wished us well-being, health and luck in Sakha accompanied by a *khomus* (Sakha jaw harp) performance at a slow meditative pace with long, silent pauses in between the music. When *algys* was finished, we were asked to open our eyes and follow the path to the exit. We were told to take off our shoes and raise our hands up to the sun while walking. Walking the path took a few minutes and before exiting we were each given a piece of paper with wishes for luck, health and well-being printed on it. Assistants instructing visitors before, during and after the *algys* gave the impression of a well planned practice. At the same time, their presence also signified their recognition of the need to explain the practice and to guide visitors.

I headed back to the researcher tent. Many passed by, some read the posters, but no one came inside. The tent was big and one of the sides was completely open for the comfort of the interviewees, and in an effort not to make the space too small. However, one man passing by joked that he would get into trouble with his wife if he were to be seen inside a tent with a young woman. Even though he was joking, I decided to open up all sides of the tent and leave only the transparent netting. I was beginning to feel a little nervous thinking that no one would come in. A group of my friends then arrived. Since they were just coming from *algys* I asked them how it went:

I really enjoyed the ceremony of purification (Ru. *tseremoniia ochishcheniia*). It felt like my roots were awakened and I felt more Sakha. It was perfect until I was kicked out when they realized that I did not pay the entrance fee or the donation. It was horrible. Last year, as I remember, they were not charging anything. They interrupted *algys* and walked me out when I refused to pay (Liya, 26 y.o. Sakha woman).

Liya was unlucky that they busted her. I did not buy the amulet either, but since I had a scarf on, no one noticed. The ritual of purification (Ru. *ritual ochishcheniia*) was something new and unknown to me. I have not been at such a ritual before. Even though I am Sakha, I was brought up in a Russian-speaking family and we never did anything Sakha. So, *algys* was quite new to me, and I liked it (Lesya, 25 y.o. Sakha woman).

I was surprised to hear that Liya was not allowed to go to *algys* at Archy D'iete without buying an amulet. It seemed that the amulet functioned as a ticket to the *algys*. I began to wonder whether it was the official organizers of the Tuymaada Yhyakh or some other organization that was offering *algys* to the visitors at Archy D'iete. At least fifteen people were guiding

visitors at the different stages of *algys*. It was unlikely that the official organizers would be charging fees, since the Tuymaada Yhyakh, like any other yhyakh, is supposed to be free of charge and open to the public.

Both Liya and Lesya described *algys* as a purification act. Liya was familiar with *algys* and attended it regularly. Lesya, in contrast, looked at it more like a mysterious ritual, where everything was new to her. They are both coming from the same town, Vilyuysk, went to the same school, yet had quite different relationships with Sakha practices. Liya described feeling an awakening of her roots and her own Sakha-ness, while Lesya perceived *algys* as a reminder of how distant and unknown Sakha practices were for her. The language that they were brought up with (Liya in Sakha, Lesya in Russian) seemed to be an important factor in determining their Sakha identity.

The presence of my friends raised interest in the researcher tent and people tentatively started coming in and asking about the project. The first volunteers had just attended *algys*, which was reflected in the interviews:

The purification ritual (Ru. *ritual ochishcheniia*) is most effective during the summertime, especially, at the time of yhyakh. It is the time when it works the best (Natalia, 45 y.o. Sakha woman).

Health is the most important thing to me. I try to go to the *algys* ceremony at least once a year. Something bad always happens if I do not manage to do *algys* for a long period of time. It is a tradition (Ru. *traditsia*) for me. In fact, I am now learning to do *algys* myself and I hope that I will succeed soon (Ekaterina, 54 y.o. Sakha woman).

Everything at yhyakh heals (Sa. *emtiir*) me from within, especially *algys*. Even the smell of the freshly cut hay and *tüpte* calms me down and makes me happy. Just being at *yhyakh* makes me euphoric (Anna, 47 y.o. Sakha woman).

*Algys* was frequently translated as purification or healing by my interviewees. When asked how they were purified and healed during the *algys*, the majority responded by *ayulğa* (Sa.) ('nature') and *aiyy*. Interestingly, no one mentioned that the healing effect was coming from the persons who were performing *algys*. The agency of the performer was not articulated and the performer did not seem to be associated with anything supernatural or miraculous. It was the words, acts, sounds and smell of *algys* that carried the meaning and the power. Such an understanding allowed Ekaterina to learn and practice *algys* on her own.



For those who did not participate in the *algys* at Archy D'iete by the entrance, there was *algys* offered at Aal Luk Mas (Sa.) ('Aal Luk Tree'). Aal Luk Mas, as with most of the other constructions at Us Khatyn, including the main entrance Toion Aan, was designed by Vil'yam Yakovlev. A massive wooden tree construction with nine levels of branches, symbolizing the nine Sakha *khallaan*, was located right in the heart of the Tuymaada Yhyakh (see image 8). Due to its size and uniqueness, Aal Luk Mas was commonly used as a meeting point.



*Image 8. Entrance to Aal Luk Mas.*

Beside the construction, there were women and girls dressed in *khaladai* and Sakha ornamented vests encouraging people to enter Aal Luk Mas. In contrast to the *algys* at the main entrance, there was only one fireplace with *tüpte* and one path for both men and women. Inside the construction, there were twelve wooden symbols, each named after one of the twelve *aiyy*. Aal Luk Mas seemed to be more tourist-orientated, as it had translations of the texts in Russian and English. In these texts, *aiyy* was translated as *pokrovitel'* in Russian and *patron* in English (see image 9).

The *algys* inside Aal Luk Mas was less formal and lasted less than a minute. A woman in a white *khaladai* played *khomus* and said a few welcoming words. When asked what to do, the woman explained that one should make a circle and touch one of the twelve symbols of

*aiyy*. There were no books, amulets or anything else for sale. All in all, it seemed a more time efficient *algys*, inclusive to non-Sakha speakers and free of charges or requests for donations.



Image 9. Inside the Aal Luk Mas.

### The opening ceremony

By 11 a.m. Us Khatyn was full of life and excitement. Thousands of people were hurrying towards the main arena, where the opening ceremony was about to start. The Kumys Centre Tunah<sup>40</sup> was built earlier in the year with a capacity of 15,000. In 2016, more than 180,000 people attended Tuymaada Yhyakh.<sup>41</sup>

The opening ceremony began with speeches of the organizers from Yakutsk City Hall welcoming the honoured guests – the Sakha political elite, representatives from Moscow (members of the Russian Parliament), and delegations from China and South Korea. They were

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<sup>40</sup> Tunakh (Sa. *тунах*) is a word rarely used in everyday Sakha to refer to the dairy or milk products. Tunah Yhyakh means dairy or milk yhyakh emphasizing the importance of *kumys* at the yhyakh. *Algys* with the use of *kumys* is one of the main spectacles held at the opening ceremony. This event is often translated by the media and organizers as *Kumysopitie* in Russian (Ru.) ('Kumys drinking') and *the libation ritual* in English.

<sup>41</sup> SakhaLife. "Khronologiya provedeniia natsional'nogo prazdnika Ysyakh Tuymaady v mestnosti Us Khatyn." <http://sakhalive.ru/hronologiya-provedeniya-nacionalnogo-prazdnika-yisyiah-tuymaadyi-v-mestnosti-us-hatyn/> (accessed April 3, 2019).



commonly referred to as “the VIPs.”<sup>42</sup> “The VIPs” were introduced, greeted and given the best seats at the tribunes with a good view and a ceiling that sheltered them from the sun or rain. The rest of the audience sat directly under the sun, and those who did not get seats simply sat on the ground.

The opening play was based on one of the *olongkho*<sup>43</sup> and was scripted and choreographed by the Sakha Theatre. Actors dressed in Sakha costumes sang lines from *olongkho*. As with most of the Sakha present, I could not understand the songs because they were in incomprehensibly rich Sakha.<sup>44</sup> The play was exclusively in Sakha, whereas the introduction and commentaries at the opening ceremony were in both Russian and Sakha.

By the time the play was approaching the end, the focus gradually turned to an elderly man dressed in white. The speaker introduced him as *algyschyt*<sup>45</sup> and informed the audiences at the Kumys Centre Tunah to get ready for the *algys*. The *algyschyt* was followed by nine boys on his right side, eight girls on his left and a large group of dancers, all dressed in white Sakha costumes (see image 10). When the *algyschyt* reached the ceremonial fireplace he began his first *algys* addressed to the *uot ichchi*<sup>46</sup> (Sa.) (‘*ichchi* of the fire’). Saying the words of gratitude to *uot ichchi*, he first lit a fire and then put *alaad’y* dipped in *salamaat* and sprinkled *kumys* from a big *choroon*<sup>47</sup>. The next two *algys* were devoted to *sir ichchi* (Sa.) (‘*ichchi* of the land’) and *salgyn ichchi* (Sa.) (‘*ichchi* of the air’). After that the *algyschyt* addressed an *algys* to each of the twelve *uehee urduk aiyy* (Sa.) (‘upper high *aiyy*’) living in the nine *uehee khallaannarga* (Sa.) (‘upper skies’). Each *algys* was unique and aimed at one particular *aiyy*.

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<sup>42</sup> “Non-VIPs” are not allowed to drive into the Us Khatyn area. This annoys some non-VIP visitors, especially the ones who come with elderly people and young children, who have to walk long distances from the designated parking lots to the centre of Us Hatyn.

<sup>43</sup> *Olongkho* is a style of Sakha epic that was recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Heritage of the Humanity in 2005, and which has played an important role in the Sakha revitalization processes. The role of *olongkho* for Sakha people and the development of yhyakh practice is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>44</sup> Eleanor Peers (2015a: 4) argues that the Sakha lexicon has been greatly reduced due to Soviet and post-Soviet Russification.

<sup>45</sup> A person who performs *algys*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ichchi* (Sa. *u44u*) is often translated as ‘spirit’.

<sup>47</sup> A *choroon* is a Sakha wooden vessel for drinking *kumys*.



Image 10. Algyschyt performing an algys.

The routines of the *algys* to *ayuu* were similar to the first three *algys* to *ichchi*. The *algys* for each *aiyy* ended with the interjections of approval and appreciation: “Urui Aikhal,” “Urui Tusku” and “Aikhal-Michil.” These interjections were then repeated by the dancers behind the *algyschyt*. Then, dancers performed a sequence of moves ending with a bow towards the east. The sequence of interjections, dance and bow was repeated the words after each of the twelve *algys*. In the beginning, only the dancers assisting the *algyschyt* repeated after him. However, by the end of the ceremony, the audience began to get involved and joined in on the expressions of approval ‘Urui Aikhal’, ‘Urui Tusku’, and ‘Aikhal-Michil’, raising their hands towards the sky. The *algys* of the opening ceremony lasted about half an hour. When the *algys* was finished, the mayor of Yakutsk, Aysen Nikolaev, and then some of the representatives from the Sakha Parliament gave speeches. After the last speech, everybody was invited to the Sakha circular dance *ohuokhai* (see image 11).



Image 11. Ohuokhai.

Thousands of people created a big *ohuokhai*. The *ohuokhai* was led by a singer, who sang one line at a time, which was then repeated by the rest of the people dancing in the circle. Thus, the lead singer controlled the tempo of the dance. Usually, the *ohuokhai* singers improvise their songs inspired by the texts from *olongkho*. To be able to improvise at an *ohuokhai* one should have a rich Sakha vocabulary and a good stamina to keep the dance going for a long time, potentially for hours. People of all ages, with and without Sakha costumes joined the *ohuokhai* dance. It started quite slowly, but gradually walking turned to running in the circle, and transitions between the steps to jumps. Those, who had winter Sakha costumes made from animal fur and skin, were the first to give up dancing because of the heat. The *ohuokhai* dance was the finishing spectacle of the opening ceremony. People, as well as the lead-singers, joined in and left, and then re-joined and kept *ohuokhai* going on into the night.

The three *algys* that I visited (by the entrance at Archy D'iete, at Aal Luk Mas and at the opening ceremony) created an impression of it being an important part of Tuymaada Yhyakh. *Algys* has often been articulated as a Sakha ancient practice by the organizers during their public speeches. At the same time, most of the participants were not aware of what they



were supposed to do and had to be assisted and instructed during the three *algys* that I attended. The common features among all *algys* was that each of them was performed in Sakha and was most of the time addressed to *aiyy*, either to all twelve of them or to some in particular. The name of the *algyschyt* was not mentioned at any *algys*. It was the acts and words of the *algyschyt* that were at the centre of people's attention and not her/his persona.

### **A day when Sakha feel Sakha**

I went back to the researcher tent to continue with interviewing, which was built around the question: What is yhyakh for you and how do you understand it?

Yhyakh is when the Sakha nation (Ru. *natsia*) starts remembering and reviving its culture (Ru. *kul'tura*) and way of life. First of all, it is a family celebration, like New Year's Eve. It is a ritual (Ru. *ritual*), and a time when we get energy (Ru. *energija*) from the sun (Ekaterina, 26 y.o. Sakha woman).

During Russian New Year's Eve families typically get together, decorate a tree and exchange gifts. Since the New Year's celebration is strongly associated with family time, Ekaterina compares it to yhyakh when her family also comes together. For Ekaterina, the Sakha people is one nation with a common culture and a distinct way of life, which, in her opinion, needs to be remembered and revitalized. Her idea was not unusual and resonated with other interviewees:

Yhyakh is the pride of Sakha people. It is the only big celebration of Sakha, our sacred tradition (Ru. *sviashchennaia traditsiya*). It is a day when we can feel our origin, our culture (Ru. *kul'tura*), a day that reminds us that we really belong to Sakha people (Kira, 24 y.o. Sakha woman)

For us, Sakha, yhyakh is our *korennoi* (Ru.) ('rooted', 'indigenous') holiday. It is a celebration that our cattle survived the winter and a farewell to the winter itself. In my childhood, it was a time when the youngsters met the elders, and a chance to meet extended family. It was and still is a place where we can see the strongest and the smartest Sakha competing in the contests (Vasily, 84 y.o. Sakha man).

Vasily was the only one among my interviewees who associated yhyakh with cattle herding, which is considered the main Sakha traditional economy. During the interview, Vasily, who had lived most of his life during the Soviet Union, described social and seasonal reasons for celebrating yhyakh. Unlike the younger people that I interviewed, he did not articulate yhyakh

as a 'sacred tradition' or a day when he receives energy from nature. Another interviewee, Ivan, of about the same age as Vasily had a similar perspective:

I like it here, at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. I like the atmosphere, the crowd, especially to see so many young people. I can shamelessly feel proud of our Sakha culture (Ru. *kul'tura*) today. Also, I did not see any drunk people, it is so nice here (Ivan, 78 y.o. Sakha man).

Ivan and Vasily emphasised the social aspects of yhyakh. Ivan was particularly happy that he could feel proud to be Sakha. He arrived from his village, five hours away from Yakutsk, did not speak Russian very well and was glad to be surrounded by Sakha-speaking people with Sakha costumes. The stigma of Sakha who do not speak Russian and come from rural villages, is still strong in Yakutsk. At the Tuymaada Yhyakh, the "working" language is Sakha, which creates an inviting atmosphere for Sakha who do not speak Russian fluently. It seemed that feeling proud of being Sakha was a situational or rare feeling for both Ivan and Vasily. Looking at the younger generation speaking Sakha and embracing their Sakha identity, seemed to make both Ivan and Vasily appear a little envious, but mostly happy.

When Ivan was leaving the tent, Kira, whom I interviewed earlier, came back with her 89-year-old grandmother. I thought to myself that she may have been the oldest visitor at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Kira introduced her grandmother, Valentina, and assured me that Valentina had a lot more interesting stories to tell than she did. In my research, I was hoping to cover a wide range of ages, but I was constantly being told by the younger people to interview the elders, as they were assumed to have more knowledge. Valentina was in surprisingly good shape for her age. She lay down on the small carpet I had brought for the interviewees to sit on. I offered her *kumys*, which I had bought earlier at the market. She tasted it and commented:

Not too bad for being sold at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. When I was younger, *kumys* always had a thin layer of butter on top. It gave extra flavour and special texture to *kumys*. I do not see people making such *kumys* nowadays. So what do you want to know? (Valentina, 89 y.o. Sakha woman).

I said that I wanted to learn about yhyakh and asked her to tell me about the yhyakhs that she had attended during her lifetime.

Oh, if I were to do that, we would stay for days in this tent. Well... Ellei Bootur [the legendary forefather of Sakha] was the first to organize yhyakh. At that yhyakh people ate the best meat, *kumys* and good *salamaat*. There were big sports

competitions. Yhyakh is a *bylyrgy bylyrgy* (Sa.) ('ancient ancient') celebration. Yhyakh was celebrated for several centuries since time immemorial and survives to this day. Today's yhyakh is exactly how it should be, not like the ones when I was younger. When there was yhyakh in the village where I was born, we had only three litres of *kumys*, which we all shared. We barely got to taste *kumys*. Then the war [World War II] began when I was thirteen. Sometimes we had to boil our reindeer boots or the skin used on the outer doors for hours to make soup out of them. I remember the Victory Yhyakh. People cried for happiness because the war was over. I cried because I lost my father and two brothers. Today I have nine children, forty grandchildren and sixty-six great-grandchildren. They bring me to the Tuymaada Yhyakh each year. It is a good excuse to get together with our big family. I hope to attend more yhyakhs in the future. I like the sports competitions the most and the opening ceremony. What time is it now? I think the wrestling competition should be starting soon. I will start walking to the stadium. If you want to know more, there were people like you asking similar questions. They made a film about me berry picking. Who would want to watch a film about a berry picking old woman? Strange people, but they seemed quite interested and happy with the result (Valentina, 89 y.o. Sakha woman).

The Victory Yhyakh in 1945 was one of the first yhyakhs that was celebrated publicly during the Soviet period. I was very grateful to Kira for bringing her grandmother, who shared her memories from the Victory Yhyakh, which I did not expect to hear about at the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2016. Over sixty thousand people from the Sakha Republic were recruited to the Second World War.<sup>48</sup> My grandfather was among those who joined the Soviet forces. He was sent to Mongolia to train military horses there. I never heard him talking about the war and had not heard about people suffering from such hunger, as Valentina described, among the Sakha during that time. I appreciated how open she was to talk about things that even my own grandfather was not comfortable talking about. Perhaps, the fact that she was interviewed by other people had helped her to be more open. Even though she was happy that the war was over, the Victory Yhyakh seemed to have been more of a reminder of her losses rather than a celebration.

It is not surprising that the Tuymaada Yhyakh and its scale of celebration impressed Valentina. Especially when one considers the small scale yhyakhs that were conducted in some villages in the first half of the twentieth century, when the whole community, according to Valentina, shared three litres of *kumys*. For Valentina, yhyakh has been celebrated from time

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<sup>48</sup>The official information portal of the Sakha Republic. "Sakha in the Great Patriotic War." <http://old.sakha.gov.ru/node/2290> (accessed April 3, 2019).

immemorial and she believed that Ellei Bootur, the legendary forefather of Sakha, was the first who organized yhyakh. This narrative is common among the Sakha.

Shortly after Valentina went to see the wrestling competition, a Sakha man entered the researcher tent, who introduced himself as a writer:

We, Sakha, are not *korennye* (Ru.) ('rooted', 'indigenous') to this land. We migrated here. Have you heard of Saka people from the times of Darius I 550 BCE? Saka are the ancestors of Sakha people, our ancestors. Why do you think Chinese built the Great Wall? To protect themselves from us, Sakha. Saka and Scythians spoke Sakha language (Ivan Bochoev, Sakha man in his 60s).

I asked if he meant Turkic languages:

No, not Turkic, Sakha language. It was a fault made by so-called Turkologists, who named the language group Turkic, instead of Sakha. Turkic originates from the Sakha language, not the other way around. Sakha used to occupy the territories from the Great Wall of China to Persia. When the Chinese began pushing Sakha, some moved to the west towards the current territory of Turkey and others to the north, where we are. Attila was also Sakha. Do you know how the Romans defeated Attila? They attacked him on the day of yhyakh! It was not a battle, but a slaughter that night. I spent several decades in the archives to investigate and prove this theory. Historians from the past were not capable of thinking creatively and did not have access to so many resources as we do today. For example, Amazonians were Sakha women. Sakha people were not practising patriarchy in the old times, they lived in a matriarchy. From the early ages, Sakha were taught to respect women. Why do you think there were no divorces before? Because men respected women. Sadly, when the Russians came they spoilt everything with vodka (Ivan Bochoev, Sakha man in his 60s).

Our interview was interrupted by his wife, who yelled at him for sitting in a "young woman's tent." He joked that as a real Sakha he should listen to the head of the family, referring to his wife. Ivan's hypothesis of Sakha origin was rather daring, but there were some ideas that resonated with some of the scholarly works that I had read. For example, the finding that the Sakha language is amongst the most archaic Turkic languages (Ksenofontov 1937, Pekarsky 1907-1930). Ivan took this idea a step further, by suggesting a change in terminology and renaming the language group from Turkic to Sakha. Following the thread of the archaic origin of Sakha language, and consequently of Sakha people and their practices, Ivan suggested that the ruler of the Huns, Attila, himself celebrated yhyakh more than 1500 years ago. He also argued that Huns and Scythians were Saka people, and Saka were the ancestors of Sakha.

Ivan's theory suggests that Sakha people have a rich and great history and are responsible for many significant changes in world history. Most of his claims are rather speculative and cannot be supported by any available sources of Sakha history. My interest is in his claims and his attempts to create pride, through an image of a great noble past of the Sakha. Ivan Bochoev writes in a popular-science style about the theories of Sakha origin. Although his writings have a rather small circulation, his opinions are interesting for my research because they contribute to the variety of understandings of Sakha practices at and around yhyakhs.

### **In search of Sakha *iteǵele***

In the afternoon the biggest spectacle at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, the sports competition Dygyn oonn'uulara (Sa.) ('Games of Dygyn') for the title of the strongest and the fastest man, attracted the majority of visitors. While hundreds of spectators were cheering for their favourite sportsmen, I had a visit from a woman in her 70s. Varvara looked like a typical elderly Sakha woman with colourful clothes, a woollen vest and neatly gathered white hair. She was a little tired, after not having found any shelter from the sun except the cafés, which were charging at least three times the normal price for drinks and meals, compared with outside the Tuymaada Yhyakh. I welcomed her to my tent and was pleased to meet someone who was not in a hurry, and willing to join me for tea time. Without waiting for me to ask any questions, Varvara began sharing stories of her life:

I moved to town [Yakutsk] when I was six years old. On my first day of school I realized that everybody spoke a language I did not know. I hated it there, I wanted to go back to my grandma and live in the village. Luckily, my teacher from primary school was a proper Soviet teacher. She helped me with my Russian every day after school. I doubt that she was ever paid for her overtime work. I managed to graduate from primary school with excellent grades. She taught me so well, that I now speak only Russian. I can't speak Sakha anymore (Varvara, Sakha woman on her 70s).

Varvara, like many Sakha living in Yakutsk, went to a school with Russian tuition and experienced the shock of entering an environment where nobody spoke her language. I could empathize with her since I also felt frustration when I started at a Russian kindergarten without speaking a word of Russian. We continued our conversation and I asked with whom she had come to the Tuymaada Yhyakh:



I am here together with my son, his family and people from Kamelek<sup>49</sup>.

I asked her what she meant by Kamelek.

Don't you know? It is those who do the *algys* by the entrance. Kamelek is an organization that teaches Sakha *iteǵele* (Sa.) ('religion', 'faith'). I used to go to different places like that. I went to Kamelek with my son, and now he and his wife go there regularly and are more engaged than I am. It is amazing how their relationships improved since then. My daughter-in-law was quite stressed, ambitious, too focused on her career and so on, but after joining community at Kamelek she grew into a gracious real (Ru. *nastoyashchaia*) Sakha woman. They now have five kids and she knows her place and respects her husband. My son stopped drinking, he does not drink alcohol anymore (Varvara, Sakha woman on her 70s).

I asked her if she believes in Sakha *iteǵele*?

Oh, yes, I do. It is funny to think of that. I was a communist atheist most of my life until my sister, who is an Orthodox Christian, told me that if I were not to be baptised, I would not meet my family after death. I want to be with my mother after I die, so I went to the Orthodox Church and got baptised. My sister is a *true* Christian, and she thinks that practising Sakha *iteǵele* is a heresy (Ru. *ieres'*). She does not even attend yhyakhs because of that. But I do not think so, in fact, I am still looking for different places, where I could learn more about Sakha *iteǵele* (Varvara, Sakha woman on her 70s).

Varvara was baptised and registered in the Orthodox Christian church, yet she was still practising and searching for Sakha *iteǵele*. The way Varvara was looking for Sakha *iteǵele* shows her intent in searching for a place and for experts, who could teach her Sakha *iteǵele* perhaps in a similar way that Christianity is taught in church. Despite her recognition of how much Kamelek had helped her son and daughter-in-law, she still continues to explore other communities that claim to be experts on Sakha *iteǵele*. Obedience, housework and motherhood were perceived to be the positive and central features for the Sakha woman according to Varvara unlike ambitiousness or career development. Varvara was not alone among my interviewees in not seeing a conflict in combining Christianity and Sakha *iteǵele*:

I love yhyakh, I like everything about it. I was raised in the capital [Yakutsk] and my parents chose not to teach me Sakha and I do not really remember going to yhyakhs in my childhood. But now, I am doing my best to learn about Sakha culture (Ru. *kul'tura*) and bring my own children to yhyakhs every year. Each year

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<sup>49</sup> The word *kamelek* in Russian means 'a fireplace'. When Sakha use the word *kamelek*, they usually refer to the indoor fireplace that Sakha used before electricity was broadly accessible. The majority of *algyschyt*s during the wintertime use a *kamelek* for the *algys* instead of an open fireplace.

I sew them new Sakha costumes. I want my children to be proud of being Sakha and I do not wish them to end up as a marginal (Ru. *marginal*) as I am. Even though I have a good job, successful career, good family, many friends, I feel that if I spoke Sakha, I would have achieved even more. I celebrate yhyakh by wearing Sakha earrings for a month before the event and I buy one piece of Sakha tableware every year. I hope to collect one big Sakha dining set. Yhyakh is the biggest celebration for me. When I do not attend yhyakh I feel that I am lacking energy (Ru. *energiia*) throughout the winter. *Algys* and *Kün Kōrsüü* give me so much energy. I am a Christian myself, but I believe in the energy of rituals (Ru. *energiu ritualov*) here at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Sakha *iteġele* is about receiving the energy from *ayulġa* (Sa.) ('nature') and *ayulġa* is right here (Irina, 41 y.o. Sakha woman).

Irina described herself as a marginal Sakha, believing that without speaking Sakha she is not complete. However, she has found other ways of expressing her Sakha-ness, for example by attending yhyakhs, wearing Sakha earrings and receiving energy from *algys*. The combination of Christian and Sakha practices did not cause any conflict, but rather were complementary in Irina's vision. Both Irina and Varvara were exploring Sakha *iteġele* themselves and were actively incorporating Sakha practices into their daily lives each in their own ways.

The next volunteer who entered my tent did not talk explicitly about Sakha *iteġele*, but through her I discovered another interesting perspective on Sakha practices:

Yhyakh is *korennoi* (Ru. 'rooted', 'indigenous') celebration of Sakha. Although today yhyakh is called the national (Ru. *natsiona'nyi*) day of the Sakha, it was not called that during the Soviet times. Despite being a communist I still did *ayulġa ahytyy* (Sa.) ('feeding of nature'). Things were a lot more modest in the old days. Only a few *alaad'y* and, occasionally, *kumys* were given to *ayulġa*. Such massive celebrations of yhyakhs as we have today began only after the 1990s. I am glad to see these changes because yhyakh is our [Sakha] most spiritual (Ru. *dukhovnyi*) celebration. The Sakha language is very sophisticated, just as our *öidöbül* (Sa.) ('understanding') is. If you can express and explain everything straightforwardly in Russian, you cannot do it in Sakha. Our *öidöbül* was transmitted from generation to generation. I think that we, Sakha, are very *öidöökhpüt* (Sa.) ('understanding', 'smart'). Wherever you go, you meet Sakha who are interested in other people's religion (Ru. *religiia*). I am 56 and I have several children and grandchildren. Some of them today are Christians and some are Muslims, which is as a result of moving to another place, marriage or their own interest. We, as Sakha, are able to understand that there are many ways to understand the world. This is the key to peace in my family and, also, at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, where many families of different *omuk* (Sa.) ('peoples', 'nationalities', 'nations') get together (Antonina, 56 y.o. Sakha woman).

Antonina shared her complex vision of Sakha *öidöbül* (Sa.) ('understanding') and the current situation when Sakha are exposed to many different practices. She did not find the Sakha who had converted to Christianity or to Islam any less Sakha. On the contrary, she saw in such conversions a uniquely Sakha feature, which is, according to her, the ability to see that there are many ways to understand the world. Unlike Irina and Varvara, Antonina did not seek Sakha *iteǵele*, nor did she compare or contrast it with Christianity or Islam. Her translation of Sakha practices as 'understandings' is not in any way suggesting that they are inferior in comparison to the practices that are recognized as 'religions'. Quite on the contrary, she emphasized a superior, smart Sakha *öidöbül*.

Antonina's Sakha was as rich as that of the people who perform *olongkhos* or sing *ohuokhai*. Yet, she still had to turn to some Russians terms: *korennoi* (Ru.) ('rooted', 'indigenous'), *natsional'nyi* (Ru.) ('national'), *religiia* (Ru.) ('religion') and *dukhovnyi* (Ru.) ('spiritual'). She used *korennoi* and *dukhovnyi* to describe yhyakh, while *natsional'nyi* was new to her for defining yhyakh, and she used *religiia* when she talked about Christianity and Islam.

During the interview, Antonina mentioned a practice of *ayulǵa ahytyy* (Sa.) ('feeding of nature') that she also performed during Soviet times. In my opinion, *ayulǵa ahytyy* or *sir ahatyy* (Sa. 'feeding of land') is quite a common practice of sharing food, usually *alaad'y* among the Sakha. Sakha often present *alaad'y* to *ayulǵa* (Sa.) ('nature') or *sir* (Sa.) ('land') while berry picking or hunting, as well as during *algys*. When Antonina left, there was a woman waiting outside the tent to be the next volunteer. She introduced herself as Sardana:

Primarily, I come to yhyakh to take part in *obriad* (Ru.) ('ritual', 'ceremony'). Those who *iteǵeier* (Sa.) ('to believe') get the most from the purification ritual (Ru. *obriad ochishcheniia*). The smells of *tüpte*, *salamaat* and *alaad'y* are purifying me at yhyakh. I always attend *algys* and Kün Körsüü to receive purification (Sa. *yaastanyy*) from *aiyy*. In the winter, I occasionally go to Archy D'iete for that. In the summertime, apart from going to yhyakhs, I try to go as often as possible for a walk in the forest to be close to *ayulǵa*. When I see a young tree, I lean on it. Only the young trees give and share energy (Ru. *energii*), while the old ones take your energy away from you. I usually go to the forest with my children, where we explore flowers, plants and, especially, different bugs. There are so many new, colourful, big bugs, worms and butterflies that I never saw in my childhood. I teach [my children] not to pick up flowers and to walk slowly and carefully without killing creatures living in *ayulǵa* (Sardana, 38 y.o. Sakha woman).

Sardana spoke Sakha, but similarly to Antonina, sometimes used some Russians words. For example, at the beginning of the interview, she used the Russian word *ochishcheniye* and later replaced it with the Sakha *yraastanyy*, which can both be translated into ‘purification’. The majority of the Sakha are biliñual and the limited contemporary lexicon of Sakha makes it challenging to speak Sakha without using words in Russian. Sardana told me how she was purified by *ayulğa* and *aiyy* at different places such as Archy D’iete, *ayulğa*, Kün Körsüü and *algys*. Sardana was among the few who used the Sakha verb *itegeier* (Sa. ‘to believe’). She used the verb when she described her relationship to *ayulğa*, *aiyy*, *algys*, *obriady*, and trees.

Antonina and Sardana referred to Sakha *iteğele* as a collective term for practices that they recognize as Sakha, while others talked about similar practices without naming them Sakha *iteğele*. The word *iteğele* was also applied to describe Islam and Christianity, suggesting its quite common translation as ‘religion’ and ‘belief’. As I learnt from my interviewees, *iteğel* is something that can be taught and learnt, and something that can be applied to describe various practices, actions and relations (for example to *aiyy* or *ayulğa*). There is no official religious organization named Sakha *iteğele*, but there are several organizations that claim Sakha *iteğele*. I discuss these organizations and their articulations of Sakha *iteğele* in more detail in Chapter 4.

### **Kün Körsüü**

As the evening arrived, Us Khatyn’s demographic gradually became less diverse. There were more children and elders during the day, but as evening came I saw more youngsters and middle-aged men and women. Concerts of various music genres from Sakha ethno-rock to Sakha pop began on several stages. I closed the researcher tent and joined my friends, who were happy and pleased with Tuymaada Yhyakh but were not planning to stay long. Instead, they were heading to the open-air techno-festival, a few kilometres away from Us Khatyn. They told me that the crowd there was “cooler.”

I asked one of my friends, Varya, to join me in camping at Us Khatyn overnight. Already by 9 p.m., people were drinking heavily. Those who were drunk in the central area of the Tuymaada Yhyakh were taken away by the policemen. Despite the fact that the consumption

of alcohol at Tuymaada Yhyakh has been banned since 2007, the number of drunk people was increasing by the hour.

At night, the sky was thickly covered by clouds and it started to rain, which caused rumours that the Kün Kōrsüü (Sa.) ('sun greeting') might be cancelled. I wondered how Kün Kōrsüü would be performed if clouds would stay and the sun would not be visible. Less than an hour was left until sunrise. The music went on and dancers in white Sakha costumes entered the designated area for Kün Kōrsüü. Some of the female dancers were holding wooden vessels with *tüpte* and walking in a circle around the field. The other dancers formed a smaller circle close to the centre of the field, where girls were waving birch branches and boys were waving *deibiir*. At the centre, there was a fireplace similar to the one used at the opening ceremony. The commentator announced that Kün Kōrsüü was open. After that, a male *algyschyt*, accompanied by nine boys on his right and eight girls on his left, entered the ceremonial field and walked towards the fireplace. All the dancers left the field. The *algyschyt* lit the fire and used a wooden stick with attached horse hair for the ceremony. There was no *kumys*, *salamaat* or *alaad'y*. The *algyschyt*, together with the dancers, was bowing to the east, to the north, to the west and to the south. After that, he performed *algys* to *ichchi* and *aiyy*. *Algys* to each *ichchi* and *aiyy* was followed by a dance sequence.

A woman standing next to me commented on how the clouds began to disappear and the red light was approaching the horizon. The atmosphere at Us Khatyn lifted and people seemed to be more positive. Finally, the first rays of sun began breaking through the clouds. Some people started to applaud the *algyschyt* for successfully "calling" the sun, but they were quickly instructed by other spectators to stay quiet and instead of applauding to raise their hands up towards the sun (see image 12).

Kün Kōrsüü was finished by an *ohuokhai* dance at 5 a.m. While the majority of people headed to the parking lots and bus stops, I went with Varya in the opposite direction towards the *tühülge*, where I had my tent. When we arrived at the *tühülge*, I saw my uncle's colleagues drinking by the campfire. They told me that Maria had returned to Yakutsk and that they could now relax and enjoy some drinks without their boss. We wished them a good night and went to sleep. As soon as we laid down, we heard several men fighting outside the tent. After a while, one of the men yelled to the others to bring him an axe, which they did. Now, the fight

continued with an axe. At some point, we heard other drunk men yelling for help. They then all joined a bigger fight somewhere further away from the *tühülge*.



*Image 12. Kün Körsüü.*

Having weighed up the dilemma of whether to stay in the tent or to move, in fear of more drunk men coming back to our tent site to fight, Varya and I decided to move. When we reached the bridge over to the main area, we saw a field full of drunk groups of fighting men. It was 7 a.m. On our way, we were noticed by a group of young men behind us. Varya and I had our camping backpacks and were mistaken for foreign tourists. One of the men yelled at us in English: “Do you have some fire?”. We kept on walking faster and tried to ignore them. They kept on shouting, to which Varya responded in Sakha: “We do not smoke”. I heard the men talking to each other: “They are Sakha, let’s go and get them”. Before I could panic, luckily, we saw a policeman who followed us towards the centre of Us Khatyn, where more policemen were guarding the area. We went into the researcher tent and stayed there until we felt safe to leave again. It was a very unpleasant experience and showed me a completely different side to the Tuymaada Yhyakh.

By 9 a.m. everything at Us Khatyn was peaceful again and full of smiling children, women and elders. There were no visible signs of the violence we had seen during the night.

When I described what had happened to some of my friends they replied: “What did you expect? There are only *mambets* at night at Us Khatyn.” *Mambet* is a derogatory slang word used among Sakha to describe young Sakha men from rural villages who are said to have an aggressive demeanour. When I went back to the *tühülge*, I saw some of the men who I had heard fighting during the night, now laughing and eating breakfast together.

Instead of continuing to interview people at the researcher tent, that day, I decided to explore Us Khatyn further. I was quite tired after the sleepless night. Wandering around, I ended up in the area with one big *uraha* and nine small wooden cabins. Each cabin had a name tag and a number of services that were on offer to the clients. Among them, there were *algyschyt*, *ekstrasens* (Ru.) (‘psychic’) and a (self-proclaimed) *shaman* from the Altai region. Almost all the cabins were empty. I went to the *uraha* in the middle, where several people in Sakha costumes of different ages were gathered inside. I learnt that they were all from a ‘Centre of spiritual culture’ (Ru. *tseñtr dukhovnoi kul’туры*) Archy D’iete.<sup>50</sup> I introduced myself and expressed my interest in yhyakh. One woman showed me her certificate of competence received from ENIOM<sup>51</sup>, a centre in Moscow that trains *ekstrasens*. She told me that I could learn about yhyakh at Archy D’iete, where they provide detailed instructions on how to conduct, in her words, “real” yhyakhs. When I asked whether there were a lot of people who came in during the Tuymaada Yhyakh, she nodded saying:

People need support these days. People are desperate because they are unable to pay off their loans: house loans, car loans, phone loans, all kinds of loans. They find comfort in alcohol. We are trying to cheer them up, support them and wish them luck (Dariya, *ekstrasens* in her 50s).

House loans and social pressures of consumerism cause financial difficulties for Sakha like for many other people around the world. The *ekstrasens*, *algyschyts* and the self-proclaimed *shaman* were offering their services to people who were struggling, for example, with alcoholism and debts to banks. I remembered Varvara, who was proud of her son, whom had stopped drinking after joining Kamelek. I made some notes to visit Archy D’iete and Kamelek.

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<sup>50</sup> This is not the same Archy D’iete where the *algys* was offered by the entrance to Us Hatyn. In this context, Archy D’iete is a spiritual centre in Yakutsk.

<sup>51</sup> ENIOM. “Vserossiyskiy nauchno-issledovatel'skiy tseñtr traditsionnoy narodnoy meditsiny ‘ENIOM’.” <http://www.eniom.ru/sens/> (accessed April 3, 2019).

There were notably fewer people at Us Hatryn on the second day of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. The closing ceremony was rather short with the announcements of the winners of Dygyn Oonn'uulara and concluding speeches by representatives of Yakutsk City Hall. The closing ceremony also symbolized the end of my first trip to Tuymaada Yhyakh as a researcher.

### **Summary**

In total, I conducted sixteen interviews at the researcher tent in 2016. Four of them were with my friends and the other twelve with the volunteers. The majority of the interviewees were women of different ages. Only three men volunteered, all of whom were over 60 years old. Being interviewed is not a common practice in the Sakha Republic, and it is thought of as something that journalists do. I expected people to be suspicious and reserved. However, I found that people were open and generous with their time. I assume that the opportunity to learn about the project from the posters before entering the tent, ensured that all of the interviewees made a choice to share their experiences and thoughts with me. By the end of the first day when I realized that I had no younger men among my interviewees, I approached two men on their 20s who were passing by. Although they hesitated, they agreed to an interview, which lasted no more than five minutes. None of my questions resulted in anything more than “yes”, “no” or “I do not know” answers. After that, I decided to wait patiently for the volunteers to enter the tent and not to force people who I happened to meet to come for an interview.

In general, there were many acts and utterances that can be seen as performances, articulations and translations of religion present in the conversations about yhyakhs and in the events at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. For example, *algys* was largely perceived by my interviewees as a healing, purification, blessing, and a practice that gives energy to its participants. The *algys* that I attended were addressed to *aiyy* and *ichchi*. I learnt about twelve *aiyy*, which were translated into ‘patrons’ in English at one of the *algys*. There were three official *algys* held at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, each different from one another. Yet, there seemed to be no conflict in their co-existence.

One of the most interesting features I learnt about Sakha practices was how actively some Sakha were searching for them. The narrative that Sakha *iteġele* was suppressed and



lost for several decades, even centuries, created a space for various understandings of Sakha *iteġele* in Sakha society. I wondered what Kamelek was and who organized *algys* by the entrance to the Us Khatyn. These questions will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Another aspect of yhyakh, which I identify as an articulation of indigeneity, was that it is a Sakha event, a national holiday for Sakha and “a day when Sakha feel Sakha.” Tuymaada Yhyakh seems to provide a space where Sakha feel proud to perform and embrace their Sakha identity. I wondered how inclusive yhyakh was to non-Sakha people. Only the opening, Kün Kōrsüü, and closing ceremonies were translated into Russian, and sometimes into English. The rest of the events were predominantly in Sakha. There were no translations into Evenki, Even, Chukchi, Dolgan og Yukhagir languages either. I became even more convinced of the importance of interviewing people who chose not to go the Tuymaada Yhyakh to learn whether their decision had to do with certain representations of the event. Language seemed to be an important aspect not only of yhyakhs’ representations but also of one’s ethnic identification. For example, for some of my interviewees the knowledge of Sakha language was an identifier of their Sakha-ness.

After the Tuymaada Yhyakh, I planned to conduct interviews with local authorities, Archy D’iete, Kamelek and other institutions involved in the organization of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. However, July is the month for vacation in Yakutsk. This meant that most of the people that I planned to interview were out of town. I returned to Tromsø and began analyzing the interviews. I also spent three months at the University of Edinburgh, where I presented my project, took the course “Religion and Nationalism” and received feedback and recommendations for my next field trip. My stay in Edinburgh and the debates about religion and nationalism made me focus more on the national narratives that were present at the yhyakhs, which to some degree influenced my next trip to Yakutsk.

### **Tuymaada Yhyakh 2017**

Each year Yakutsk City Hall announces a new theme for Tuymaada Yhyakh. The main themes that are used are dedications either to the anniversary of ‘the incorporation of Sakha into the Russian state’ (Ru. *prisoedinenie Yakutii k Rossii*) in 1632 or to the anniversary of Victory Day

in 1945, signalling the end of World War II. The theme for Tuymaada Yhyakh 2017 was the 380<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the incorporation of Sakha into the Russian state.<sup>52</sup>

The opening ceremony, on Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup> June, began with a theatrical performance, where actors and actresses dressed in Sakha costumes walked around the stage with a Sakha breed of cattle and Sakha horses. Performers were introduced by the speaker as the first Sakha from the time of Dygyn Darkhan, the forefather of the Sakha. Then a group of men and women dressed in Russian and Sakha costumes entered the field, led by a man who was introduced to the audiences as an *oyuun*, a word that is sometimes translated as ‘shaman’ (f.e. Sieroszewski 1896; Crate 2006; Peers 2015b; 2015c). *Algyschyt* is also sometimes translated as ‘shaman’.

Even though *algyschyt* and *oyuun* are both sometimes translated as shaman, they are not used interchangeably among Sakha. *Algyschyt* is a relatively new term, roughly from the 1990s, and predominantly used to describe a person performing *algys*. For example, the person who performs the ceremonies of *algys* and Kün Kōrsüü at the Tuymaada Yhyakh is *algyschyt*. In comparison, *oyuun* is a much older term documented in the ethnographic materials about Sakha for several centuries. *Oyuun* was translated into ‘shaman’ in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by missionaries, ethnographers and political exiles. Today, there are no people who publically call themselves *oyuun* among the Sakha. The exception are the professional actors performing the role of *oyuun* during theatrical pieces like in the opening ceremony of the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2017. There is a common narrative that *oyuuns* do not exist anymore among the Sakha. In later chapters I will discuss and analyze in more detail the notions of *algyschyt* and *oyuun*.

It is common knowledge amongst Sakha, supported by some historical ethnographic materials (f.e. Romanova 1994), that *oyuun* is not permitted at yhyakhs. However, since this *oyuun* was played by an actor in a theatrical performance and was not a ‘real’ *oyuun*, it was deemed perfectly acceptable. The actor playing *oyuun* held a drum and led other actors dressed in Sakha and Russian costumes (see image 13).

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<sup>52</sup> Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2002, 2007 and 2012 were dedicated to the 365, 370 and 375 anniversaries of the Sakha incorporation into the Russian State respectively.



Image 13. Oyuun at the opening ceremony.

In the same group, there were people in Sakha military armour and Cossack dress, representing Sakha and Russians from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The speaker stated first in Sakha, then in Russian:

The 17th century was the era of the greatest discoveries made by the Russian Cossacks. The vast territory from the Ural mountains to the Pacific Ocean was incorporated into the Russian state as a result of the courage and persistence of Cossacks. By the 1620s, Cossacks reached the Lena River, where a long lasting friendship of Sakha and Russian peoples began.

The historical event from 1637 is named as “the incorporation of Sakha into the Russian state” with an emphasis on Sakha agency, who, according to the narrative at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, voluntarily agreed to join the Russian State. The notion of friendship between Sakha and Russians, often, but not always, includes small-numbered *korennye* peoples living in the Sakha Republic. This notion was present in the speeches of Aysen Nikolaev, the mayor of Yakutsk, and the representatives from Moscow at the Tuymaada Yhyakh this year, as well as when I attended the Yhyakh in 2016.

After the play, the *algys* began. Unlike last year’s *algys*, I noticed three, and not one, *algyschyts*. I remembered taking a bus earlier that week in Yakutsk, when an interview with Vil’yam Yakovlev, the architect of the Us Khatyn area, was broadcasted on the local radio.

During the interview, Yakovlev argued that the more *algyschyts* perform *algys*, the more powerful the *algys* becomes.

### **Guinness World Records**

Before people joined the *ohuokhai* dance at the end of the opening ceremony, everybody with Sakha costumes was invited to take part in an attempt to set a Guinness World Record for the largest gathering of people in Sakha costumes. For several weeks before the Tuymaada Yhyakh, messages about the criteria for Sakha costumes were circulating on WhatsApp<sup>53</sup>. According to some of these sources, Sakha costume for women should consist of *khaladai* dress, a vest, a head cover, accessories *iliñ kebiher* (Sakha front neckless) and *keliñ kebiher* (Sakha back neckless); and the male costume of a shirt, a belt with Sakha ornaments and a Sakha knife. My mother's WhatsApp account received numerous offers to sew a *khaladai* dress. Atelier, clothing stores, souvenir shops and markets in Yakutsk were all selling items for Sakha costumes in preparation for the record. Some of my friends used Instagram to find profiles where both professional and amateur designers were offering modernized Sakha costumes. Jewellery stores had special deals for *iliñ kebiher* and *keliñ kebiher* made from silver and even gold. There were some alternatives for those who did not want or could not afford a set of *iliñ kebiher* and *keliñ kebiher*: to buy smaller accessories in less expensive silver; to purchase accessories made from metal (commonly from aluminium) or to get a copy "made in China" from the local Chinese market. All in all, in 2017 the excitement for the Guinness World Record hyped up the upcoming Tuymaada Yhyakh.

This was not the first attempt to set a world record for the Sakha. In fact, there were three Guinness world records previously set in Yakutsk.<sup>54</sup> The first Guinness Record was registered when the largest *khomus* ensemble of 1,344 musicians performed simultaneously in Yakutsk on the 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2011. The certificate was officially presented at the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2011 and accepted by Egor Borisov, who was a Head of the Sakha Republic at that

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<sup>53</sup> WhatsApp is an instant messaging freeware. The availability of inexpensive smartphones, considerably cheaper mobile internet, in comparison to the Internet providers, make 93.7% of the people in the Sakha Republic users of WhatsApp. Quartz. 2015. "In the Siberian province of Yakutia, WhatsApp is basically the internet." <https://qz.com/390475/in-the-siberian-province-of-yakutia-whatsapp-is-basically-the-internet/> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Guinness World Records. [www.guinnessworldrecords.com](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com) (accessed April 3, 2019).

time. Already the next year, in 2012, Sakha set another Guinness Record, the largest *ohuokhai* dance, which consisted of 15,293 participants. This record took place at the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2012. According to the description within the record book: “Ohuokhai is a greeting of the sun that marks the beginning of the summer and a new life cycle at Ysyakh, the celebration of Yakut New Year.”<sup>55</sup> The third record was set in 2014 and also at the Tuymaada Yhyakh when 11,136 people performed the largest libation ritual. *Kumysopitie* (Ru.) (‘Kumys drinking’) was translated into English as ‘the libation ritual’. The event consisted of drinking *kumys* by participants, while the *algyschyt* was performing *algys* to the twelve *aiyy*. Neither before, nor after the Guinness World Record in 2014, was ‘the libation ritual’, when the audience joined in drinking *kumys*, performed at the Tuymaada Yhyakh.

I had a *khaladai* dress, but no other items of Sakha costume, and therefore did not plan on taking part in the record attempt. However, organizers informed the public an hour before the scheduled record attempt that women only needed a *khaladai* dress and men a Sakha shirt to participate. I entered the Tunakh centre, where the opening ceremony had taken place earlier and joined the crowd of people in Sakha costumes (see image 14).



*Image 14. Setting the Guinness World Record at the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2017.*

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<sup>55</sup>Ysyakh, yssyakh or *ЫСЫАХ* is a Russian spelling of Yhyakh, which is often used in English too.



Both Sakha and non-Sakha people joined the record, including the men from the guest delegation from China, who were dressed in a full set of Sakha costumes. When the counting of people was done, it was officially announced that 16,620 participants took part in the “Largest gathering of people wearing traditional Yakut clothing.”<sup>56</sup> The fourth record was set and the mayor of Yakutsk, Aysen Nikolaev, described the event as “the celebration of his city’s cultural heritage, where local youngsters learn about Sakha culture, and an event which increases the city’s attractiveness as a tourist destination.”<sup>57</sup> After the registration of the record, people began taking selfies with friends and families, the mayor and Sakha celebrities. Among my group of acquaintances, I met Eleanor Peers, an anthropologist from the University of Aberdeen who has written extensively on the Sakha and whom I previously met during my stay in Scotland.

Since I did not have a researcher tent in 2017, I spent more time exploring the Us Khatyn area. One of the sites that I visited was a large copper construction, Altyn Serge (see image 15).



*Image 15. Altyn Serge.*

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<sup>56</sup>Guinness World Records. “Russian city hosts record breaking gathering of people wearing traditional Yakut clothing.” <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2017/7/russian-city-hosts-record-breaking-gathering-of-people-wearing-traditional-yakut-480371> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>57</sup> Guinness World Records. “Russian city hosts record breaking gathering of people wearing traditional Yakut clothing.” <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2017/7/russian-city-hosts-record-breaking-gathering-of-people-wearing-traditional-yakut-480371> (accessed April 3, 2019).

It was erected in 2002 in honour of the 365<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the incorporation of Sakha to the Russian state. The largest *ohuokhai* dance was performed around Altyn Serge for the Guinness Record in 2012.

In 2017, there was almost always a queue for the Altyn Serge during the two days of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. People of all ages, both men and women, patiently waited their turn to come close to it. I often witnessed people in the queue who did not know what to do, who either asked people standing next to them or simply did the same as the person in front was doing. Some leaned once on each side of Altyn Serge, while others leaned on each side first with their chest and then with their back. This second option for the practice caused a longer queue. The meaning of this practice, according to the majority of people I approached, was to receive energy (Ru. *energiia*), power (Sa. *küüs*), and to make a wish. Some people asked for health, others for wealth, but many believed that saying a wish out loud was not a good sign.

### Severnoe Siianie

One of my goals in 2017 was to visit the *tühülge* of the small-numbered *korennye* peoples at the Tuymaada Yhyakh - Severnoe Siianie (Ru.) ('northern lights'). By its entrance, there was a poster with the program of the events (see image 16).



<b>Tühülge №30 “Severnoe Siianie”</b>
<b>23d of June</b>
14:00 “Meeting of the northern land” – program of the diaspora of peoples of the North.
14:30 “Hostess of chum (temporary dwelling), keep your hearth” festival-competition of national cuisine of peoples of the North.
15:00 “Singing and dancing of children of the North” folklore festival.
16:00 “Heyro” Dolgan national celebration rituals.
16:30 “Games of ancestors of peoples of the North” festival of national games.
17:00 “Joy of the first fishing season” traditional ritual of Russkoye Ust’ye.
18:00 “Round northern dances” performances of singers.
21:00 “Dyalandya” dance ethno marathon.
<b>24<sup>th</sup> of June</b>
11:00 “Games of ancestors of peoples of the North” festival of national games.
12:00 “Songs of the ancient land” festival of national songs of the North
15:30 Closing and Award ceremony.

Image 16. Program of events at Severnoe Siianie *tühülge*.

Evenki, Dolgan, Even, Yukaghir, and Chukchi were described as “peoples of the North” in the program. Severnoe siianie *tühülge* consisted of several camps, where people could eat, rest and socialize like in any other *tühülge*. Many were wearing clothes that signified belonging to one of the northern peoples (see image 17). Some events were described as specifically Dolgan or Evenki, whereas most of them were generically introduced as dances and rituals of “peoples of the North.” There was a number of competitions inspired by the practices of reindeer-herding, hunting, sewing, and building a chum, which is a temporary dwelling used by the reindeer-herders in the North of the Sakha Republic.



*Image 17. Round dance at Severnoe siianie.*

There was one more group at the Severnoe Siyanie – ethnic Russians from Russkoye Ustye. Russkoye Ustye is a settlement of 130 inhabitants in the north-east of the Sakha Republic.<sup>58</sup> Due to the remoteness of the settlement, its residents developed an interesting mixture of Russian (presumably from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) and other regional languages. Russkoye Ustye has become an attractive place to visit for Russian linguists and ethnographers.

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<sup>58</sup> Sakha Republic (Yakutia) Territorial Branch of the Federal State Statistics Service. “Chislennost’ naseleniya po rayonam respubliki na 1 yanvarya 2016.” [Численность населения по районам республики на 1 января 2016 года](#) (accessed April 3, 2019).



## **Summary**

In 2017, Tuymaada Yhyakh celebrated its twentieth anniversary by setting a fourth Guinness record at Us Khatyn. Perhaps, internationally this was of little importance, but for Sakha it was a significant recognition, and this was what mattered the most to the people that I encountered. The set record not only strengthened the pride of being Sakha but also created jobs for Sakha artists, tailors and seamstresses.

The Tuymaada Yhyakh was not only seen as a tourist attraction by Sakha authorities, but was used to convey official political narratives to the public. The theatrical performance at the opening ceremony represented a narrative of Sakha people's choice to join the Russian state. Thus, the Tuymaada Yhyakh can be seen as a space, where political agendas are communicated and confirmed.

In 2017, I focused on the presence of the *korennye* peoples at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. At the *tühülge* called Severnoe Siianie there were Chukchi, Evenki, Even, Dolgan and Yukaghir peoples, who all are recognized as the small-numbered *korennye* peoples of the North. In addition, at the *tühülge* there were people from Russkoye Ust'ye, who claim to be the descendants of the first Russians who arrived in the current territories of the Sakha Republic.

Yhyakh was repeatedly proclaimed as an ancient practice of the Sakha by my interviewees. Even the new element of *algys*, namely the presence of three *algyschyt*, was presented as a revitalized aspect of the authentic yhyakh from the old times by Yakovlev, who referred to the Russian ethnographer Ivan Khudyakov. While I was observing Altyn Serge, I got the impression that most of the people standing in the queue were convinced of its effect and importance, and at the same time were not familiar with the practice. This feeling continued to follow me at Us Khatyn, especially at events called rituals and ceremonies, when despite the "newness" of some practices, they were represented as ancient, traditional and from the past of Sakha people.

## Tuymaada Yhyakh 2018

Prior to the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2018, an interesting article was published at the Sakha news web portal Ykt.ru titled “Tuymaada Yhyakh can become a UNESCO heritage.”<sup>59</sup> The article was based on an interview with a Sakha historian Ekaterina Romanova:

Tuymaada Yhyakh should be acknowledged as a living heritage of peoples of the Eurasian steppe culture because it represents the tradition of the calendar celebrations of peoples of Southern Siberia, Central Asia, and the Turkic peoples of Caucasus and Crimea. Sadly, there are many who have lost the traditional elements of the calendar celebrations among the above-mentioned peoples. However, in the Sakha Republic, these traditions are alive and are transmitted to the new generations at the Yhyakh celebrations and also through the Guinness World Records that are already a tradition at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. The main symbols of Tuymaada Yhyakh 2018 thus will be horse, blacksmiths, *algys*, and *Kumysopitie* (Ru.) (‘kumys drinking’) ceremony.<sup>60</sup>

News articles at Ykt.ru have a comment section where readers post their opinions. This article received supportive comments, agreeing with the importance of international acknowledgement, while others criticized the organizers for “the unnecessary extensive financial support” and “the focus on the show, [achieving] Guinness world records, and [becoming] a UNESCO heritage site instead of celebrating yhyakh in an authentic way with *kumys*”.<sup>61</sup>

In 2018, there were two events that I still had not had a chance to visit: *kumysopitie* ceremony, which is often translated into ‘libation ceremony’; and, the most popular event at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, the sports competition Dygyn onn’uulara (Sa.) ( ‘Dygyn Games’). I set a goal of attending these events.

The opening ceremony on the 23d June began with the announcement of the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2018:

Since ancient times with the beginning of summer Sakha prepare for their national holiday (Ru. *natsional’nyi prazdnik*). Children, adults and elders look forward to the Kün Kōrsūū. This is the time when family and clan can meet and gather together.

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<sup>59</sup> New Ykt.ru. 2018. “Ysyakh Tuymaady mojet stat’ shede vrom UNESCO.” Ykt.ru. <http://news.ykt.ru/article/70450> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>60</sup> New Ykt.ru. 2018. “Ysyakh Tuymaady mojet stat’ shede vrom UNESCO.” Ykt.ru. <http://news.ykt.ru/article/70450> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> New Ykt.ru. 2018. “Ysyakh Tuymaady mojet stat’ shede vrom UNESCO.” Ykt.ru. <http://news.ykt.ru/article/70450> (accessed April 3, 2019).

We, Sakha, all grew up with yhyakh and celebrated it from our childhood. It is the time to sprinkle (Ru. *kropit'*) all of Russia!

I remembered that the word *yhyakh* has its roots in the Sakha verb *ys* meaning 'to sprinkle'. I suddenly realized that after searching for multiple meanings and understandings of yhyakh, I nearly forgot its literal translation. The origin of the word *yhyakh* from *ys* symbolizes sprinkling of *kumys* usually performed at *algys*. One of the dance performances at the opening ceremony imitated *choroon* (a Sakha vessel mainly used for *kumys*) being filled by the *kumys* (see image 18). Yhyakh was presented by the speaker as an ancient Sakha event that presumably was remembered by most Sakha from their childhood. Many of my interviewees recognized its long history despite the fact that most of them could recall only the recent yhyakh celebrations.



*Image 18. Performance of choroon being filled with kumys.*

The first word in the ceremony, as usual, was given to the honoured guests of the event including an official delegation from Japan, representatives from the Federation Council of Russia, the diamond company ALROSA, the Sakha Parliament Il Tumen, and the acting mayor

of Yakutsk city, Dmitry Sadovnikov.<sup>62</sup> Once the honoured guests had been introduced, greeted and seated in the reserved VIP seats, the speaker continued by announcing *algys*:

It is time for the ancient ritual of blessing (Ru. *obriad blagosloveniia*). *Algys* was addressed to the great gods (Ru. *bojestv*) *aiyy*, and light creator (Ru. *svetlyi sozdatel'*), Ürüŋ Aar Toion, for well-being, happiness and health. *Algys* is a prayer (Ru. *molitva*) to the spirits (Ru. *dukham*).

Eleven *algyschyt*s from different regions of the Sakha Republic entered the event area. They were introduced and accompanied the main three *algyschyt*s, who performed *algys* as in 2017. If by the start of my PhD I was doubtful that I would find any articulations of religion at yhyakhs, as time passed, I met more and more articulations of religion both at and around yhyakhs. At the very beginning of the opening ceremony in 2018, audiences were introduced to *aiyy* and Ürüŋ Aar Toion, described by the organizers as gods (Ru. *bozhestva*) and creators (Ru. *tvorets*) accordingly, whereas *algys* was described as the prayer to the spirits (Ru. *molitva dukham*). The opening ceremony ended with a common *ohuokhai* dance, and the numerous concerts, contests, performances and ceremonies began at Us Khatyn.

The ceremony of Kumysopitie took place at the Us Khatyn hippodrome (see image 19). To my surprise, there were very few people participating, no more than thirty individuals among the audience. Considering that there were over 190 000 people visiting Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2018, Kumysopitie, supposedly one of the main ceremonies, was nearly empty. Moreover, none of the participants, except the *algyschyt*, had *choroon* for drinking *kumys*. The *algyschyt* performed an *algys*, the speaker introduced the *kumys* producing companies in the Sakha Republic and their representatives, and in less than half an hour, the festival of Kumysopitie was finished. In comparison to the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2014 when thousands of people brought their own *choroon* and *kumys* and set the Guinness record of the largest libation ritual, no one, except the *algyschyt* drank *kumys* at Kumysopitie in 2018.

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<sup>62</sup> The previous mayor of Yakutsk city, Aysen Nikolayev, was the Acting Head of the Sakha Republic in summer 2018.



Image 19. Kumysopitie.

I used the remaining time at Us Khatyn to visit Sakha blacksmiths and a Sakha village with the reconstruction of a Sakha house – *balağan*. I also visited Altyn Serge, where as in the previous years, people were standing in a queue to make a wish for the coming year. The most popular event at Us Khatyn was, without doubt, the sports competition *Dygyn oonn’uulara* (Sa. ‘Dygyn games’). For two days, twelve athletes were competing in seven types of sports, including five traditional Sakha games: archery, running, stone lifting, Khapsağai (Sakha wrestling), Mas-wrestling (stick pulling), Üs tögöl üs (Sakha jumping contest), and Tutum ergiir (Sakha sports where athletes compete for the number of turns made with a spinning stick) (see image 20).

Spectators were not only cheering and attentively focusing on the performances of the athletes but also betting on the best athlete for each competition. The betting process was just about asking the person sitting next to you whether she or he was interested in making a bet. My 42 year old aunt, who has no particular interest in sports, joined me to see the games and did not mind betting a few rubles with the man sitting next to her. From what I could see, there were just as many people who were betting as those who were not. Once one was engaged in betting, the excitement of watching the games would escalate to a new level. In



the end, my aunt lost 100 rubles, which, according to her, was totally worth the experience she got.



*Image 20. Hapsagai at Dygyn games.*

Dygyn oonn'uulara were for a long time of no interest to me in this project. However, not to write about them would have been a major loss in my representation of Tuymaada Yhyakh. Due to my particular focus on articulations of religion and indigeneity, readers may have gotten an exaggerated impression of their overall presence. The majority of visitors come to the Tuymaada Yhyakh to see the Dygyn games according to my observations and conversations at, and outside, Us Khatyn. The excitement of the games are epitomised by the considerable prizes on offer. The 2018 winner, Egor Filippov, won 10 kilos of Sakha tea and a brand new Nissan Terrano car. The second Nissan Terrano was awarded to the winner of the *olongkho* competition (for the best *olongkho* performer), symbolizing the two most significant competitions at the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2018.

## Other voices

After visiting the Tuymaada Yhyakh for three years, I realized that my interviews were not as diverse as I had hoped they would be. For instance, I did not have any voices representing visitors outside Russia. The Sakha Republic is not a common tourist destination. I called the International Office at the North-Eastern Federal University and asked whether some foreign students would be interested in participating in my project. A week later, I received a call from an American exchange student who was studying Russian in Yakutsk. I met Jessica in the park, where she shared her experiences from the Tuymaada Yhyakh:

I have been in Yakutsk for almost a year now. I arrived in August last year and since then I was always asked whether I have been to yhyakh yet or not. Finally, I went to the [Tuymaada] Yhyakh last weekend. It took us two hours to get to Us Khatyn, because of the traffic. I was there with my two Sakha friends, who helped me with Sakha translations. I speak Russian, but my Sakha is still very basic after ten months of learning it. We went to the opening ceremony, where a *shaman* was making an offering nine times. After each offering, there was a dance and my friends told me that it symbolized nine heavens, where the *shaman* was sending his *prayers*. I took a lot of pictures and videos, but it was not easy, there was so much happening at the same time. My friends were from Suntaar region. So, they took me to the *tühülge* that belonged to Suntaar region. I was offered *kumys*, it was very sour and sweet. I did not like it too much, but I appreciated their kindness. Then we walked around, I saw big *serge* [Altyn Serge]. There was something special happening there, people were standing in a queue. There was no official announcement of what it was, but obviously it was something important. What are you particularly interested in? In what field are you writing your thesis? (Jessica, 22 y.o. American woman).

I told Jessica that I was interested in yhyakh and how different people understand it and that I am a PhD student in religious studies.

Right. I am very interested in the *religion* of Sakha too. I am trying to figure it out, but after ten months of living in Yakutsk, I have not got very far. For example, I was camping with one of my friends who took me to the [Tuymaada] Yhyakh. When we were preparing a bonfire, she put some food on the bonfire and said that it was an offering to the *spirit* of the fire. She is a young girl in her 20s, I expected some old people to do this type of thing. I did not sense before that she was *religious* and we are roommates for about a year now. She says that Sakha had a *religion* before, but today it is a *culture* and *tradition*. To me, it looks more than culture and traditions, more like a *ritual*, especially at the [Tuymaada] Yhyakh (Jessica, 22 y.o. American woman).

I then asked Jessica about her knowledge of Sakha people before the arrival:

[...] I read on the internet that Yakutiya is 50/50 Sakha and Russian region. But it is not true. It feels like it is 80% Sakha. Sakha culture and Sakha people are very visible compared with Native Americans in California. I had hoped that I could just blend in with white Russians and not attract much attention, but, especially in the villages, I am often the only blond white person. I did not read much about Russian or American history, but it contrasts strongly with how Natives in the Sakha [Republic] are so visible today (Jessica, 22 y.o. American woman).

Jessica was, in fact, one of the few among my interviewees who asked explicitly about my PhD project, the university that I was affiliated with, and the field of my research. Having learnt about me working in the field of religious studies, Jessica shared her views about Sakha 'religion'. She was confused and intrigued by the Sakha practices which to her seemed more than culture or tradition, despite being told so by her Sakha roommate. Coming from California in the US, Jessica compared Sakha to Native Americans and also used the term 'natives' to describe Sakha. She was surprised about how Sakha were so visible in Yakutsk, while Native Americans, in her opinion, were nearly invisible in California. Jessica religionized yhyakh in her descriptions of the person performing *algys* as a shaman, who was sending prayers to the nine heavens.

In addition to the interviews conducted at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, I had conversations with some people who chose not to go to the event. I wanted to stay attentive to reasons why people would chose not to attend Tuymaada Yhyakh. I asked among my friends and acquaintances whether there were some who did not go there:

I do not go to yhyakh. I do not speak Sakha, my parents did not teach me, all of my friends are either Russians or Russian-speaking Sakha. I know that I am ethnically Sakha, but I was raised and surrounded mostly by Russians, so I do not really relate to Sakha celebrations, language or whatever. I do not feel that I belong to Sakha, especially at yhyakh (Dina, 28 y.o. Sakha woman).

I moved to Yakutsk from a small northern village when I was seven. I remember going to yhyakh in the village with my family. I do not attend yhyakh in Yakutsk because most of my family lives in the North and yhyakh in the city is just a form of entertainment that I am not interested in. There are also too many drunk people and I find it dangerous to attend (Toma, 25 y.o. Sakha woman).

If I have to go because of work to the Tuymaada Yhyakh, then I go. Otherwise, I find it boring there. Everything there is in Sakha, which I do not understand. And I heard that it is not safe there at night (Elena, 48 y.o. Russian woman).

I was told that it was a shamanic festival. I am a Christian, so I think it would have been inappropriate for me to go there (Jussi, 19 y.o. exchange student in Yakutsk from Finland).



Among the common reasons for not attending the Tuymaada Yhyakh were its Sakha profile and assumptions that the event is aimed exclusively at the Sakha and Sakha speaking public, along with concerns about whether the Us Khatyn area would be a safe place and descriptions of it being a shamanic festival. I also knew many people who did not go to the Tuymaada Yhyakh because they were at many other yhyakhs before. Jessica, the American exchange student, mentioned when I turned off the voice-recorder how surprised she was to see that there are so many yhyakhs. She had expected that there was one Tuymaada Yhyakh but later learnt that there were numerous yhyakhs organized by different companies, schools, organizations, villages and families.

### **Concluding remarks**

Each person I interviewed had a personal understanding of yhyakh and its role for them. The most common notions were that this event was a national day of Sakha, a sacred day that gives an energy, a celebration for family and a day when Sakha are proud to be Sakha. The younger Sakha generation talked more confidently about yhyakh as a sacred celebration, whereas, the older people were most interested in the sports competitions and the opening ceremony. Yet, they too conveyed strong notions of yhyakh as a symbol of Sakha people's historical continuity. Some referred to the Sakha forefather Ellei Bootur, while others developed more daring hypotheses about the Sakha people's past.

Claims of antiquity and the romanticization of Sakha practices were perhaps the most typical approaches to yhyakh. Events and practices that were promoted as ancient were adopted by visitors at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. At all of the three *algys* there was assistants guiding participants on what to do and what to say. In instances, where there were no assistance, for example at Altyn Serge, people would either ask the people standing next to them about what to do or do whatever the person before them did. I wondered who is developing the practices of *algys* and the instructions for them? What sources do they use?

Articulations of yhyakh as a religious event were not only present at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, but also outside Us Khatyn, in conversations with people who did not attend the event. Yhyakh's description as a religious or shamanic event, prevented a Finnish exchange tourist and a sister of one of my interviewees (Varvara) from attending it due to their membership in certain Christian denominations. Interviews with people who did not visit the

Tuymaada Yhyakh were also helpful in learning about the event. Tuymaada Yhyakh's strong Sakha profile was also one of the reasons why some people felt excluded from the event. For others it was the most attractive feature of the event, for example for a few tourists, researchers and the Sakha from the more remote settlements.

Regarding the articulations of indigeneity, some of my interviewees used the word *korennye*, for example Vasily, who described Sakha as *korennoi narod* (Ru.) ('rooted', 'indigenous people') and Antonina who talked about yhyakh as a *korennoi prazdnik* (Ru.) ('rooted', 'indigenous celebration') of Sakha people. Amongst over twenty interviewees, the only person who applied the term 'shaman' was an American exchange student. No other person used the word 'shaman' during the interviews. Jessica also compared the Sakha to other peoples who are broadly recognized as indigenous, Native Americans. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that the interview with Jessica was conducted in English and that she had to work at finding the terminology in English to describe things that she saw and experienced at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. I was asked by my colleagues at INREL whether there were any international delegations of peoples who identify themselves as indigenous at yhyakh. The only international official representatives were political delegations from Moscow, Japan, China and South Korea.

To summarize, the overall impression I got from the Tuymaada Yhyakh was that despite the multitude of voices, articulations and performances that sometimes were contradictory to one another, they co-existed and each had enough room in one space. A number of new questions emerged during my fieldwork: Who organize various *algys* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh? Who is the *algyschyt* at the opening ceremony? What are the sources or actors that are involved in the processes of revitalization of practices at yhyakhs? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the chapters to come.

### Chapter 3. Olongkho Yhyakh 2016–2018

Reflecting Sakha beliefs, it also bears witness to the way of life of the small nation struggling for survival at times of political unrest and on the difficult climatic and geographical conditions.

(Description of Olongkho from the UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage)<sup>63</sup>

On the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2005, UNESCO recognized the heroic epic style of the Sakha people *olongkho*, and added it to their list for Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Vyacheslav Shtyrov, President of the Sakha Republic at that time, declared the period from 2006 to 2015 to be the “Decade of Olongkho”. To mark the significance of such important recognition, Sakha authorities announced an annual yhyakh devoted to *olongkho*.

Despite the multiple number of yhyakhs that Sakha people celebrate, there was no uniting yhyakh for all regions in the Sakha Republic. Even the Tuymaada Yhyakh, which has the largest attendance, is primarily oriented to the residents and guests of Yakutsk. Olongkho Yhyakh, thus, became the first yhyakh to be organized as a national event for all 35 *uluus* (Sa.) (‘municipalities’) and financed by the Republic’s budget. During the “Decade of Olongkho”, ten *uluus* were chosen to host the event.<sup>64</sup>

My first fieldwork trip coincided with the tenth Olongkho Yhyakh in Verkhoyansk *uluus* in 2016.<sup>65</sup> Initially, I had planned to concentrate my research on the study of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. However, I saw the potential contribution that an analysis of the Olongkho Yhyakh

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<sup>63</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. “Olonkho, Yakut heroic epos.” UNESCO.org. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/olongkho-yakut-heroic-epos-00145> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>64</sup> 2006 – Suntarsky uluus; 2007 – no; 2008 – Tattinsky uluus; 2009 – Ust'-Aldansky uluus; 2010 – Gorny uluus; 2011 – Mirninsky rayon; 2012 – N'urbinsky uluus; 2013 – Megino-Kangalassky uluus; 2014 – Khangalassky uluus; 2015 – Churapchinsky uluus; 2016 – Verkhoyansky uluus

<sup>65</sup> There was no Olongkho Yhyakh held in 2007, making the yhyakh in Verkhoyansk the tenth.

might bring to the study and especially to a discussion about the dynamics between global recognition and local practices. I thought that this Olongkho Yhyakh might be the very last of its kind and, therefore, decided to travel to Verkhoyansk. Later, however, a second “Decade of Olongkho” was announced, which meant that an Olongkho Yhyakh was to be held each year for another ten years. This decision demonstrates the emerging, and important, role of Olongkho Yhyakh for today’s Sakha society and also establishes more permanently a new form of public yhyakh for the whole Republic.

This chapter is based on participant observation at each Olongkho Yhyakh from 2016-2018, interviews with some of the visitors and organizers of the yhyakhs, and texts from UNESCO and news articles. The aim is to explore articulations and performances of religion and indigeneity at and around Olongkho Yhyakh, including the processes of its establishment and organization.

### **Olongkho: Becoming an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity**

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003. According to UNESCO’s definition:

Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge, and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.<sup>66</sup>

UNESCO established four criteria in addition to this definition in order to identify intangible cultural heritage around the world. The criteria say it must be: 1. traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time; 2. inclusive; 3. representative; and 4. community-based.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. “What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?” UNESCO.org. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>67</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. “What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?” <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (accessed April 3, 2019).

The qualifying selection of candidates for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was announced in Russia in 2004.<sup>68</sup> Representatives of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Yakutsk State University<sup>69</sup>, the Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development<sup>70</sup> of the Sakha Republic and the Ministry of Education of the Sakha Republic convened a working group of politicians, scholars, activists and artists to select an eligible Sakha practice that could qualify for the list.<sup>71</sup>

The Sakha intelligentsia identified the Sakha epic style, *olongkho*. *Olongkho* was placed together with ninety other proposals from the Russian Federation to compete for UNESCO recognition. After three qualifying rounds at the headquarters of UNESCO, only two cultural elements from the Russian Federation were eventually added to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. One of them was the *Cultural space and oral culture of the Semeiskie*<sup>72</sup> and the second was *Olongkho of Sakha people*.

By the time of *olongkho* recognition in 2005, there were only two *olongkhosuts* (performers of *olongkho*) publically performing in the Sakha Republic: Dariya Chaika Tomskaya and Petr Reshetnikov.<sup>73</sup> Dariya Tomskaya passed away at the age of 95 in 2008, and a few years later, in 2013, Petr Reshetnikov died at the age of 84. Perhaps, the danger of the potential extinction of the practice encouraged the authorities to take immediate action for its protection. Today *olongkho* is among the few cultural practices that are recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in the world.<sup>74</sup> It is defined by UNESCO as follows:

One of the oldest epic arts of the Turkic peoples, the term *olongkho* refers to the entire Yakut epic tradition as well as its central epic. The poetic tales, which vary from 10 to 15,000 verses in length, are performed by the *olongkho* singer and storyteller. In addition to possessing good acting and singing skills, the narrator must be

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<sup>68</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Khronologiya meropriyatiy po godam." <http://www.unesco.ru/ru/?module=pages&action=view&id=96> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>69</sup> Renamed to North-Eastern Federal University in 2010.

<sup>70</sup> *Ministerstvo Kul'tury i Dukhovnogo Razvitiya Respubliki Sakha (Yakutia)*.

<sup>71</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Khronologiya meropriyatiy po godam." <http://www.unesco.ru/ru/?module=pages&action=view&id=96> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>72</sup> "The Semeiskie communities are formed by a group of so-called "Old Believers", a confessional community originating from the time of the Instigation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century."

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Cultural space and oral culture of the semeiskie." <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/cultural-space-and-oral-culture-of-the-semeiskie-00017> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>73</sup> Teatr Olonkho. "Volshebny mir Olongkho." <http://olonkhotheatre.ru/articles/234-volshebnyj-mir-olonho.html> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> 508 practices in 122 countries.

a master of eloquence and poetic improvisation. The epic consists of numerous legends about ancient warriors, deities, spirits and animals, but also addresses contemporary events, such as the disintegration of nomadic society. Given that each community had its own narrator with a rich repertoire, numerous versions of *olongkho* circulated. The tradition was developed within the family context for entertainment and as a means of education. Reflecting Yakut beliefs, it also bears witness to the way of life of a small nation struggling for survival at times of political unrest and under difficult climatic and geographical conditions.<sup>75</sup>

UNESCO described Sakha practices as ‘beliefs’ and the stories of *olongkho* as ‘legends about ancient warriors, deities and spirits’, which can be seen as a translation towards religion. As the description above suggests, the narrator of *olongkho* is usually a master in the Sakha language, which is, in fact, rare among the Sakha people today because of the dominance of Russian influences in everyday language habits. For the majority of my friends and family, myself including, the *olongkho* texts are nearly incomprehensible. Before 2005, both the language of *olongkho* and practice of the epic itself were largely marginalised. In 2016, one of the organizers of the Olongkho Symposium<sup>76</sup>, during her speech, said:

To my shame, before *olongkho* was recognized by UNESCO I did not know much about it. I thought that *olongkho* was one particular story, never realizing that it was a poetic style with multiple stories. I feel particularly embarrassed now since I am working with Sakha culture myself (Elizaveta A. Sidorova, Executive Secretary to the UNESCO Commission of the Sakha Republic).

The recognition of *olongkho* led to an official visit from Mr Koichiro Matsuura, the Director-General of UNESCO, to Yakutsk in 2006.<sup>77</sup> During the visit, Vyacheslav Shtyrov, the then President of the Sakha Republic, and Mr Koichiro Matsuura signed a Joint Communiqué between the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and UNESCO.<sup>78</sup> This significant document, sets out the direction for all future collaboration between the Sakha Republic and UNESCO. It details:

**Education** – Participation of the Sakha Republic in UNESCO’s program “Education for all”, ensuring the development of the nomadic schools in the northern regions of the Sakha Republic with an aim of providing equal access to education for all.

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<sup>75</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. “Olonkho, Yakut heroic epos.” <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/olokho-yakut-heroic-epos-00145> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>76</sup> The International Scientific Symposium “Preservation of cultural diversity: The UNESCO Masterpieces on the Land of Olongkho,” July 6-7, 2016, Yakutsk.

<sup>77</sup> UNESCO Director-General (elected to a six-year term on 15 November 1999; re-elected in 2005).

<sup>78</sup> Teatr Olonkho. “Sovmestnoye communique mezhdu Respublikoi Sakha (Yakutia) I UNESCO (2006).” <http://olokhotheatre.ru/communique.html> (accessed April 3, 2019)

**Research and environmental protection** – Participation of the Sakha Republic in a number of UNESCO programs dedicated to the research of climate change and preventions of natural disasters in extreme climatic living conditions.

**Culture** – Development of the program “Preservation, revitalization and development of the Sakha heroic epos *olongkho* in a period of 2006-2015”, which implementations include: establishment of the International Centre of Olongkho, Olongkho Theatre in Yakutsk, International Mammoth Museum in Yakutsk, development of programs aimed for the preservation and development of the Cultural and Natural Heritage of Peoples of Arctic and Sub-Arctic regions of the Russian Federation.

**Communication and Information** Participation in UNESCO program “Information for all” and digital archiving of the elements of the cultural heritage of the indigenous people.<sup>79</sup>

The recognition of *olongkho* by UNESCO was not limited to the one official announcement but was followed by an extensive number of obligations and responsibilities that fell on the Sakha Republic. Interestingly, despite it being centred on the recognition of Sakha *olongkho*, the agreement with UNESCO required the preservation and development not only of Sakha practices but of the practices of nomadic peoples’ in the northern regions of the Republic (meaning Even, Evenki, Dolgan, Yukaghir and Chukchi peoples). Moreover, the Joint Communiqué touched upon the issues of culture, research and education, as well as the environmental protection, including the prevention of natural disasters. UNESCO’s recognition of one of the Sakha practices resulted in measures directed towards various aspects of Sakha society and, as referred in the English text of the Communiqué, “indigenous peoples” of the Sakha Republic.

The announcement of the “Decade of Olongkho” for the period of 2006–2015 correlated with the time framework for the implementation of the Joint Communiqué. During these ten years, there was a large amount of research done on the epics: *olongkho*-data gathering, publishing, translation of *olongkho* texts and digital archiving. It is indeed tempting to investigate all of the aspects named in the Joint Communiqué, but to do so would mean this dissertation would move beyond its research goal. Therefore, in this chapter, I focus exclusively

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<sup>79</sup> Full text at: Teatr Olonkho. “Sovmestnoye communique mezhdou Respublikoi Sakha (Yakutia) I UNESCO (2006).” <http://olonkhotheatre.ru/communique.html> (accessed April 3, 2019). Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura at: UNESCO. Director-General, 1999-2009 (Matsuura, K.). “Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the Forum: Sustainable Development of the Arctic Countries and the Northern Regions of the Russian Federation in the Context of Education, Science and Culture.” <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146605> (accessed April 3, 2019).

on the articulations of religion and indigeneity of one of the outcomes of this agreement – Olongkho Yhyakh.

## **Olongkho Yhyakh 2016**

I followed the news about the preparations for the Olongkho Yhyakh in Verkhoyansk from the beginning of 2016. Verkhoyansk is a small town with a population of a little over 1,000 people. A lot of work had to be done to host several thousand participants and visitors for the event. The majority of the efforts, and expenses, were directed towards improving infrastructure in the region and building architectural constructions for the yhyakh area.<sup>80</sup> The news that the financial support for the event would come from the Republic's budget created some tension among the Sakha. I witnessed conversations among the general public that criticized such priorities of the Sakha political elite and the unnecessary use of limited financial resources. There were also people in these conversations who supported the idea of organizing such important events in remote areas like Verkhoyansk, with the hope of increasing tourism and improving the infrastructure of these regions. The general atmosphere and controversies reminded me of the debates around events like the Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup, though, of course, on a much smaller scale. Each Olongkho Yhyakh was supposed to be hosted by a new *uluus* each year, meaning that the expenses for its organization had to be annually approved and taken from the Republic's budget, creating room for debates on this issue every year prior to each of the events.

## **Getting to Verkhoyansk**

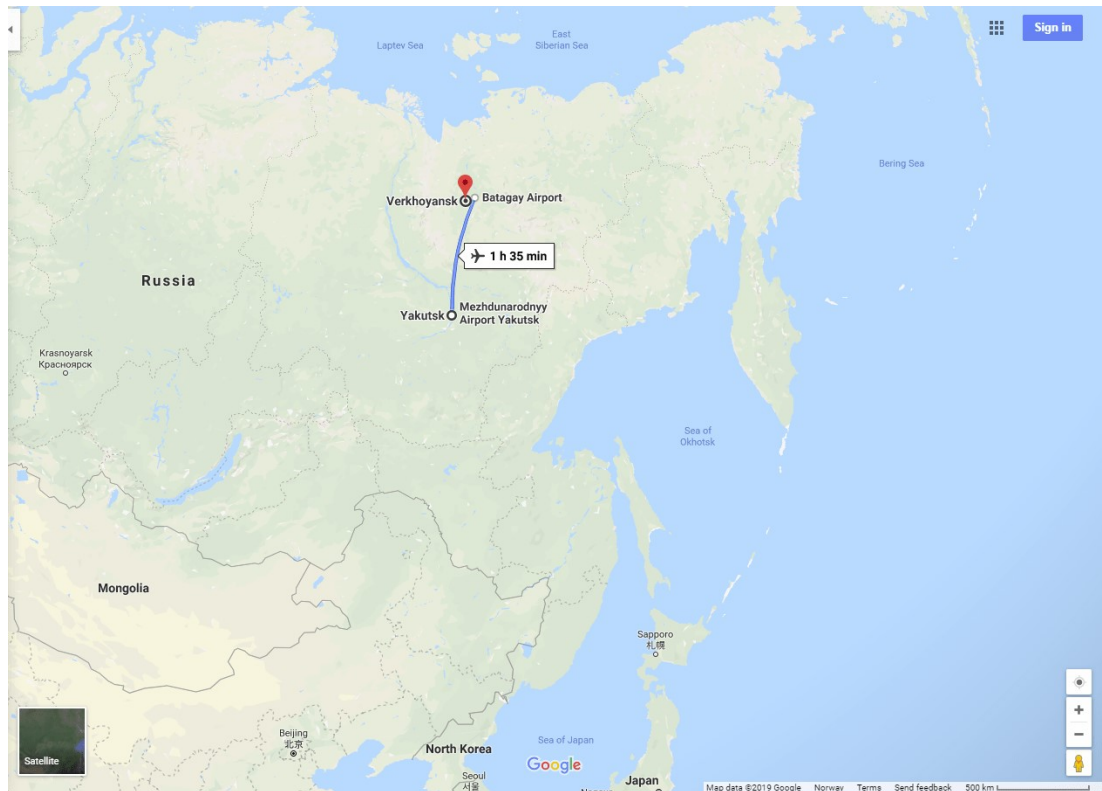
The Olongkho Yhyakh 2016 was to be held in Verkhoyansk. There is only one way to reach this town in the summertime – by plane and it requires flying to Batagai, the nearest airport to Verkhoyansk (see map 2). In winter time, when lakes and rivers are frozen, the winter-roads are open for people to travel by car. Verkhoyansk is a very remote place, where all provisions

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<sup>80</sup>YakutiaMedia. "Construction of Aal Luk Mas, House of Olongkho and the main arena with tribunes." <http://yakutiamedia.ru/news/488037/> (accessed April 3, 2019).



and goods need either to be sent in the winter or to be transported in by plane, which is very expensive.



Map 3. Yakutsk, Batagai and Verkhoyansk.<sup>81</sup>

The flight I was on was delayed for several hours due to the weather conditions in the north. Heavy rains in Verkhoyansk soon became a topic of discussion. After waiting for half a day at the airport, passengers were finally invited to board. We had spectacular views of the nature during the two hour flight. Mountains, still covered in snow, green forests and numerous rivers and lakes could be seen below. The abundance of water in rivers and lakes were largely caused, I learnt later, by the melting permafrost.

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<sup>81</sup> GoogleMaps. "Yakutsk to Verkhoyansk" [https://www.google.ru/maps/dir/Yakutsk,+%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F/%D0%92%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA,+%D0%A0%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF,+%D0%A1%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0+\(%D0%AF%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%8F\),+%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F,+678530/@58.1771518,121.8234897,4.11z/data=!4m14!4m13!1m5!1m1!1s0x5bf63939a0d2c47d:0x69b4c4b35cfa2fb!2m2!1d129.6754745!2d62.0354523!1m5!1m1!1s0x5b9579da63386d09:0x1dda69f74af67b40!2m2!1d133.3993398!2d67.5505925!3e4?hl=en](https://www.google.ru/maps/dir/Yakutsk,+%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F/%D0%92%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA,+%D0%A0%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF,+%D0%A1%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0+(%D0%AF%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%8F),+%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%8F,+678530/@58.1771518,121.8234897,4.11z/data=!4m14!4m13!1m5!1m1!1s0x5bf63939a0d2c47d:0x69b4c4b35cfa2fb!2m2!1d129.6754745!2d62.0354523!1m5!1m1!1s0x5b9579da63386d09:0x1dda69f74af67b40!2m2!1d133.3993398!2d67.5505925!3e4?hl=en) (accessed April 3, 2019).

People with buckets of eggs, boxes of Korean noodles and other kinds of provisions hurried to leave the medium size plane after landing. Dozens of buses and cars with nameplates “Ысыах Олонхо” (Ru.) (‘Olongkho Yhyakh’) were waiting for the passengers arriving from Yakutsk. It looked like the majority of people were going to the Olongkho Yhyakh.

The journey from the Batagai airport to Verkhoyansk was supposed to take about two hours. I took a mini-bus taxi together with the other newly arrived passengers from Yakutsk. Travelling in the north can be dangerous due to the low-quality roads and harsh weather conditions. The roads were muddy, which made the car slip constantly from side to side. On our way, we crossed three bridges, made only from sand and dirt, over three rivers that were a few meters in width. The mini-bus taxi had both Orthodox Christian icons and Sakha *kharyskhal* (Sa.) (‘protection’) made of silver and horse hair (see image 21). I often notice the combination of these two elements in the cars of Sakha drivers, especially of those who regularly drive long distances, who see in them protection against road accidents.



*Image 21. Sakha kharyskhal and Orthodox Christian icons in a taxi.*

Halfway to Verkhoyansk, our taxi driver announced that there would be a stop by a *shaman-derevo* (Ru.) (‘shaman-tree’). We walked to the *shaman-derevo*, where people put *alaad’y*,

candy, cigarettes, bread, coins and pieces of colourful cloths called *salama* in Sakha (see image 22). A young Sakha man sitting next to me used the stop to have a smoke and then left his cigarette butt under the *shaman-derevo* as a gift. I asked him why he chose to offer the leftovers of his cigarette, to which he replied: “I give to *shaman-derevo* what gives me the most joy.” Later in Verkhoyansk, I met Marta, a Sakha woman living in Iceland, who shared her frustrations when we talked about *shaman-derevo*:

I come home to Yakutia every summer, and often I have some friends from Iceland, who join me. This year my friend Rosa attended the [Olongkho] Yhyakh, where I was translating the speeches, songs and rituals (Ru. *ritualy*) to her. She was always confused by us, Sakha, who are talking about protecting nature but throwing plastic trash everywhere, especially by the *shaman-derevo* (Marta, Sakha woman in her 40s).



*Image 22. Shaman-Derevo by the road between Batagai and Verkhoyansk.*

In my family, whenever we travel outside of town, to go berry or mushroom picking, we always either leave *alaad'y* on the side of the road or put a piece of bread on the ground. My aunts and mother call this *sir* (Sa.) ('land') *ahatyy* (Sa.) ('feeding', 'offering'). I had always assumed that we do *sir ahatyy* whenever we are in the countryside or on a long journey. When my family visited me in Tromsø while I was doing a master's degree, I expected them to do *sir ahatyy* during our travels and had extra bread or cookies with me. I do not usually do it myself. By the

end of their visit to Norway, I realized that my family had not done *sir ahatyy*, despite travelling around the country. At that time I was not doing research on Sakha practices, thus did not pay attention to this. Later I asked my mother why they did not do *sir ahatyy* in Norway, to which she responded: “Our *ichchi* do not live in Norway. It is not our *sir*. They have their own ways, which we do not know and, thus, should not disrespect by doing our things at their *sir*.”

I have seen most of the members of my family and friends do *sir ahatyy*. However, I can not remember any of them referring to a *shaman-derevo*. In fact, it was only on this journey from Batagai to Verkhoyansk that I heard of a *shaman-derevo* and saw it for the first time. The driver and all the passengers were Sakha and spoke in Sakha, yet they all referred to the tree as *shaman-derevo* in Russian and to the act itself as *sir ahatyy*. They did not use the Sakha word for a tree *mas*, or the frequent translations of ‘shaman’ in Sakha, such as *algyschyt* or *oyuun*. *Shaman-derevo* was not *shaman-mas*, *oyuun-mas* or *algyschyt-mas*. It was only referred to in Russian but perceived as a Sakha practice. If it was a Sakha practice, why did it not have a Sakha name? The notion of *shaman-derevo ahatyy*, which requires a mixture of Russian and Sakha, sounded quite strange to me and signaled an interesting feature of this practice. It was both something Sakha because it was performed as *sir ahatyy* would be and something not Sakha because it was about the *shaman-derevo*.

### **Kihileekh are angry**

When I arrived to Verkhoyansk in the evening, I was hosted by my family’s friends. I was woken the next morning by intense chattering in the kitchen and the sounds of a sewing machine. People in the kitchen were talking about the heavy rainfall from the previous night that had caused the rivers, including the ones beneath the three connecting bridges between Batagai and Verkhoyansk, to burst their banks and the bridges to be washed away. This meant that Verkhoyansk was isolated from the rest of the region and, most importantly, from the airport. Both tourists and some organizers, honoured guests and participants of Olongkho Yhyakh were supposed to arrive that morning. The question of whether the Olongkho Yhyakh, only a few hours away, would be cancelled was in the air. Zina, an elderly woman from the family that was hosting me, sighed and said that the Kihileekh mountains were showing their anger at the organizers of the event:



The Kihileekh should not be disturbed. It is a place of *aiyy* that only great *oyuun* can visit. Olongkho Yhyakh brings a lot of traffic and tourists, who do not understand that and climb the mountains. The Kihileekh show their anger by washing away the bridges and stopping the wave of tourists (Zina, 82 y.o. Sakha woman).

Zina talked about the Kihileekh mountains and *aiyy* as if they were living creatures who had feelings and ways to express them. Kihileekh comes from the plural form of the Sakha word *kihi*, which means 'a human' or 'a person'. The mountains were so-called because of the human-like shaped stones standing on top of them (see image 23).



*Image 23. Kihileekh mountains.*

In my childhood, I heard the stories about Kihileekh first from Slava, a student from Verkhoyansk, who stayed with my family during his studies in Yakutsk. It was Slava's relatives who were my hosts in Verkhoyansk. When Slava's parents visited him, they would sometimes tell stories about people who climbed Kihileekh. Often these stories were about people who had physical or psychological struggles who climbed the mountains to be healed and receive energy. There were also stories about people who never made it back from Kihileekh and were lost in the woods. Slava moved back to Verkhoyansk after obtaining his degree in sports and

tourism. He opened a tourist company where he offers organized hiking trips and helicopter tours to the Kihileekh mountains.

By late morning, the only helicopter in the region began transporting people from the Batagai airport to Verkhoyansk. The atmosphere began to ease in town. I walked to the yhyakh area together with Zina, her daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren dressed in newly sewn Sakha costumes. Some of the costumes were finished during the night and the sewing machine was busy until the very last minute before we left the house. I saw people walking from the helipad to the event site. I approached two women with big backpacks, who turned out to be tourists from Moscow, to ask about their journey:

We took the first flight from Yakutsk to Batagai. There were several buses waiting for visitors from Yakutsk to transport people to Batagai. We sat on one of two buses that departed at the same time from the airport. After about half an hour we were informed that the bridges to Verkhoyansk were washed away and the bus started driving back to the airport. At Batagai, we were told that we could get to Verkhoyansk only by helicopter. We bought tickets for 2,000 rubles per person. Only three out of the twenty-five passengers from the bus took a helicopter, while the others travelled back to Yakutsk. Many locals from Batagai and surrounding villages could not afford the helicopter ticket and went home. The trip took twenty minutes and the helicopter took off again without turning off the engine and flew back to Batagai to continue transporting people to the yhyakh. There is a long queue in Batagai of people who want to make it to the Olongkho Yhyakh (Alina and Anna, Russian women in their 30s).

It was not only the visitors from Yakutsk who faced difficulties. People from the neighbouring villages around Verkhoyansk had no affordable way to come to the Olongkho Yhyakh. Despite the extensive funding spent on the improvement of the region's infrastructure, unexpected weather conditions created a number of challenges for the organizers. Equipment, horses and reindeer that were supposed to be exhibited during the Olongkho Yhyakh did not arrive. One of Zina's daughters had to run back home to sew Sakha dresses for dancers whose costumes were supposed to arrive from Batagai but never did.

Floods are not a rare occurrence for the locals in Verkhoyansk. My host family told me that more and more people are moving to Yakutsk and other regions of the Republic because of the floods and melting hay fields caused supposedly by the continuous high temperatures that contribute to the melting of the permafrost. One of the main economies in the Verkhoyansk region is cattle herding. The melting hay fields makes it nearly impossible to collect

and dry enough hay for the cattle to eat over the winter. Such conditions often leave the farmers with no choice other than to slaughter their cattle and move to other regions. Some succeed in starting a new life after giving up cattle herding. Some fail and seek solace in alcohol.

Recently, young men have found a new source of income in extracting mammoth tusks. The stories of instant and spectacular wealth from mammoth tusk sales in Asian markets motivate people to try their luck. Despite the high stakes, there is no guarantee of success by the end of the season. Many end up losing money spent on costly expeditions. One of the women from my host family, Agafia, said:

Some boys do not even finish high school. They drop their education with the hope of getting rich from finding mammoth tusks. Those boys who go to the university, come back home for the summer season with hopes to pay their rent and tuition fees from the mammoth tusk sales. It is a dangerous and illegal business with no insurance and no guarantees. We are losing our boys to this (Agafia, Sakha woman from Verkhoyansk).

Mammoth tusks are already named a 'new kind of gold rush' and tuskers as 'mammoth pirates'.<sup>82</sup> The inscreasing scale of smuggling, dangers for tuskers, damages for the environment, and potential economic loss for the Republic create debates around the legalization and state control of the export trade of mammoth tusks.<sup>83</sup>

### **Olongkho Yhyakh begins**

By noon, it stopped raining. The sun was shining and the sky was blue and clear. Only a few puddles remained from the heavy rains. The opening ceremony began at 11 a.m. The Head of the Sakha Republic with the delegation from the Sakha Parliament and other important guests filled the central VIP stands. The opening ceremony started with a play developed by the Olongkho Theatre.<sup>84</sup> Andrey Borisov, former Minister of Culture and Spiritual Development, and one of those who worked on the nomination of Olongkho to the UNESCO, was the director of the performance. On the main stage, there was an installation of the Kihileekh mountains,

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<sup>82</sup> Amos Chapple. 2016. "The Mammoth Pirates. In Russia's Arctic north, a new kind of gold rush is under way." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc.* <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-mammoth-pirates/27939865.html> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>83</sup> REGNUM. 2018. "V Yakutii pridumali kak legalizovat' eksportnuu trgovlu bivnyami mamontov." <https://regnum.ru/news/2455077.html> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>84</sup> The Olongkho Theatre was established as one of the implementations of the Communique between the Sakha Republic and UNESCO.

inside the installation were women in Sakha costumes symbolizing the living souls of Kihileekh. They played Sakha jaw harp *khomus* and sang excerpts from *olongkho*. Then, an actor introduced as *oyuun* with a drum performed a choreographed dance together with the group of dancers (see image 24).



*Image 24. Performing oyuun.*

Similarly to the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2017, the *oyuun* was a part of the theatrical play. After the performance, the *algys* began. An *algyschyt* in white clothes, in contrast to the dark outfit of the *oyuun*, entered the stage with eight girls on his left and nine boys on his right. Again, in contrast to the dancing *oyuun*, who was a character in the play, the *algyschyt* was presented by the speaker as an expert in the ancient ritual (Ru. *drevniy ritual*) of *algys*. The *algyschyt* performed *algys* for the prosperity of *olongkho* and finished the ceremony by sprinkling *kumys*. Next, Egor Borisov, the Head of the Sakha Republic at that time, was invited to speak, then the Chairman of the Government of the Sakha Republic, and after that the local administration from Verkhoyansk and organizers of the Olongkho Yhyakh. The opening ceremony ended with the *ohuokhai* and the audience was invited to join in (see image 25).





Image 25. Ohuokhai dance.

The *ohuokhai* was kept going for two days non-stop, with people replacing each other as they became tired. At night there were fewer people dancing, but the *ohuokhai* was kept going until the closing ceremony. Anyone could join the circle, regardless of skills, clothing, gender, age, or nationality. Throughout the yhyakh I joined in with the *ohuokhai* several times. I approached one of the men who danced *ohuokhai* to ask about his experience at Olongkho Yhyakh so far:

This is a special yhyakh. Kihileekh mountains and the land of Verkhoyansk have a different energy. When I dance *ohuokhai* here, I feel that I am receiving energy (Ru. *energiia*) from the surrounding wild nature. There is a strong energy (Arkady, Sakha man in his 30s).

The event was full of joy and celebration. Considerable work was done by the locals, improvising at the last moment to prevent cancellation. The lack of food supplies, equipment, and decorations that were supposed to arrive, forced the organizers to adjust and change the program. I had a brief interview with the Head of the Media coverage for the Olongkho Yhyakh:

It is a big honour and a very big responsibility to host the Olongkho Yhyakh. There were no events of such a scale organized before in our municipality. If it had not been for the Olongkho Yhyakh, we would not have received such big financial support from the Republic's budget to improve the infrastructure of the municipality. Yhyakh will end in two days, but the new roads, cultural objects,

renovations of the local school, museum, will all stay. Many locals from Verkhoyansk had to volunteer. Some private individuals volunteered to sponsor prizes for the sport and cultural competitions. For instance, many families gathered money together and bought one prize each for the winners of the various competitions. The scale of support from the local population has been enormous and genuine. We all know each other in Verkhoyansk. Therefore, I can tell you that almost every family hosted tourists and participants for free and shared their food. We are in the North, we have to support each other. Some might think that you can buy what you need, but in a small place like Verkhoyansk, we do not have hotels, and one grocery shop cannot cover the needs of thousands of tourists. So far we are estimating about 5,000 people will visit the event, including 1,200 members of 29 *uluus* delegations, 111 participants of cultural performances and competitions and about eleven people coming from abroad. The most important is that the people who travelled so far to us will enjoy the Olongkho Yhyakh (Anastasia, Sakha woman in her 40s).

As Anastasia mentioned, almost everybody in Verkhoyansk was involved in the organization of the yhyakh. Zina, my host, alone accommodated nine visitors including me. For four days we all shared breakfast and dinner. I brought packaged tea, candy, fruits and vegetables as *kehii* (small gifts that Sakha people typically give to the people who host them). It is considered offensive by many to receive money or something too valuable from your guests. Thus, the help received from the locals in Verkhoyansk, who welcomed visitors and provided them with all of the necessities, was significant in the organization of the yhyakh.

On the way to the yhyakh area, I saw a renovated school building, museum and a new cultural house, where the Olongkho Theatre had performances each evening during the Olongkho Yhyakh. Anastasia mentioned one of the biggest challenges of organizing the Olongkho Yhyakh in such remote place – food supply. While buying a bottle of drinking water from one of the market booths, I began chatting with Elena, a woman who was peeling potatoes. I said that I was doing research and expressed my general interest in yhyakh. Elena said that she would not mind the company and could tell me about the Olongkho Yhyakh while she was preparing potatoes:

Olongkho Yhyakh is a responsibility and honour for all of us here at Verkhoyansk. I hope that our guests will be comfortable. As long as the visitors are happy, I am happy too. I heard that Egor Borisov, the Head of the Republic, arrived with his family and gave a speech during the opening ceremony. I am working at six different locations at the Olongkho Yhyakh to serve food and *kumys*. I was too busy to attend the ceremony, but I heard people talking about it. It cheered me, and all of us, up. It was difficult to get enough *kumys* because the mares have just

calved. We had to empty all our stocks, and in total we produced 2.5 tonnes of *kumys* for the Olongkho Yhyakh. All *kumys* here is made from the milk of a Sakha breed of mare. For the meat, we began slaughtering cattle and horses several weeks ago. Vegetables, fruits, and other food products we had to transport by plane from Yakutsk to Batagai and then drive to Verkhoyansk. We were given some quotas and subsidies from the government to transport food supplies. We made plans for this last year and transported some products in the winter, when the roads were open, which was much cheaper than using a plane. I heard that some visitors were complaining about the high prices at our cafes. But this is the North and we cannot do anything about the high transportation costs. I am not earning anything from the sales, the opposite in fact, I am sponsoring the event and my budget is going into the minus (Elena, Sakha woman in her 50s).

The Sakha horse, which Elena mentioned, is a rare native breed found only in the Sakha Republic. The horses are semi-wild, and are collected from the forest only once a year for milking. It is a rather complicated process to milk a semi-wild horse, and 2.5 tonnes of collected *kumys* for the yhyakh is an impressive amount.

I looked at my dish of potatoes and vegetables and imagined how much more it would have cost if the transportation of the food supply was not subsidized by the government and if Elena had priced it in a way that would give her some income. She also mentioned that several people who worked at the café booths worked overtime, but neither Elena nor her employees were paid for those hours. It seemed that the Olongkho Yhyakh was heavily reliant on the local population, who under pressure to host a successful event volunteered and even sponsored it to some extent. I got the impression that the locals and organizers of the yhyakh prioritized the experiences of their guests over their own and many of them did not have a chance to enjoy the event. People were united by a shared goal to present Verkhoyansk at its best even if that meant a considerable amount of unpaid work.

At the yhyakh, a wide range of activities was going on simultaneously: a sports competition among men *Öbügeler oonn'uulara* (Sa.) ('Games of the Ancestors'); a beauty competition for women *Tuyaaryma Kuo*; Sakha board games; concerts; competitions in *khomus* performance; and contests for the best Sakha costumes (see image 26). There were not only people with Sakha summer dresses like *khaladai* but also with full winter sets including fur clothes. Some of the costumes were quite impressive, especially those with large *iliñ kebiher* and *keliñ kebiher* (front and back necklaces) made from silver. Some of the men's

costumes were also rich in silver, for example, the belts. However, the absolute highlight of the Olongkho Yhyakh was indeed the *olongkho* itself.



*Image 26. Participants of the contest for the best Sakha costume.*

### **Olongkho is alive and young**

One of the main criterion for the *olongkho* being included in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was that the tradition had to be alive. As has been mentioned above, there were only two *olongkhosuts* at the time when *olongkho* was proposed to UNESCO. Both *olongkhosuts*, Petr Reshetnikov and Dariya Tomskaya, witnessed how *olongkho* had begun spreading among the younger generation before they passed away. Ten years after UNESCO's recognition, in Verkhoyansk, the homeland of Dariya Tomskaya, the tenth Olongkho Yhyakh gathered together over one hundred *olongkhosuts* from all over the Sakha Republic.

In order to perform at the Olongkho Yhyakh, *olongkhosuts* had to go through multiple qualifying competitions. Only the winners of the regional contests in *olongkho* made it to Verkhoyansk, where they were competing for the title of the best *olongkhosut* of the Republic. The contest was divided into two groups: one for adults and one for children. There were more children performing *olongkho* than adults. The committee had to put a time-limit on the



children's contest, with no more than 20 minutes for each performance. Some kids were clearly disappointed since they had prepared a performance that would last for at least an hour. I was impressed to see children as young as seven mastering the Sakha language and the *olongkho* style.<sup>85</sup> Once finished, performing children ran outside and played with the other kids. The contest for the children was finished by 7 p.m. and each age category received the prizes for the first, second and the third place, from the judges (see image 27).



*Image 27. Olongkho contest among children.*

In contrast, the contest for adults did not have a strict time-limit, which led these *olongkho* performances to continue throughout the night. The contest was organised inside the *uraha* made of birch bark. The members of the judging committee had to take several turns to eat and rest in between all the performances. It was the first time that I had seen *olongkhosuts* perform 'live'. When the *olongkhosuts* were imitating dialogues, they used different voices. Each had a distinct singing and acting style. There were both men and women of various ages among the

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<sup>85</sup> One of my cousin's daughters, a 5 years old, is learning *olongkho* in kindergarten. She likes the *olongkho* singing style so much that her parents complain that she is now talking only in the style of *olongkho*.

*olongkhosuts*. It was striking to see so many *olongkhosuts*, considering that there were only two persons performing *olongkho* publically just ten years ago.

### **Guests from afar**

Anastasia from the Media Centre mentioned that there were several guests who had travelled from abroad. Among them was Susanna Sieroszewski, the great-granddaughter of the political exile Wacław Sieroszewski, from Poland, and Eleanor Peers, an anthropologist from the University of Aberdeen, Great Britain.

The excitement of meeting the great-granddaughter of Sieroszewski demonstrated itself among some of the interviewees:

I was working almost non-stop, had three hours of sleep and, sadly, did not have time to attend any events, but I met Sieroszewski's great-granddaughter! It was a reward for all the work that I have done (Elena, the manager of the food supplies in Verkhoyansk).

Of course, we know that Sieroszewski lived here in Verkhoyansk, but time goes by and it seems like it was such a long time ago. Now we see his great-granddaughter reminding us that he was not a legend living only in the books, but a real person (A group of local residents of Verkhoyansk).

Wacław Sieroszewski, the great-grandfather of Susanna Sieroszewski, is an important figure in Sakha history. Verkhoyansk, a town surrounded by mountains reaching temperatures of -72°C in winter, was used as an exile destination long before the infamous Soviet GULAGs. Sieroszewski was an activist in Polish separatist movements, which brought him to his Siberian exile in 1880 (Sieroszewski 1993). During his years of exile, Sieroszewski became interested in the Sakha language, geography, economy, family life and practices, to which he devoted his major ethnographic work, *Yakuty* (1896). *Yakuty* is still one of the most fundamental works done in Sakha ethnography. Therefore, the visit from Susanna Sieroszewski was a remarkable event not only for the residents of Verkhoyansk but for the Sakha Republic in general.

Another guest from abroad was Eleanor Peers, an anthropologist from the University of Aberdeen, who has been conducting research on the development of the yhyakh celebration for the last ten years and who regularly visits the Sakha Republic. The presence of a few representatives from abroad framed the Olongkho Yhyakh as an international event in the

Sakha media, which seemed to have increased the pride among the organizers and the local residents.

Russian guests outside the Sakha Republic were also treated with interest by the local media and people. I conducted a short interview with two tourists from Moscow whom I had met earlier. I asked about their impression of Olongkho Yhyakh:

Well, it seems like everything has been organized with attempts to brand the Sakha Republic, but the attempts have clearly failed. Many never made it to the yhyakh because the roads were washed away. Perhaps, the local gods (Ru. *bogi*) from Kihileekh were not happy about the event. It took many hours of waiting and travelling; people are tired, no one is smiling, there is no fun atmosphere. Ask any of the local Sakha; everybody thinks that it is a failure of the organizers, who did not manage to make things work on time. The idea was indeed good, but the implementation was rather different from the expectations. I only enjoyed the Sakha traditional dresses, amazing costumes. We were at the [Tuymaada] Yhyakh festival (Ru. *festival'*) in Yakutsk, where we went to the ceremony of purification (Ru. *ochishcheniia*). I did not see any such ceremonies here. We were late and missed the opening ceremony. It is sad that several events were cancelled (Alina and Anna, Russian women in their 30s from Moscow).

These tourists from Moscow were not impressed by the Olongkho Yhyakh. They expected a well organized, yet exotic celebration with ceremonies, but were disappointed when they learnt that many events were cancelled. They had hoped to see happy people at the yhyakh, but due to the unexpected challenges caused by the weather, many locals were working and had no time to enjoy the event. Another reason why the event did not make an expected impression, I assume, was the language barrier. Most of the events and performances were in Sakha. Foreign guests had their private translators, while backpackers from Moscow had to rely on their Russian, which was commonly understood but not extensively used during the event. Interestingly, they framed the event as a failed attempt to “brand” Sakha. They said that they learnt about the yhyakh from Russian TV channels and imagined it to be different from what it was, though they could not describe exactly what they had expected.

Another interesting articulation is their interpretation that the washed away bridges were a sign of anger from the local gods (Ru. *bogi*), though it is most likely that they heard this from the locals. Similar to the articulations of *algys* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, they translated *algys* as a ‘ritual of purification’. Having visited Tuymaada Yhyakh, with its many *algys* ceremonies, they had certain expectations that were not fulfilled. The only positive aspect of



the event they mentioned was the contest of the Sakha costumes. They told me that they planned to stay for two days in Verkhoyansk and then go for a four-day hiking trip to the Kihileekh mountains. Despite accepting the local interpretation that the Kihileekh mountains were angry because of the tourists, they still decided to go on their hiking trip.

### **Tühülge for korennye peoples of the North**

Verkhoyansky's neighbour is Eveno-Bytantaiskiy *uluus*, which is largely populated by the Even people. Even are recognized as a small-numbered *korennye* people of the North, unlike the Sakha. Small-numbered *korennye* peoples of the North had their own *tühülge* at the Olongkho Yhyakh, as they did at the Tuymaada Yhyakh.

I entered the *tühülge*, introduced myself, my project and expressed my interest in interviewing Even people. When I approached three women dressed in Even costumes, they said that they were Sakha (see image 28).



*Image 28. Sakha women in Even dresses.*

I learnt that they were members of a folklore group that performs Even songs and dances. They made the Even costumes themselves, specifically for the Olongkho Yhyakh. Since I had already

mentioned that I was interested in interviewing Even representatives, they refused to be interviewed and re-directed me to one of their fellow members of the folklore group, whom they thought might be Even. I regretted the way I had introduced myself and my project because it would have been equally interesting to interview these Sakha women. When I went to the woman whom they pointed out to me, she said: "I am not Even, most of my extended family are Yukaghir people, but I am a Sakha. My parents speak Yukaghir, but they are Sakha too." This was an interesting take on the notion of ethnicity not as something that is exclusively defined by one's heritage, but as something that can be chosen in the way this Sakha woman chose to identify herself as Sakha despite the fact that most of her extended family identifies as Yukaghir. When I attempted to continue the conversation, she said that I should approach an old woman sitting on the front bench and walked away. This woman identified herself as Even, and agreed to talk with me:

I love yhyakh. I like it here. I remember some yhyakhs when I was younger. It was always fun to watch sports competitions. However, yhyakhs were not as common when I was younger. I remember more Reindeer festivals (*Sa. taba festival'ya*). I never went to school. We were living a nomadic life with my family and our reindeer. It was always nice to attend festivals and meet other people (Irina, Even woman in her 70s).

Irina touched upon, perhaps, the most articulated role of yhyakh – a meeting place. Reindeer herding is a traditional economy of Even people. The population of Even today is about 20,000 people. Many still practice reindeer herding. In contrast to Irina's childhood, many contemporary Even children have an opportunity to attend nomadic schools, where teachers either travel together with the reindeer herders or travel by helicopter from one temporary settlement to another. I did not find anybody else who would identify her/himself as Even. At times, I got the impression that the Sakha women were quite insistent in articulating their Sakha identity. The Sakha women from the folklore group did not mind having Even dresses on. They were proud of the costumes, but at the same time, they hurried to disassociate themselves from the Even people. Thus, the *tühülge* for the *korennye* peoples of the North was mainly occupied by people who identified themselves as Sakha.

Before travelling to Verkhoyansk, I had a meeting with the Sakha historian Ekaterina Romanova, who is active in the processes of organization and conceptualization of the Tuymaada Yhyakh in Yakutsk. I thought that Romanova was also involved in the organization of the Olongkho Yhyakh, but she said that: "The Olongkho Yhyakh is not a real (Ru. *nastoyashchii*)

yhyakh, it is an event invented by the authorities to worship (Ru. *pochitat'*) *olongkho*, instead of *aiyy*.”<sup>86</sup> However, there were some people who had exactly the opposite opinion about the Olongkho Yhyakh:

This is a real (Ru. *nastoyashchii*) yhyakh for me here at Verkhoyansk. I have attended many yhyakhs but this one in particular I think is the most genuine and authentic one. I dislike Tuymaada Yhyakh because it has just grown into a commercial show. After I moved from Yakutsk to Iceland, I began to wonder about myself and my people. I was so impressed by Icelanders, who put so much effort in preserving and developing their language and culture. I realized that I am missing the pride that they have. I was raised in Russian and Sakha, but I cannot speak pure (Ru. *chisty*) Sakha. I feel like a victim of the Soviet assimilation. That is why I feel so happy to see young children today at the Olongkho Yhyakh who have such a rich vocabulary in Sakha and play *khomus* so well. This proves that we, Sakha, have managed to keep our traditions (Ru. *traditsii*) alive despite Christianization and the Soviet regime. I am proud to be Sakha. When I am in Iceland I wear my Sakha jewellery and costume and tell them about my Sakha people. When I positioned myself as a cosmopolitan, I felt that I was not accepted by Icelanders. Only after finding and showing my roots was I integrated into the Icelandic community (Marta, a Sakha woman in her 40s).

Marta was overwhelmed by the hospitality and generosity of people at Verkhoyansk. She was even more impressed by the children playing *khomus* and mastering the Sakha language better than herself. Marta called herself a victim of Soviet assimilation as a result of which not only did she lose her mother tongue but had, in her opinion, difficulties in integrating into Icelandic society. She concluded that the key for integration in Iceland was not to be a faceless cosmopolitan but to be proud of her own culture in the same way that Icelanders are proud of theirs.

I visited Marta in 2018 in Reykjavik, where she organized an event for erecting a Sakha hitching post for horses, *serge* as a symbol of friendship between the Sakha Republic and Iceland. Marta visits her family each summer in Yakutsk and actively participates in charity programs that organize *khomus* competitions for children.

The hundreds of *olongkhosuts* present at the Olongkho Yhyakh demonstrated that the practice of *olongkho* is alive and that it has a future. Verkhoyansk was the last *uluus* to host the Olongkho Yhyakh in the “Decade of Olongkho”. However, as mentioned earlier, the head

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Ekaterina Romanova at her office. Summer, 2016.

of the Sakha Republic announced a second “Decade of Olongkho” for the period of 2016 – 2025.

### **Olongkho Yhyakh 2017**

Vilyuysk, a town situated 600 km west of Yakutsk, was chosen to host the Olongkho Yhyakh in 2017. The current population of Vilyuysk is about 10,000 people.<sup>87</sup> It took nearly twelve hours to get to Vilyuysk from Yakutsk by a regional mini-bus taxi. Because of the traffic and difficult driving conditions, I arrived in the early hours of the next morning. Since the time was already about 2 a.m., I asked the driver to stop by the Olongkho Yhyakh *tühülge*, where the Kün Kōrsūū (Sa.) (‘Sun greeting’) was supposed to start soon. There was a bridge separating the parking lot and the *tühülge*. I met my friend, Ekaterina, and her family, who had agreed to host me during the yhyakh in Vilyuysk. Ekaterina told me that the municipality had built a copper Altyn Serge, similar to the one at Us Khatyn (see image 29).



*Image 29. Altyn Serge in Vilyuysk.*

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<sup>87</sup> Russian Federal State Statistics Service. 2011. “2010 All-Russian Population Census, 1.” [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm) (accessed April 3, 2019).



We went there and saw some people leaning on the sides of Altyn Serge just like at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. I then noticed that some were not only leaning on it but taking turns in posing for a picture. The Kün Kōrsūū began when the *algyschyt* in white clothes with nine boys and eight girls following, entered the *tühülge*. The sun rose and the ceremony was finished with the *ohuokhai* dance.

The atmosphere at Vilyuysk Olongkho Yhyakh reminded me of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. It was rich in events, concerts, entertainment and had hundreds of visitors. It felt very different from the Olongkho Yhyakh at Verkhoiansk in 2016, yet I could not identify what exactly was so different until I found the *uraha* where the contest of *olongkho* was taking a place. It was nearly empty. There were three judges, a couple of *olongkhosuts* and a camera operator from the Sakha broadcasting company “NVK-Sakha” (see image 30).



*Image 30. At Olongkho uraha.*

At first, I thought that perhaps I had entered the Olongkho *uraha* during lunchtime or that it was just a coincidence that it was so empty at this particular moment. I stayed there for two hours, and then checked back quite frequently during the day, but there were very few people sitting and listening to *olongkho*. I got the impression that most of the visitors did not enter the Olongkho *uraha*, and those who did enter, checked what it was, and left within a few

minutes, if not immediately. This was in considerable contrast to the Olongkho Yhyakh at Verkhoyansk, where the Olongkho *uraha* was often so full that people had to stand by the door or sit on the ground. The *tühülge* of the Vilyuysk Yhyakh was much bigger than the one at Verkhoyansk. The Olongkho *uraha* was located quite a distance from the centre and was far from the parking area, making it more challenging for the visitors to go there.

The temperature during the daytime was above +30 °C in Vilyuysk. Many locals, especially elders, stayed at home because it was too hot to walk or sit in the sun. Primarily, families with young children and young adults were present at the yhyakh. In addition to the food stands and the market of the Sakha handicrafts, there was plenty of entertainment for the children such as trampolines, air slides, balloons and candy for sale. There were definitely more people at the market than at the Olongkho *uraha*.

Ekaterina took me sightseeing in town and showed me a new Russian Orthodox Church. I asked how the locals at Vilyuysk had reacted to this, to which she answered:

[Russian Orthodox] Christianity has always been strong here. I am not 100% sure but I think that Vilyuysk was one of the first Sakha settlements, where Russian missionaries built a school. I think that we are quite proud of having a church because it is a symbol of education and care. In fact, I was baptised there myself last year when the new Church opened (Ekaterina, 26 y.o. Sakha woman).

Ekaterina and I went to the Vilyuysk museum, where some of her assumptions were confirmed. Since Vilyuysk is situated west of Yakutsk, Russian Cossacks and missionaries arrived there first and then to Yakutsk and other regions in the area. The location was also one of the reasons why public institutions such as churches, schools and medical centres were built in Vilyuysk earlier than in the rest of the region. Among the most significant figures who visited Vilyuysk was the British missionary and explorer Kate Marsden, who built a hospital for people with leprosy.<sup>88</sup> Her status as a nursing heroine was acknowledged by the Sakha people, who named a 55-carat diamond, the *Sister of Mercy Kate Marsden*, after her.<sup>89</sup>

After the short sightseeing trip in Vilyuysk, we went back to the *tühülge*. At the end of the closing ceremony, the delegation from Vilyuysk officially passed the right to host Olongkho

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<sup>88</sup> Vilyuysk regional museum.

<sup>89</sup> RIA Novosti. "Zhiteli Yakutii postavyat pamyatnik angliyskoi sestre miloserdiya Ket Marsden." April 23, 2009. <http://dv.ria.ru/society/20090423/81762650.html> (accessed April 3, 2019).

Yhyakh to the delegation from Aldan, a gold-mining town in the south of the Sakha Republic, where I travelled to visit the last Olongkho Yhyakh for this research.

### **Olongkho Yhyakh 2018**

The estimated journey to the Aldan highlands was about eight hours by taxi from Yakutsk. Both Yakutsk and Aldan taxi operators had special deals for the visitors of Olongkho Yhyakh. I choose one of the most affordable and common ways to travel to Aldan – by mini-bus taxi. We were seven passengers heading from Yakutsk; there were five going to the Olongkho Yhyakh and two Russian men who planned to work in the Aldan gold mines.

One of my cousins, Lera, works in Aldan as a mine surveyor. She studied and lived in Moscow for several years. However, since there were not many opportunities for a mine surveyor in the capital city, she moved to Aldan and has now been working there for five years. Lera's husband, Sergei, works as a surgeon in Aldan. As young specialists who worked for several years in Aldan, Lera and Sergei receive free accommodation from the municipality, which is where I stayed during my visit.

I went to the Olongkho Yhyakh with Lera. Sergei could not join us because he was working on the ambulance for the two days of the yhyakh. The *tühülge* of the Olongkho Yhyakh in Aldan was on the top of the hills with a view to the Aldan highlands. The Olongkho Yhyakh in Aldan was proclaimed to be the least expensive Olongkho Yhyakh, despite it being the first public yhyakh organized in the town.

Due to the convenient hilly location, organizers installed benches on the slopes. The food stands were gathered in one common area with plenty of tables and benches creating a space for visitors to eat, rest and hang out with family and friends. The food area with all its stands created a cosy atmosphere that allowed people not only to passively spectate the sports games and cultural performances but also to actively interact with each other.

After having a meal, we went to the Sakha handcraft market with Sakha clothes, where Lera bought a *khaladai* dress for herself. It was a surprise to me because growing up I got the impression that Lera generally disliked Sakha things and was 'too cool' to speak Sakha or wear Sakha clothes. This was the moment when it occurred to me that the Sakha revitalization had



even touched my own family and my most 'Russified' family members were confidently embracing their Sakhaness.

The opening ceremony began, as usual, with the speeches of politicians and hosts of the event. Aysen Nikolaev, the former Mayor of Yakutsk City and acting head of the Sakha Republic at that time gave the first speech:

I would like to thank the Aldan region for the wonderful celebration we have today. 95 years ago, Aldan was the place where the new era of industrial development began in the Sakha Republic. Multinational Aldan is still a leader of the industrial development of Yakutia, being an example of the friendship of peoples (Ru. *druzhiba narodov*). Dear friends, the deeper meaning of our *olongkho* is in receiving peace, well-being and abundance to the Middle Earth (Ru. *sredny mir*). Our duty is to work so that people in our Yakutia can live in wealth and happiness. For that, we have everything we need: natural resources, vast territories, and, most importantly, smart and brave people who are not afraid of challenges and harsh climatic conditions. I sincerely wish that the blessings (Ru. *blagosloveniya*) that we are receiving today and the *algys* will reach each resident of Yakutia. To our home Yakutia, to our Great Russia! (Aysen Nikolaev, acting Head of the Sakha Republic).

In September 2018, Aysen Nikolaev was elected as the Head of the Sakha Republic. Nikolaev's speech demonstrates his belief in *algys*, which he perceives as 'a blessing' sent to Middle Earth. Such a speech from the main political figure in the Sakha Republic is an important example of the current political stand towards the religionization of Sakha. It is also an example of communication between the state authorities and the public, emphasizing that yhyakh is a celebration not only for Sakha but for other ethnic residents of the Sakha Republic and 'Great Russia' in the words of Nikolaev.

The main narrative at the Olongkho Yhyakh in Aldan was the *druzhiba narodov*, which although literally means 'friendship of peoples', is more frequently translated to 'fraternity of peoples' in English. Fraternity of peoples is the Marxist concept used commonly in the Soviet Union to emphasize the brotherhood of different peoples within the union. Aldan, a town of about 20 000 residents, is predominantly populated by Russians with a small percentage of Sakha, Evenki and Even populations. For the first time, at the opening ceremony of the Olongkho Yhyakh, there was an official presentation in Evenki and Even languages. Not only was *olongkho* performed at the yhyakh, but there were also extracts from the Evenki and Even epics, and Russian *bylina*, which is a traditional East Slavic oral epic narrative poem.

After the opening ceremony, I noticed a priest from the Russian Orthodox church. I decided to approach the priest for an interview and asked his opinion about the yhyakh:

As a patriot of Russia and Yakutia, I am concerned with everything that happens in Aldan. The Russian Orthodox Church has never been against yhyakh; quite the contrary, it has supported the values and traditions of the local populations. We live in a very culturally and ethnically diverse Republic, where yhyakh is definitely the biggest national celebration. As a resident of the Republic, I take part in it. I am very proud to say that I was engaged in promoting this Olongkho Yhyakh and was requested to do so by the organizers. The Aldan region has a predominantly Slavic population, whose unfamiliarity with the Sakha culture and traditions could have been problematic for the attendance of the event.

I would like to say that Russia is not only a multi-ethnic but also multi-confessional country. Therefore, we, as the biggest religious and Christian denomination in the country, have a considerable respect for and understanding of the cultures and religions (Ru. *religii*) of the small-numbered *korennye* peoples (Pavel, the priest at the Russian Orthodox Church in Aldan).

I did not use the word 'religion' in my question, however, Pavel perceived my question about yhyakh as a question about religion, thus religionizing the practice of yhyakh. The dominance of the Russian population, among whom there was a large number of Orthodox Christians, was of concern, as Pavel mentioned, for the organizers of the yhyakh in Aldan. Therefore, Pavel was recruited to promote the Olongkho Yhyakh, which demonstrates the support of the Russian Orthodox Church for yhyakh in Aldan. Interestingly, Pavel grouped Sakha people into the category of the small-numbered *korennye* peoples, even though Sakha are not recognized as one.

Later, I met a Catholic missionary from Slovakia at the *tühülge* for the small-numbered *korennye* peoples. He introduced himself to me as Father Iosif and told me his story and relationship with Aldan:

I first arrived in the Aldan region in 1992. I began teaching at the Lyceum and now I work as a priest in the Catholic parish. I fell in love with Aldan and made friends with the local populations from Hatastyr, Kutana and other settlements of Even and Evenki peoples (Father Iosif, Catholic missionary from Slovakia).

I asked Father Iosif what he thought as a representative of the Catholic church of *algys* and *algyschyts*:

It is a new culture, a new perspective for me. As a follower of the Christian religion, whether the Orthodox or Catholic, we worship the sun, Jesus Christ as an eternal sun. During the Catholic Easter, we worship fire; we use candles that symbolize sacrifice, power and kindness. This I find quite similar to *algys*, even though I saw

*algys* for the first time in Aldan today. I wanted to learn Sakha, but there are mainly Russians and Russian speaking Sakha in Aldan. Therefore I like working in smaller neighbouring settlements where I meet people who speak Sakha, Evenki and Even.

I organize summer camps for children. We first arrived in the Aldan area to help people who suffered from the flood at the beginning of the 1990s. Little by little, the local populations became more curious about Catholicism and some decided to be baptised. Over time, we grew into a small community, and we gather and pray together. It is a religious community, but I have friends and am in close contact with the other locals outside our religious community too (Father Iosif, Catholic missionary from Slovakia).

This was the first time I had met and talked to a missionary. Father Iosif spoke in nearly fluent Russian and had a rich vocabulary. His view on *algys* and his comparison of Sakha practices to Christianity was quite interesting. Both the priest from the official Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic missionary expressed their understanding and support for yhyakh and Sakha practices.

At the *tühülge* for the small-numbered *korennye* peoples, there was a stage, where various performances took place ranging from dancing and singing to a poetry reading. Unlike any other *tühülge*, this one had several *chum* (a temporary cone shaped dwelling) and art exhibitions inspired and made by the reindeer-herder communities. I saw a woman in Evenki dress and asked her impressions about the Olongkho Yhyakh:

Yhyakh is a Sakha celebration. We have our own yhyakh, it is called Bakaldyyn, which we celebrate at the beginning of June. We celebrate the blossom of Tundra, the New Year. It is a time when all reindeer-herder families get together in one place. It is also a place and opportunity for the young men and women to meet each other.

We celebrate first Bakaldyyn and then yhyakh. It is mainly Russians who live here. We celebrate yhyakh usually in our own settlements, so this is, in fact, the first time when we are properly celebrating yhyakh in Aldan. Well, to be honest, celebrating Bakaldyyn is a new thing for us too. Ten years ago, there was no Bakaldyyn, only yhyakh. Now they are reviving Bakaldyyn! (Albina, 56 y.o. Sakha/Evenki woman).

I asked Albina whom she meant by ‘they’:

I mean the Evenki. I am not Evenki myself, I am Sakha, but I was married to an Evenki. So I guess I am sort of Evenki now. We have lost the Evenki language here in Aldan. We keep our traditions by sewing and making Evenki crafts. Our everyday culture, customs and traditions are still alive, despite our lost language. The interest in native clothes and handicrafts is growing rapidly. I spend most of my spare time either making crafts myself or teaching others. There are plenty of

people who want to learn, just look at our exhibitions, everything is handmade by our community (Albina, 56 y.o. Sakha/Evenki woman).

Albina began the interview by referring to the Evenki as ‘they’ and transitioned later to using ‘us’, which demonstrates the complexity of her self-identification. Making and using Evenki clothes, jewellery and handicrafts was a way to express Evenkiness for Albina, who ethnically described herself Sakha. Albina interestingly juxtaposed the language and material culture as two equally important ways to express one’s identity. I thought of my cousin Lera for whom a Sakha dress was a signifier of a choice and a tool to demonstrate her Sakhaness. Clothing and material culture seem to have been used as an effective way to express one’s identity.

My next stop was at the Olongkho *uraha*. There were 204 registered participants, including 50 children.<sup>90</sup> Each adult *olongkhosut* had 40 minutes for their performance. There were both men and women of different ages. When I entered *uraha*, in the audience, there were only other *olongkhosuts* who were waiting for their turn to perform and curious visitors coming in and out but staying for no more than five minutes at a time. Even the judges seemed to be more preoccupied with being photographed and taking selfies (see image 31).

When the performing *olongkhosut* finished his performance, I asked whether I could interview him:

I have been performing at several Olongkho Yhyakhs: at Verkhoyansk, Vilyuysk, and others. I got to know a lot of very nice people with similar interests. For us, the Olongkho Yhyakh is the place to meet each other. I look forward the most to meeting friends and making new friends too. I am curious to see how other *olongkhosuts* live and perform from the other regions of the Republic (Petr, *olongkhosut* in his 60s).

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<sup>90</sup> V Aldane *nachinayetsya Ysyakh Olongkho*. Accessed April 3, 2019  
<http://news.ykt.ru/article/74324?qf=25863659&qg=70708241>



Image 31. Olongkho uraha in Aldan.

I asked Petr about how long he had been performing *olongkho*?

I think, from the year when *olongkho* was acknowledged by UNESCO, so since 2005. I did sing songs, but not *olongkho*. You cannot just wake up one day and start singing *olongkho*. There is a lot of practice, skills, and knowledge that you need time and assistance to master. I was lucky that I had a tutor, Nikolai Vasil'evich, who is a known *olongkhosut* in the Republic. I had to learn from him since I started as an adult man, or I would say as an old man. Luckily, children and youngsters have more resources than I had in my childhood; they learn *olongkho* already in kindergarten. Oohh... I see my old friend! Excuse me; I will go and greet him, good luck with your research (Petr, *olongkhosut* in his 60s).

Petr ran to his friend and they headed to the food stands area. I suspect that Petr was one of many who was inspired by the recognition of *olongkho* by UNESCO and began performing *olongkho*. He did not seem to be upset by the fact that there was almost no audience present during his performance, as he mentioned, the most important thing for him was to meet other *olongkhosuts*, regardless of whether the meeting was at the Olongkho *uraha* or by the food stands.

I wondered whether the Kün Kōrsüü ceremony would take place since it was not announced in the program. It seemed to be one of the key ceremonies at yhyakhs that I had

previously visited. When I asked the organizers they said that there would be a disco at night instead. Lera went with her friends to the disco, while I stayed at home to rest. The next day, I woke up and saw Sergei coming back from the night shift. I asked him how it went and he said that the night was fine, but early morning was quite busy:

There were several fights after the disco and one man got severely injured. Unfortunately, it was not the worst of what had happened at night. A young woman, no... a girl of 16 was raped and left in the forest by the yhyakh area. We took her to the emergency room and stitched her wounds. Luckily, her life is not in danger (Sergey, a surgeon in Aldan).

While we talked, Lera entered the kitchen. She had left the disco at 3 a.m. and, thus, did not see any of the fighting. I recalled the violence I saw in the early morning at Us Khatyn in 2016 when I stayed overnight there. At both yhyakhs, the violence began in the early morning. I was curious whether any media would cover these stories or not. As time showed later, there were only news articles that highlighted the success of the Olongkho Yhyakh. From what I have observed, there were no news articles covering or addressing the issues of violence either at Tuymaada Yhyakh or Olongkho Yhyakh.

## **Concluding remarks**

In 2016, Sakha authorities organized the International Scientific Symposium “Preservation of Cultural Diversity: the UNESCO Masterpieces on the Land of Olonkho” and invited delegations from Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, India, China and Japan. After the recognition of Olongkho as a cultural heritage of Humanity, the Sakha people, on several occasions grouped themselves with the other peoples, whose cultural heritage was also recognized by UNESCO. Such a comparison with the ancient cultures in India, China or Japan, was definitely a flattering element for the Sakha, who often describe their practices and themselves as ancient people with ancient culture. UNESCO’s recognition and, especially, the Joint Communiqué between the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and UNESCO had a strong impact on the Sakha people and their practices. The practice of *olongkho*, performed by only two people just a few years ago, is brought ‘back to life’ by hundreds of *olongkhosuts* today.

One can look at the revitalization of *olongkho* as a top-down decision, but it is more complex than that. It was the initiative of the Sakha intelligentsia to apply for UNESCO



recognition. UNESCO's decision was a game changer because only after the international recognition were extensive funds directed towards the revitalization of *olongkho*. At last, Sakha people were eager and encouraged to revitalize Sakha practices in their households and workplaces. I think that the example of the *olongkho* revitalization shows both the role of the international recognition and the active agency of the Sakha people.

As a result of UNESCO's recognition, a new form of yhyakh emerged among the Sakha - Olongkho Yhyakh. The unique feature of Olongkho Yhyakh, in my opinion, is how it is oriented towards the image of a Republic-wide yhyakh. Perhaps, the branding of Sakha people and their culture failed for the Russian and the international audiences, as the backpackers from Moscow indicated it, but the branding (if I were to use that term) of Sakha culture for local audiences has definitely succeeded. Olongkho Yhyakh in Verkhoyansk engaged the local residents, who for the sake of creating a celebration for their guests volunteered to work and used all the resources they had. In return, they felt pride in hosting a Sakha event visited by guests from the around the Republic and by a few tourists from central Russia and abroad.

Olongkho Yhyakh is not only directed towards the popularization of *olongkho*, but also towards the popularization of yhyakh. As one of my interviewees from Aldan noted: "Now Aldan has a place to celebrate yhyakh." It is unlikely that Aldan would have built a *tühülge* for the celebration of yhyakh had it not been selected to host the Olongkho Yhyakh. By 2018, the Olongkho Yhyakh has been held in twelve municipalities in the Sakha Republic. This means that there are now twelve municipalities that have a *tühülge* for the celebration of yhyakh and at least eight more will build a *tühülge* in the coming years for the Second Decade of Olongkho.

Visiting three different Olongkho Yhyakhs allowed me to see both the common patterns in ceremonies and the unique elements to each yhyakh. It also helped in creating a multi-dimensional image of the Olongkho Yhyakh. Had I visited only Verkhoyansk, I would have had an exaggerated sense of the excitement of the audiences, as the last two yhyakhs demonstrated lesser public interest in listening to *olongkho*. This observation suggests that the role of the Olongkho Yhyakh is far beyond the practice of *olongkho* itself, as the lack of audiences at Olongkho *uraha* did not make a major difference to the event itself. Similarly, at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, the aspects of nation building, romanticizing the past and a political narrative of the fraternity of peoples were present at Olongkho Yhyakhs. A strong positive image of yhyakh resulted also in the reluctance to allow the criminal acts present at yhyakhs

to be covered by the media and to be made public. A number of interesting notions and practices surfaced during the field trips, such as the *shaman-derevo*, practices of *sir-ahytyy*, usages of Christian icons and Sakha *kharyskhal* by the Sakha drivers, the living mountains of Kihileekh and Altyn Serge (both at Us Khatyn and Vilyuysk). All these examples suggest religionization of Sakha practices. Since both the Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh were rich in articulations of Sakha practices in religious terms, the next chapter will address in more detail the most salient uses of religion in my empirical material.

## **Chapter 4. Yhyakh and Sakha religions**

The first part of this chapter addresses the practice of *algys* that has been continuously described by my interviewees as ‘a healing’, ‘a purification’ and ‘a ritual that gives energy’. I am particularly interested in *algyschyts*, as the performers of what is most regularly described as religious practice at yhyakh, and whose opinion about *algys* and *yhyakh* are important for this study with its aim of reaching a multitude of voices. I am also interested in the organizers of *algys* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh: Archy D’iete, who organizes *algys* at the opening ceremony; and Kamelek, who offers *algys* by the entrance to Us Khatyn. Learning more about the actors that are in charge of *algys* at these yhyakhs will contribute to a better understanding some of the promoters of yhyakh and their motivations, which is one of the goals of this dissertation.

The articulations of religion and indigeneity that I am exploring at and around yhyakh lead, among many other things, to the notion of ‘Sakha religion’, where ‘Sakha’ embodies one of the articulations of indigeneity in this particular case. Understanding religion, or in my case Sakha religion, as “social realities that as such are not given, but are a product of continuous negotiation and objectification” (Dressler 2019: 12), I decided to focus on the actors involved in Sakha religion-making processes. Therefore, the second part of this chapter discusses organizations that claim to represent Sakha religion today (Aar Aiyy Itegele, Aiyy Itegele and Tengrism), as well as the institutions that give approval to these organizations, including the Ministry of Justice and the Russian Orthodox church. The analysis of the registration processes of these organizations and their current situation contribute to a better understanding of the motivations behind and the impact of translations of Sakha practices, including yhyakh, towards the domain of religion. At last, the larger role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Sakha society is briefly discussed.

## Archy D'iete

At the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016, I met a Sakha *ekstrasens* (Ru.) ('psychic'), Dariya, at the *uraha* for *algyschyts* and *ekstrasens*. During the interview, I asked Dariya about yhyakh and her vocation as an *ekstrasens*:

Today, we finally have an opportunity to celebrate yhyakh like in the old times (Sa. *bylyrgylyy*). Sakha *iteġele* was rescued by taking the form of something cultural during the Soviet times. However, politicians still decide what happens at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, which is not right because they do not know enough about Sakha rituals. Yhyakh is not about watching, it is a big and important ritual (Dariya, Sakha *ekstrasens*).

Dariya mentioned the narrative, which I repeatedly heard during my fieldwork, about Sakha *iteġele* being rescued by becoming a form of culture, during the time when religion and religious practices were not encouraged by the Soviet Union. By stating that yhyakh is not only about watching, I suppose that Dariya was pointing to the passiveness of visitors at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. There are hundreds of events that take place at the Tuymaada Yhyakh but very few actively engage participants. Concerts, fashion-shows, sports-competitions and official ceremonies are all oriented towards people spectating from the side and not taking part.

I asked Dariya what she meant by "celebrating yhyakh like in the old times" and where she learnt about older practice:

For instance, the modern tendencies of performing *ohuokhai* I think are wrong. The new trend of *ohuokhai* for men where women are not allowed to participate resulted in an *ohuokhai* exclusively for women. In the old times, *ohuokhai* at yhyakh was the only place where young people could meet and interact with each other and then marry. Both men and women should participate in *ohuokhai*, it is like a Yin and Yang or positive and negative on a battery, there should be a balance (Dariya, Sakha *ekstrasens*).

I have studied the archives, met *algyschyts* and received information.

I asked where she "receives information":

You will not understand... I receive information from "up there", not from this world. If you want to know more about yhyakh, you should go to Archy D'iete (Dariya, Sakha *ekstrasens*).

Dariya advised me to visit Archy D'iete to learn about yhyakh. It was interesting to learn how Dariya used academic research on yhyakh from the archives and her ability to receive

information through her *ekstrasens* skills. I followed her recommendation and went to Archy D'iete in summer 2016 (see image 32).

A friend of mine from Norway, Heidi, who was visiting me at that time, asked if she could join me. Heidi was curious about Sakha *oyuun* after seeing an exhibition at the Sakha Regional Museum where *oyuun* was translated as '*yakutskiy shaman*' ('yakut shaman') in Russian. I suggested to Heidi that she could ask about *oyuun* at Archy D'iete, based on my knowledge that there are *algyschyts* and *ekstrasens* there, who might know something about *oyuun*. Personally, I have never met anyone who identified her/himself as *oyuun* or who was referred to as such by others, except for the theatrical performances at the Tuymaada and Olongkho Yhyakhs.



*Image 32. Archy D'iete.*

The house of Archy D'iete was built in 1999 (Filatov 2000: 121). It is a state-financed organization that carries the status of the 'Centre of spiritual culture' (Ru. *tseñtr dukhovnoy kul'tury*). When we entered Archy D'iete, there was a queue of middle-aged women. They asked whether we had an appointment to see the *ekstrasens*. Since we were talking in English to each other, one of the staff members, Anna, a Sakha woman in her 50s, asked Heidi where

she was from and what she was interested in at Archy D'iete. I explained that Heidi was curious about Sakha *oyuun*, to which Anna quickly responded that there are only *algyschyt*s and *ekstransens* at Archy D'iete. She then left but soon returned with a Sakha man in his 60s, whom she introduced as *algyschyt* Ayulğan (from the Sakha word for 'nature' *ayulğa*). *Algyschyt* Ayulğan seemed to be in a hurry, whereas Anna was trying to convince him to talk to a guest from abroad. Ayulğan asked my full name, after which he smiled and said that he knew my grandfather and asked me to call him Boris (his non-*algyschyt* name).

I learnt from Boris that he went to the boarding school in Khocho, where my grandfather and family lived before moving to Yakutsk. My grandfather was a hunter employed by the state. He was hunting nine months a year and stopped when he shot his 99<sup>th</sup> brown bear, believing that if he were to start hunting again, the 100<sup>th</sup> bear would take his life as a punishment for the greed. In memory of my grandfather, who regularly provided the boarding school with meat, Boris offered to perform a short *algys* for Heidi, even though her interest was not in *algys*. It seems, her interest in *oyuun* was understood by staff members at Archy D'iete as a request for *algys*.

Boris led us to the ceremonial room at Archy D'iete and asked us to wait. There was a fireplace (Ru. *kamelek*) in the middle of the spacious light room decorated with Sakha woodcraft. Boris returned dressed in a Sakha white costume. He asked Heidi to sit by the fireplace and to close her eyes. The *algys* began with the lightning of fire, and then continued with wishes for safe travel, health and well-being for Heidi. In the middle of *algys*, Boris asked if we brought *kumys*, *salamaat* or *alaad'y*. Since we did not bring anything, Boris used horsehair as an offering to the fire. The *algys* lasted for about half an hour, after which he showed us the box by the entrance for donations. There was no fixed price for *algys*. When we asked Boris about *oyuun*, he replied:

I am not an *oyuun*, I am an *algyschyt*. There were and maybe still are some powerful *oyuuns*, but I have never met them. Real *oyuuns* live in remote areas and, usually, people do not know about them (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

Boris hurried off somewhere else but agreed to meet me later for an interview. During the *algys*, he had obviously expected us to bring *kumys*, *salamaat* or *alaad'y*, which suggested that *algys* was a rather common practice at Archy D'iete since both Anna and Boris assumed that it was what we wanted and were prepared for. Although Heidi appreciated *algys*, she was



still keen to learn about *oyuun*. The translation of *oyuun* as ‘shaman’ from the Sakha museum connected Sakha *oyuun* to the image of the shaman that Heidi had prior to coming to Yakutsk. I wondered if Heidi would have had the same impression of *algyschyt* at Archy D’iete if the museum had not translated *oyuun* into a shaman or if Boris translated *oyuun* into shaman. Heidi travelled back to Norway a few days after our visit to Archy D’iete without ever meeting Sakha *oyuun* or Sakha ‘shaman’.

As we agreed, I met Boris for an interview, where I asked him about Archy D’iete:

We connect to *aiyy*, spirits (Ru. *dukhi*) who live in the upper world here at Archy D’iete. We arrange weddings, celebrations, lectures. Recently, we also started hosting baptism (Ru. *kreshchenie*) ceremonies for children to *Aiyy Üöreğe* (Sa.) (‘Teaching of Aiyy’). We do not do funerals. Archy D’iete is a place of joy and light, which we do not want to contaminate with the dark energies of death and sorrow. The Orthodox Church takes responsibility for funerals and we recommend people to go there instead (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D’iete).

Ceremonies offered at Archy D’iete, such as weddings and baptisms, resemble the services offered at churches. People who request a funeral ceremony at Archy D’iete are recommended to go to the Orthodox Church, which makes these two institutions seem comparable and, at times, interchangeable.

Since Dariya advised me to visit Archy D’iete to learn about yhyakh, I asked Boris about the role of Archy D’iete in organizing Tuymaada and other yhyakhs:

Archy D’iete is a gathering place of *Laboratoria yhyakha* (Ru.) (‘Laboratory of yhyakh’), which is a group of scholars and practitioners, who work on the revitalization of yhyakh. Scholars who research Sakha traditional clothing, Sakha food and Sakha *iteğele* meet every year at Archy D’iete to systematize and develop yhyakh in order to put it back in its place. There are about fifteen scholars and practitioners with interest in yhyakh who work together and share their research with each other, including Ekaterina Romanova, Uliana Vinokurova, Afanasy Fedorov, Rozalia Bravina, William Yakovlev and Svetlana Petrova (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D’iete).

The scholars who Boris mentioned are contemporary Sakha researchers with two common interests: yhyakh and its revitalization. I came across their work in libraries, archives and through various media. Yet, it was the first time I heard about the *Laboratoria yhyakha*. I have conducted interviews with some of the members that Boris named, but none of them mentioned *Laboratoria yhyakha*. Even though the group is informal and is not officially

registered or financed, I found its title illustrative in regard to the yhyakh revitalization processes today.

Boris was the first *algyschyt* that I interviewed and I asked him about how he had become an *algyschyt*:

I have been working at Archy D'iete for over ten years now. I went to Yakutsk State University and got a degree in Sakha linguistics. I worked as a research fellow at the Institute of the Humanities for five years until 1998. Then I quit. People who worked in research were the poorest ones at that time. Therefore, I applied for administrative positions at various cultural centres where I worked with Sakha culture and folklore until my wife was appointed to work in Verkhoyansk, Northern Yakutia. She is a geologist. I managed to get a position at the local cultural centre. One day I was asked by my colleagues to perform *algys*. I did not want to do that, I was not an expert. I did research on Sakha practices, but to be performing them myself... no, I did not want to do that. Perhaps, I was the most 'appropriate' person to perform *algys* in comparison to geologists and mineworkers. In the end, I agreed and began preparing for it. I went to the local archive and library. Since then I have been repeatedly asked to perform *algys* until I ended up here at Archy D'iete. Even though it has been so many years since people began performing *algys*, the norms of *algys* are not yet settled because there are still important disagreements (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

Against his initial reluctance, Boris began performing *algys* and today he is amongst the most experienced *algyschyts*. The degree in Sakha linguistics meant Boris was perceived as an expert not only in the Sakha language but also in Sakha practices in the small town of Verkhoyansk. People in Verkhoyansk saw in Boris the potential to perform *algys* based on his knowledge of Sakha language and folklore. This can be seen as an example of the demand for *algys* and *algyschyts* in Verkhoyansk. I continued the interview and asked Boris about the disagreements on the norms of *algys*:

During Soviet times, we had the communist regime and communist ideology. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the ideology was gone. The empty vacuum was created in society, which needed to be filled. We, Sakha, turned to our native culture (Sa. *törut kul'tuura*). Sakha claimed sovereignty and gained it. We developed 'the national conception' (Ru. *natsional'naia konseptsia*), where yhyakh, as a part of it, gained considerable recognition and attendance increased significantly. At the same time, Sakha *iteġele* was also under the processes of revitalization and systematization. As a result, two directions for Sakha *iteġele* have developed today: Aar Aiyy Iteġele by Vladimir Kondakov and Aiyy iteġele by Lazar Afanas'ev-Teris. They disagree on the ways *algys* should be performed. Both organizations are officially recognized by the state. This means that they are now on the same level as other religions, for instance, Christianity, Islam and

Buddhism. Even though they disagree on some things, they are both developing Sakha *iteġele*. For instance, in Islam, you have Sunni and Shia practitioners; similarly, in Sakha *Iteġele* we have Aar Aiyġ *Iteġele* and Aiyġ *Iteġele* (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

Boris described the time after the dissolution of the Soviet Union as 'the vacuum' – something that needed to be filled. The filling, for him, had to be of a religious character. Boris compared Sakha *iteġele* to Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, and the two religious organizations of Sakha were interestingly compared to the Sunni and Shia denominations of Islam. At the end of our interview, I asked Boris about the difference between *oyuun* and *algyschyt*:

In the old times (Sa. *bylyr*), there were *aiyy oyuuns*, who did *algys* at yhyakh and *khara oyuuns* (Sa.) ('black oyuun') who could heal people. *Khara oyuun* travelled in between the three worlds and were assisted by creatures from the lower and the upper worlds. *Algys* at yhyakh is devoted to *aiyy* from the upper world. At yhyakh, there is no place for the creatures from the lower world and for the ones who interact with them. Therefore, *khara oyuun* is not permitted to enter yhyakh. *Oyuun* was some sort of a profession at that time. It was a vocation that allowed *oyuun* to make a living. The number of *khara oyuuns* increased because they helped diseased people and had a more stable income in comparison to *aiyy oyuun* who led yhyakh once a year. Eventually *aiyy oyuun* became extinct. Only *khara oyuun* were left, but even they were all prosecuted and killed when the Soviets took power. As a result, there are no *oyuun* left among Sakha, neither *aiyy oyuun* nor *khara oyuun*.

Regarding *algyschyts*, there was no demand from amongst the Sakha until the 1990s, because there was no *algys* at yhyakhs during the Soviet Union. Instead, there was communist propaganda. There are no longer *oyuun* among Sakha, only *algyschyts*. In fact, since the demand is increasing each year, we opened a study program to train *algyschyts* here at Archy D'iete (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

When Boris talked about *aiyy oyuun* and *khara oyuun*, he did not refer to any particular historical time except for saying that it happened in the 'old times'. Despite having similar functions at yhyakh, *aiyy oyuun* and *algyschyt* are not the same for Boris. It was important for him not to be called *oyuun* or *aiyy oyuun* because he was an *algyschyt*.

I learnt from Boris that Archy D'iete offers a study program developed by Afanasy Fedorov, which trains *algyschyts*. Afanasy Fedorov is a director of the *algys* and Kün Kōrsüü ceremonies at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. The study program is organized in blocks, which makes it more convenient for people who travel to Yakutsk from other places in the Sakha Republic. One of the study blocks is called "Yhyakh" and prepares students to lead yhyakhs. At first, the

certificates for this program were issued by the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, then by the Sakha College of Culture and Arts<sup>91</sup> and now by Archy D'iete.<sup>92</sup>

I thanked Boris for his time and the knowledge that he had shared with me, to which he replied that there is always a need for scholars who contribute to the revitalization of yhyakh, Sakha culture and Sakha *iteǵele*. I did not see myself as an activist scholar, nor did I express such a desire to Boris, yet he assumed my interest in yhyakh was an attempt to revitalize Sakha practices.

By the exit, I met Anna, who had introduced me to Boris when I first visited Archy D'iete with Heidi. When Anna learnt about my project on yhyakh, she invited me to the Tölkö Yhyakh outside Yakutsk. Anna encouraged me to travel there, saying that it was a 'real' yhyakh, like those in the old times (Sa. *bylyrgylyy*). I was intrigued to attend a yhyakh that was considered authentic by an employee at Archy D'iete and decided to travel there.

### **Tölkö Yhyakh**

It took an hour by ferry and another hour by car to get to the Tölkö Yhyakh from Yakutsk. I met Anna, who asked me to help her collect *tüpte*. We walked to one of the abandoned houses in the village and she asked me to climb over the fence. Seeing me hesitate, Anna said that she had asked permission from the owners to collect *tüpte* from their *khoton* (Sa.) ('cowshed'). *Tüpte* is used as isolating layer for *khotons* in the winter when it can easily reach -50°C. When asked why we had to collect from this particular, abandoned *khoton*, Anna sighed saying that only a few people in the village have cattle today and that the majority of the villagers slaughtered their cattle and moved to Yakutsk abandoning their *khoton*. This *khoton* was one of the few left in the village. It took us about ten minutes to fill the two plastic bags we had with *tüpte* (see image 33).

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<sup>91</sup> *Yakutsky Kolledzh Kul'tury i Iskusstv.*

<sup>92</sup> I went to the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk to ask about the study-program for becoming an *algyschyt*, where I was told that the universities with federal status are no longer allowed to issue qualifications other than degree diplomas. The *algyschyt* study-program cannot be used towards a university degree, and therefore, its founder Afanasy Fedorov issued certificates from the Sakha College of Culture and Arts while he worked there. By 2018, Afanasy Fedorov no longer worked at the Sakha College of Culture and Arts and certificates for *algyschyts* were issued by Archy D'iete.



Image 33. Collecting tūpte from khoton.

Tölkö Yhyakh was initiated by the Tölkö community and its founder Dorgon Dokhson, who is a recent university graduate with a degree in Sakha folklore. Anna was proud of Dorgon and his interest in Sakha practices. She repeatedly commented on how nice it was that young Sakha men like Dorgon come to Archy D'iete with energy and ideas for the revitalization of Sakha culture and *iteǵele*. Anna was a mentor for Dorgon, who followed Anna's recommendations and instructions on preparing yhyakh.

Tölkö Yhyakh began with the official welcome speech of the Tölkö community members. The *tühülge* of the Tölkö Yhyakh was quite spacious next to the forest and a small river. It was a warm and sunny day and the smell of collected *tūpte* filled the *tühülge*.

*Algys* was performed by an elderly woman to whom everyone referred as Ed'eyy (Sa.) ('elder sister'). Women were instructed to take the left and men the right side of Ed'eyy. After that, we were all invited to drink black (Sa. *khara*) *kumys* home brewed by Dorgon, which he described as brewed in an old Sakha way. The opening of the Tölkö Yhyakh was finished with an *ohuokhai* dance and the sports games *Öbügeler oonn'uulara* ('the games of ancestors') began (see image 34).





Image 34. *Öbügeler oonn'uulara.*

It was the first yhyakh that I attended where the people were separated during the *algys* based on their gender. There were no more than fifty participants at the Tölkö Yhyakh, including the organizers. People brought their own food from home and the Tölkö community provided *kumys* and horsemeat.

The main entertainment was the sports competition for children, *Öbügeler oonn'uulara*, where only boys were competing. The girls of the same age, who were also at this yhyakh, were attempting to imitate the “boy’s games” on their own. The aim of this yhyakh, according to the organizer Dorgon, was to give an opportunity for the upcoming generations to learn about the traditions of their ancestors. Some boys had come to the yhyakh for the sports games with their teacher Vasilisa, whom I asked about the Tölkö Yhyakh:

I am so glad that Anna encouraged the Tölkö community to organize this yhyakh. The boys that are competing today come from families with difficulties. We have a summer camp for children whose parents cannot take care of them. Instead of being on the streets and ending up in a criminal environment, boys build their own brotherhood at the camp and Sakha sports games motivate them to train in sports (Vasilisa, teacher at the Sakha summer camp).

Tölkö Yhyakh was described and presented as the yhyakh where things were done in the ‘old way’ (Sa. *bylyrgylyy*). The emphasis on simplicity and authenticity was visible through the attempts at brewing *kumys bylyrgylyy*, performing *algys bylyrgylyy* with the gender segregation, and organizing the sports games *bylyrgylyy*. On the way back to Yakutsk, I sat next to Anna and we were talking about yhyakh, when she said: “Thanks to the UNESCO’s recognition for bringing back pride to Sakha people and saving Sakha *iteġele*”. Anna was referring to the recognition of *olongkho* by UNESCO. When we arrived in Yakutsk, Anna gave me the book *Ellei Bootur* (2005) by Afanasi’ev-Teris, the founder of Aiyy Iteġele, saying: “This is for your research. Ellei Bootur was the first man to hold yhyakh and today you visited a real yhyakh also organized by a man.”

Anna emphasized repeatedly that men, not women, should organize yhyakh and that is why Tölkö Yhyakh was a real yhyakh. Whereas, to my eyes, the Tölkö Yhyakh was predominantly organized by women. Anna was responsible for preparing *tühülge* and she supervised Dorgon Dokhson in nearly all aspects of the yhyakh, and, during my observations, Ed’eey performed *algys*, and Vasilisa trained and brought boys from the summer camp to the sports competition.

### **Kamelek (Saiyyna centre)**

At the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016, one of my interviewees, Varvara, mentioned a place, named Kamelek, where she goes to learn about Sakha *iteġele*. According to Varvara, Kamelek helped her son stop drinking alcohol and her daughter-in-law to become a ‘real’ Sakha woman. Kamelek is the organization that offers *algys* by the entrance to the Us Khatyn area. My interest in this was twofold: first, to learn about the vision of Sakha *iteġele* by Kamelek; second, to learn about the *algys* organized by them at the Tuymaada Yhyakh.

Kamelek, as I learnt, had the status of a ‘Centre of spirituality’ (Ru. *tseñtr dukhovnosti*). When I contacted Kamelek, the woman who answered the phone informed me that Kamelek had renamed itself as the Saiyyna centre. The Saiyyna centre was situated on the outskirts of Yakutsk in a neighbourhood that was rumoured to have high crime rates. When I entered the fenced area, there was a garden with flowers and small wooden constructions in Sakha style. Inside the main wooden house, I met a young Sakha woman, who introduced herself as Alina



and welcomed me in. The building was full of paintings, woodcraft, handicrafts and photographs of people at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. We sat down on the bench, I introduced myself and the conversation began:

You are at the Saiyyna Centre. We offer *algys* to the visitors at the Tuymaada Yhyakh every year. If you are interested to learn about Saiyyna teachings, you can take the course first. We gather each Sunday in the afternoon, but these gatherings are only for the members. To become a member you have to take the course first. It is an introductory course, which costs 4,000 rubles. We do not know when the next course will be. We are not the ones who decide (Alina from the Saiyyna centre).

I asked whom I could contact to learn about the next available course:

You do not understand. It is not us, humans, who decide. If I were to explain now, you will misunderstand. You can leave your phone number and we will call you if there is to be a course (Alina from the Saiyyna centre).

I gave Alina my phone number and asked her about the Saiyyna centre:

The Saiyyna centre was established by Claudia Maksimova-Saiyyna. The centre carries her name. Saiyyna passed away in 2009, but her centre and her words continue to live. People who come here find their inner peace and talents. Some start writing poems, some sing, some do woodwork. Everything you see in this house is made by people who attend our centre. People come for different reasons. We have a lot of young men and women of your age who come to us too. Some struggle with alcohol, some with health, many have financial problems. They all find support here. We published several books about the centre that you can buy if you want to know more (Alina from the Saiyyna centre).

I asked Alina whether I could attend one of the Sunday gatherings, to which she said that she had to ask permission from the senior staff members. Alina came back with an older woman dressed in Sakha costume. The elderly woman looked at me and made a sign to Alina to leave the room. After a while she said:

I feel that you are tense. You have some issues with your health and your private life. For your age, you are still not married. I will send *algys* to *aiyy* for your health and well-being. Close your eyes and do not open until told otherwise (*algyschyt* at Saiyyna centre).

I wanted to say that I had come to learn about their centre and not about my health or private life. However, it felt inappropriate to interrupt the *algyschyt* and say that I had no issues with either of the things that she had talked about. I closed my eyes as I was told but nothing happened for several minutes. We sat in silence until she began playing a drum and singing, the singing gradually turned into high pitch screams. I felt uncomfortable but did my best not

to express it. I was told to open my eyes and asked whether I felt something. I was concentrating so much on not showing my discomfort that I quickly replied: “No, I did not.” I meant to say that I did not feel anything uncomfortable and disturbing, but only later did I realize that my answer might be interpreted as “I did not feel any effect from your *algys*.” The woman was clearly disappointed and said that I have a thick skin and narrow mind, and thus will not be able to understand their teachings at the Saiyyna centre. I was shown to the door.

I never received the phone call about the course at the Saiyyna centre. Although I was denied access, in fieldwork terms, I had the books that I purchased at the Tuymaada Yhyakh and those that I bought at the Saiyyna centre.<sup>93</sup> I learnt that in 1997, with support from the Department of Culture and Spiritual Development<sup>94</sup> of Yakutsk City Hall, the Centre for Development and Growth (*Sa. Üünüü-Saidyy Bihige'*) was established in Yakutsk. In 2001, the centre was renamed as the Spiritual centre “Kamelek.” It is unclear when Kamelek changed its name to the Saiyyna centre in honour of its founder Saiyyna. In one of her books Saiyyna writes:

Some people say that Sakha people preserved the archaic *iazycheski* (Ru.) ('pagan') *iteġel* to this day and still worship nature, while other people developed advanced *iteġel* with icons. Whatever they say, everything was created by *sudu küüs*. *Südü küüs*, in Russian, is the creator (Ru. *tvorets*), god (Ru. *bog*), *tangara* (Sakha word, which is frequently translated into 'god') that created the universe (*Sa. kuaaar*). Aal Luk Mas is the symbol of the upper, the middle and the lower worlds. *Kuaaar* sent to different peoples in the world its messengers: Jesus Christ, Buddha, and Muhammad (Saiyyna 2007: 8–10).

Similarly to Boris, Saiyyna compared Sakha *iteġele* to Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. In her books, Saiyyna cites Lazar' Afanas'ev-Teris (founder of Aiyy Iteġele), Vladimir Kondakov (founder of Aar Aiyy Iteġele), and the theosophist Nicholas Roerich. One of her books, *Min Kuaaar oġoto – soroġoto buolabyn* (Sa.) ('I am a child of the Universe – a part of it'), is a collection of stories of people who came to Kamelek. Many stories have described how people discovered their hidden talents and how they learnt to handle their feelings and improved

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<sup>93</sup> Saiyyna. 1997. *Min Kuaaar oġoto – soroġoto buolabyn*. Yakutsk.

Saiyyna. 2007. *Aiyy Saryala*. Yakutsk.

Saiyyna. 2007. *D'ylġan tüsteniite. Dukhuobunas uonna Iteġel künneeġi olokhkho*. Yakutsk.

<sup>94</sup> *Управление культуры и духовного развития города Якутска*.

relations with their family, friends and colleagues. Quite often people described Kamelek as a rehabilitation centre for their body and soul.

Since I was not able to join the Sunday gatherings where I could meet regulars of the Saiyyna centre, I went to the popular Sakha internet web-site Ykt.ru and searched for “Saiyyna Kamelek” to see whether there were any references to the Saiyyna centre.<sup>95</sup> There were nineteen forum conversations about Saiyyna, one of them was entitled “How to find Saiyyna – psychologist (*ekstrasens*)?”<sup>96</sup> Here are some of the answers:

I would also like to go to her. Does anybody know the price? Is she a psychologist, psychic (Ru. *ekstrasens*), fortune-teller (Ru. *gadalka*) or a healer (Ru. *tselitel'nitsa*)?

Can she help against curses (Ru. *porcha*)?.

She is a terrible woman! If you doubt her abilities, she will curse you to the tenth generation!

You are wrong. You must have met another woman. Saiyyna is bright (Ru. *svetlaya*). You will never hear anything negative from her.

I called Kamelek. They say that one has to take the course “Iteġel” first and it costs 4,000 rubles.

I would also like to go. My sister was there and she began writing poems about her previous life. It scares me. Otherwise, it would have been nice to clear my *aura*.

My mother went to her. My father always wanted to have a son. Thanks to Saiyyna, I now have a sweet little brother.

I do not understand why she and her centre receive money from the government. This is wrong!

Saiyyna is not a fortune-teller, she is a teacher of very sophisticated teaching. It connects yoga, belief (Ru. *vera*), psychology and health. She teaches only in Sakha.

It can be dangerous to go to her. If you are ready, then you will discover your talents, but if you are not ready, you can go crazy.<sup>97</sup>

There is a limit to the reliability of these anonymous internet comments. Yet, I find them typical of Sakha society to some extent. There is a strong taboo about going to psychologists

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<sup>95</sup> Ykt.ru was used by 81,4% of the population in Yakutsk in 2017. Accessed April 3, 2019

<sup>96</sup> Ykt.ru “Kak naiti Saiyyny – psikhologa (*ekstrasensa*).”  
<http://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?f=32&id=629435&qf=24404643&qs=69598466> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>97</sup> Ykt.ru “Kak naiti Saiyyny – psikhologa (*ekstrasensa*).”  
<http://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?f=32&id=629435&qf=24404643&qs=69598466> (accessed April 3, 2019).

and therapists among Sakha, even though there is a demand for them in Sakha society. I find the first name of the centre quite descriptive, which was translated into Russian as the 'Conversation Centre' (Ru. *tsentr obshchenia*), meaning a place where people could come and talk. Some people seem to be more sceptical about the unknown and mysterious things at the centre, while others were attracted to such mysteriousness and were curious about the meaning of life, their inner talents and future. It is possible to say that the Saiyyna centre was perceived as a place for both physical (help with infertility and alcoholism) and psychological (support in private and financial struggles) healing. Moreover, based on Varvara's interview it was a place where one could learn about Sakha practices (*algys*, *yhyakh*) and Sakha social values (marital and parental norms).

It is difficult to tell how many people regularly attend the Saiyyna centre. At the Tuymaada Yhyakh, there was a queue for their *algys* throughout the whole event. I would estimate that there were several thousand people who went to the *algys* there. While outside the Tuymaada Yhyakh, I guess there could not have been more than a hundred regular visitors if I were to consider the size of the hall where the Sunday meetings were held.

## **Religious organizations that claim Sakha religion**

*Algyschyt* Boris from Archy D'iete mentioned the two religious organizations that practice Sakha religion: Aiyy Itegele and Aar Aiyy Itegele. These organizations are registered by the state, or to be specific, by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. Since I am also interested in the dimension of *religion-making from above*, I want to discuss authoritative discourses (of the state and media) that define certain practices and organizations as religious.

The first step in the search for the articulations of Sakha religion was to look at Wikipedia. Wikipedia is a powerful mediator of knowledge to the public today, which I think is important to recognize. Wikipedia had two different definitions of 'Sakha religion' in its Russian and English pages:

Wikipedia page in Russian (my translation):

Before the arrival of Russians, Sakha people practised traditional religion Aar Aiyy. Sakha consider themselves to be the children of God (Tangara) and relatives of Aiyy. *Algys* are often actual prayers. Sakha celebrate "Yhyakh", a day when they

worship white Aiyy, forefathers of men on Earth. Traditional Sakha religion Aar Aiyy Iteḡele was officially registered at the Ministry of Justice 10<sup>th</sup> January 2012.<sup>98</sup>

Wikipedia page in English:

Before the arrival of Russians, the majority of the local population believed in *Tengrism* common to Turkic-language peoples of Central Asia, or in Paleoasian *indigenous shamanism* with both 'light' (community leading) and 'dark' (healing through spirit journeys) *shamans*.<sup>99</sup>

The difference between the two Wikipedia pages demonstrates how through the choice of terminology, Sakha practices are placed into various categories. The Russian page named Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, registered in 2012, as an official Sakha religion. Despite its registration being recent, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele was also described as the Sakha traditional religion practised before the arrival of Russians, on the Russian Wikipedia page. The description of yhyakh as a day when Sakha worship *aiyy* was placed in the section of 'Sakha religion'. The English Wikipedia page was the most laden with categories such as Tengrism, indigenous, shamanism and shamans, whereas Sakha concepts such as *aiyy*, *algys* and *iteḡel* were absent.

A number of scholars suggest that the Sakha religious revival that began after the dissolution of the Soviet Union depended heavily on the Sakha intelligentsia and local authorities, especially on the President of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolayev, who was in office from the late 1980s and for the most of the 1990s (Balzer 2005; Filatov 2000; Sundström 2015; Yamada 1999). Valery Vasili'ev, a Sakha historian, conducted a study of what is known today as the Sakha religious revival:

In 1989, representatives of the Sakha intelligentsia established the Social Centre of Yakutia (Ru. *obshchestvennyi tsentr yakutii*). Members of this centre in collaboration with Sakha linguists established a group, *Sakha Tyla* (Sa.) ('sakha language'), where they discussed the revitalization of Sakha culture. [...]

In February 1990, Sakha Tyla opened a school called *Kut-sur*. The school, led by Sakha linguist Lazar' Afanasi'ev-Teris, positioned itself as a philosophical-theological school with the main purpose of revitalising the moral values of Sakha

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<sup>98</sup> "До прихода русских, среди якутов была распространена традиционная религия Аар Айыы. Якуты считают себя детьми Бога (Тангара) и Родственниками Айыы. Благословения (алгыс) являются часто настоящими молитвами. Якуты каждый год празднуют «Ыһыах», день воспевания Белых Айыы, прародителей людей на земле. Традиционная якутская религия официально зарегистрирована в управлении министерства юстиции Российской Федерации по Республике Саха (Якутия) 10 января 2012г." Wikipedia. "Yakuty." <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%AF%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%82%D1%8B%D0%A0%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B3%D0%B8%D1%8F> (accessed March 2, 2018).

<sup>99</sup>Wikipedia. "Sakha republic." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakha\\_Republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakha_Republic) (accessed March 2, 2018).

and named their teaching *Aiyy Eyerege* (Sa.) ('Teaching of Aiyy'). Based on their research, members of Kut-syur school announced that Aiyy Eyerege is rooted in the religious views of ancient Scythians (Saka people), known as *Tengrianism*. [...]

In March 1990, Sakha Tyla was renamed as *Sakha Keskile* (Sa.) ('Future of Sakha') and proposed the organization of a public yhyakh in Yakutsk. [...]

In October 1990, Kut-syur published the brochure *Aiyy Üöreğe*, where they defined *kut* as a force that gives life and *sur* as a force that gives life energy. Authors of the brochure systematized the moral code of *aiyy* consisting of nine articles. [...]

In 1990, the Association of Sakha Medicine was founded by Sakha physician, Vladimir Kondakov, who argued that Sakha medicine is a part of the spiritual culture (Ru. *dukhovnaya kul'tura*) of Sakha. [...]

In 1994, Lazer Afanas'ev-Teris published a book, *Aiyy Eyerege*, where he described the twelve-year cycle of yhyakhs as the main ritual (Ru. *obriad*) of Aiyy Eyerege. In the same year, the Association Iteğel was founded based on Aiyy Eyerege by Afanas'ev-Teris. The Association Iteğel organized an annual conference where both Afanas'ev-Teris and Vladimir Kondakov presented their views, which gradually conflicted with each other (Vasili'ev 2000: 257–259).<sup>100</sup>

This chronological description might seem dense and difficult to comprehend, which is rather caused by the complexity of the situation at the beginning of the 1990s. Various associations, centres, organizations and schools were opened, renamed, left and closed during the first years when Sakha intelligentsia attempted to define and systematize Sakha practices. Although President Mikhail Nikolaev supported these attempts and even created the Academy of spirituality (Ru. *akademiya dukhovnosti*) in 1996 to re-awaken and develop Sakha practices, he eventually distanced himself from the radicalizing groups (Kut-Sur and Sakha Keskile) and sought to marginalize them (Filatov 2000: 116–120; Sundström 2015: 372, Yamada 1999: 94–5). Vladimir Kondakov and Afanas'ev-Teris continued independently to develop their own understandings of the Sakha *iteğele* that I discuss in more detail below.

### **Aar Aiyy Iteğele**

Vladimir Kondakov, a doctor of medical sciences, as mentioned above, founded the Association of Sakha Medicine. Kondakov published a five-volume book, *Aar Aiyy Iteğele*

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<sup>100</sup> My translation. One of the reasons I decided to insert this series of quotes because of their importance in providing the context for the discussion on Sakha religious organizations. The other reason is that Valery Vasili'ev's works are not yet translated into English, and, hopefully, this brief yet important text will contribute to the international research on Sakha practices.



(2004), where he defines Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, its practices, the role of *algys* and the twelve *aiyy*. Kondakov positions himself as *aiyy oyuun* and a researcher in Sakha medicine and shamanism. He is also known for performing Kün Kōrsūü ceremony at the Tuymaada Yhyakh in the period from 1991 to 1998 before the event moved to the Us Khatyn area. In 2009, Vladimir Kondakov passed away. His followers applied to the Ministry of Justice to recognize Aar Aiyy Iteḡele as a religious organization in 2011.

To fulfil the criteria, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele had to answer the following questions set by the committee of the Ministry of Justice:

1. *Can Aar Aiyy Iteḡele be considered a religion?*

Aar Aiyy Iteḡele argued that based on the definitions of religion by Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim and the standard book used across schools in the Sakha Republic on religious studies *Religionovedenie* by Ol'ga Lobazova (2002) it can be considered a religion (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii... 2011: 8*).<sup>101</sup>

2. *Does Aar Aiyy Iteḡele meet the requirements of the Federal Law of the Russian Federation from 29.03.1997 №125 "About the freedom of conscience and religious organizations"?*

According to this federal law an organization can be recognized as religious if it: has a worship practice; organizes services, rituals and other religious rituals; teaches its religion and offers religious education to its followers.<sup>102</sup> The expertise committee confirmed that Aar Aiyy Iteḡele meets all these requirements (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii... 2011: 13*).

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<sup>101</sup> Ministerstvo Yustitsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii. 2011. "Ekspertnoe zakluchenie v otnoshenii Mestnoi religioznoi organizatsii goroda Yakutska Aar Aiyy iteḡele (Religiia Aar Aiyy)". No. 02-08/8333 from September 30.

<sup>102</sup> *В соответствии с пунктом 1 статьи 6 Федерального закона "О свободе совести и о религиозных объединениях" религиозным объединением в Российской Федерации признается добровольное объединение граждан Российской Федерации, иных лиц, постоянно и на законных основаниях проживающих на территории Российской Федерации, образованное в целях совместного исповедания и распространения веры и обладающее соответствующими этой цели признаками: вероисповедание; совершение богослужений, других религиозных обрядов и церемоний; обучение религии и религиозное воспитание своих последователей. С учетом анализа, проведенного при рассмотрении первого вопроса, поставленного перед Экспертным советом, считаем детальное раскрытие всех обоснований нецелесообразным и возможным ответить: Местная религиозная организация г. Якутска "Аар Айыы итэбэлэ" (религия Аар Айыы) соответствует, по мнению Экспертного совета, требованиям пункта 1 статьи 6 Федерального закона от 26.09.1997 №125-ФЗ "О свободе совести и о религиозных объединениях" и может быть признана религиозным объединением.*

3. *Is it possible to transmit and teach Aar Aiyy Iteḡele without the written and published sources of teaching?*

Aar Aiyy Iteḡele members referred to Durkheim and argued that Sakha beliefs just as “the religious beliefs without written traditions in Africa deserve to be respected not any less than the established written religious traditions” (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2011: 13).

In the application, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele claims to have roots in the pan-Turkic religion Tengrism, and argues that it is the most ancient religion on Earth. The expertise committee, however, classified Aar Aiyy Iteḡele as a neopagan (Ru. *neoyazycheskoe*) practice referring to its multiple usages of terms such as ‘aura’, ‘karma’, ‘trans’, ‘ecstasy’, ‘astral’ and ‘cosmic powers’, stating that “these modern concepts could not have belonged initially to the Sakha traditional practices” (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2011: 5).

When arguing about the origin of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, its members claimed that twenty-three Aiyy Booturs (Sa.) (‘Aiyy Heroes’) took part in ‘religious rebellions’ against the Russians in 1642 (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2011: 8). This was a reference to a major Sakha uprising which took place in 1642 against Russian Cossacks who collected taxes from the Sakha, when Cossack leader Golovin tortured and publically hanged twenty-three Sakha men (Ivanov, 2002). The expert committee concluded that there were no official sources on the religious character of this rebellion and recommended Aar Aiyy Iteḡele revisit their arguments (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2011: 4).

Although the Ministry of Justice did not agree with a number of claims that Aar Aiyy Iteḡele made in its application, including its claim of being *the* traditional religion of the Sakha people, it found Aar Aiyy Iteḡele eligible to be recognized as a religious organization in 2011. Thus, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele became the first officially registered religious organization that claimed Sakha *iteḡele*.

The conclusion of the Ministry of Justice, including its classification of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele as a neopagan practice, seems to have little impact on the way Aar Aiyy Iteḡele continued to represent itself. The goal of the organization was to be officially registered, whereas the comments of the expert committee were no more than non-binding recommendations. On both the Sakha and the Russian Wikipedia pages about Sakha religion, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele is named as the official religion of Sakha and, moreover, as the traditional religion of the Sakha people before the arrival of the Russians.

According to Aar Aiyy Iteḡele yhyakh is the celebration of everything living and the main religious holiday (Ru. *religioznyi prazdnik*) of the Sakha (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2011: 7). To learn more about the organization I decided to visit it during my fieldwork in the summer of 2018. The house of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele was situated on the outskirts of Yakutsk, about forty minutes by car from the city centre. An elderly woman opened the door of the two-storied wooden cottage and introduced herself as Tamara Timofeevna (see image 35).



*Image 35. Aar Aiyy Iteḡele.*

Tamara was dressed in *khaladai* and a white headscarf. I introduced my project and expressed my interest in learning about Aar Aiyy Iteḡele. At first, Tamara was hesitant, but later, she became more comfortable and began to talk about the history and work of the organization:

Our religion (Ru. *religiia*) is registered and officially recognized. The registration process took nine months. The most time-consuming part was to receive approval from the various institutions, such as the Ministry of Justice and Commission from the Russian Orthodox Church. Clergymen from the Theological Seminary (Ru. *dukhovnaya Seminaria*) in Yakutsk visited us to confirm that we were not executing any “dark” (Ru. *temnye*) rituals and spreading them to the followers. There were also people from the FSB (Federal Security Service, the main successor of KGB) who investigated our work.

On top of all this, we had to write and publish a book. One of the committee's recommended requirements was to have a book, like the Quran or Bible. We have some sponsors and people who donate to the community. With these resources, we published the book, *Aar Aiyy Iteḡele*, in Sakha and Russian.

We were told during the registration process that religious organizations should be inclusive of more than just Sakha people too. Therefore, we translated the book into Russian. I look at the Russian edition as oriented mainly to the Russian speaking Sakha. Although we are an open community, I believe that each nation (Ru. *natsiia*) should follow their own religion (Ru. *religiia*). For example for us, Sakha, it is Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, whereas for Russians, it is the Orthodox Church (Tamara Timofeevna, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele).

Not only the Ministry of Justice but also the Russian Orthodox Church and Federal Security Service participated in inspecting and approving Aar Aiyy Iteḡele according to Tamara. The Russian Orthodox Church seems to have been concerned about whether Aar Aiyy Iteḡele performed destructive and dark practices. The engagement of the Russian Orthodox Church suggests its powerful position in today's Russia, including in the Sakha Republic. Moreover, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele had to prove that it was not a radical nationalist organization, which was likely the concern of the Federal Security Service.

The general criteria of the Ministry of Justice seem to have made a major impact on the content and practice of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele. Although it attempted to argue that not all religions need written texts, referring to Durkheim, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele members still published a book, according to Tamara, similar to the Quran and the Bible. Furthermore, the book had to be translated into Russian to demonstrate the organization's inclusiveness. The book being exclusively for Sakha speaking audiences does indeed limit its membership and makes it easier to criticize the organization for a nationalistic stance. Despite Tamara's opinion on the importance of reading the texts in Sakha, she also advocated for the need for a translation of the text, having in mind Russified Sakha, who are often not fluent in Sakha. Interestingly, Tamara sees religion as one of the constituent parts of the national identity when she argues that Aar Aiyy Iteḡele is a religion for Sakha people, while Orthodox Christianity is for the ethnic Russians. Overall, it seems that Aar Aiyy Iteḡele made multiple adjustments in their practices to fulfill the criteria of the religious organization. I asked Tamara about the current situation at Aar Aiyy Iteḡele:

Today, the organization consists of *algyschyts* and the administrative staff. In total, we are twenty-one. We are trying to revive Sakha religion, which has been oppressed, neglected and nearly absent for over 300 years now. First, they

(Russians) took away our land, then our *iteġele* and after that our language. Without *iteġele*, land and language, people become extinct. Luckily, we took our religion back in 2011. [...]

Vladimir Kondakov believed that Aar Aiyy Iteġele was rooted in Tengrism, just like Christianity. In the beginning, we had one religion and it was Tengrism. Eventually, people separated and formed languages and mentalities distinct to them, otherwise, we all come from one religion. Therefore, we support other people with *iteġele*, regardless of the kind (Tamara Timofeevna, Aar Aiyy Iteġele).

Tamara did not see the registration of Aar Aiyy Iteġele in 2011 as the birth of a new religion. For her and, presumably, for other members, it was a re-birth and a return of the Sakha religion from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The 17<sup>th</sup> century is the time when Russians arrived in the current Sakha territories and wrote the first records of the Sakha people. This means that there was no written knowledge about Sakha people before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which makes it easier to speculate about Sakha practices before that time.

According to Tamara, it was not only Aar Aiyy Iteġele but also Christianity and other religions that are rooted in Tengrism. Therefore, she saw a connection between all religions and argued for the effectiveness of healing people with *iteġele* (i.e. theists such as Christians, and Muslims), unlike the ones who do not have any *iteġele* (i.e. atheists). Tamara showed me around the house and stopped in front of a big portrait of a man, whom she introduced as *aiyy oyuun* Vladimir Kondakov (see image 36):

Vladimir Kondakov was *aiyy oyuun*. People like him are not born in every generation. When Sakha *iteġele* was forbidden, *aiyy oyuuns* disappeared. Now we continue what Vladimir Kondakov began and our main mission is to help people. We perform rituals of 'cow pulling' (Sa. *suehuu tardyy*), to make a cow fertile, and 'child pulling (Sa. *ogo tardyy*) to help infertile women. There are many women and couples who come to ask for children from Tangara<sup>103</sup> (Tamara Timofeevna, Aar Aiyy Iteġele).

Infertility seems to be one of the most common conditions that motivates people to contact religious experts among the Sakha. As a result, there is a strong focus on helping people with such requests among *algyschyts*. Lastly, I asked Tamara whether there were any regular members at Aar Aiyy Iteġele:

There is a small group of women who come here every other week. In fact, we have greater attendance from men. However, they do not gather here because

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<sup>103</sup> *Tañara* is a common name for a 'god' in Sakha. *Tañara* is often compared to Tengri.

we do not have enough space for all of them and they say that we are located way too far from the city. They have their own organization “Üs Tümsüü (Sa.)” (‘The gathering of the three’). They meet every Sunday at Archy D’iete. What will these young men do with old ladies here? So, they gather on their own in town (Tamara Timofeevna, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele).



*Image 36. The portrait of Vladimir Kondakov inside the Aar Aiyy Iteḡele house.*

When Tamara talked about an organization for men only, I remembered *ekstrasens* Dariya, whom I met at the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2016. Dariya had told me how upset she was about the tendency to separate the genders within Sakha practices, for example in the emerging trend for the Sakha male *ohuokhai*. Unlike Dariya, Tamara did not express any concern about the men who gathered separately from the women at Aar Aiyy Iteḡele. She gave me the contact details for Petr, one of the founders of the “Üs Tümsüü”. Before meeting Petr, I looked through the Sakha news to learn about the media-coverage of *ohuokhai* for men and “Üs Tümsüü”.



## Uraaŋkhai and Üs Tümsüü

The earliest media reference to the *ohuokhai* for men that I found was from 2016.<sup>104</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2018, the day of the Sakha Republic, men performing *ohuokhai* filled Lenin square in Yakutsk centre (see image 37).<sup>105</sup>



Image 37. *Ohuokhai* 2018 in front of the Sakha Parliament in Yakutsk (Photo by Ykt.Ru).<sup>106</sup>

Over one thousand men joined the dance initiated by the Sakha patriotic sports club “Uraaŋkhai”. Alexey Laptev, the president of the club gave an interview to Ykt.ru:

We, Uraaŋkhai, promote a teetotal lifestyle, the development of patriotism towards one’s homeland, and encouraging young people to do sports (Alexey Laptev, Uraaŋkhai).<sup>107</sup>

In 2017, at that the head of the Sakha Republic, Egor Borisov, and the mayor of Yakutsk, Aysen Nikolaev, both visited the event and joined the *ohuokhai*.<sup>108</sup> Although there were some

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<sup>104</sup> News Ykt.ru. 2016. “Uraangkhaitsy proveli muzhskoy osuokhai v den’ respubliki.” <http://news.ykt.ru/article/42321> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>105</sup> There are two official Sakha national days: 1) 27<sup>th</sup> of April, the Sakha Republic’s day; and 2) 21<sup>st</sup> of June, the day of Yhyakh.

<sup>106</sup> News Ykt.ru. 2018. “Neskol’ko soten muzhchin stantsevali osuokhai v tsentre Yakutska.” <https://news.ykt.ru/article/71735> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>107</sup> News Ykt.ru. 2016. “Uraangkhaitsy proveli muzhskoy osuokhai v den’ respubliki.” <http://news.ykt.ru/article/42321> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>108</sup> News Ykt.ru. 2017. “Muzhskoi ohuokhai v sentre Yakutska.” <http://news.ykt.ru/article/56372> (accessed April 3, 2019).



opinions that resembled Dariya's reaction about the exclusion of women, the supportive comments, such as "men are our pride", "spirit of the nation is in its traditions", and "the Sakha flag is the most beautiful in the world", dominated the comment section at Ykt.ru.<sup>109</sup>

Performances of Sakha masculinity through the *ohuokhai* seemed to encourage Sakha patriotism, brotherhood and pride in being a Sakha man. A rather different set of reactions was created by the photograph from the male-only *algys* by the organization Üs Tümsüü at Archy D'iete (see image 38).<sup>110</sup>



Image 38. *Algys at Archy D'iete for men only by Üs Tümsüü.*<sup>111</sup>

The photograph was shared widely in the Sakha news and social media at the beginning of 2018, and was perceived with scepticism by the Sakha public. It was claimed by some that the gathering resembled a radical religious sect. The official response to the debate was given by

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<sup>109</sup> News Ykt.ru. 2017. "Muzhskoi ohuokhai v sentre Yakutska." <http://news.ykt.ru/article/56372> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>110</sup> YSIA. 2018. "Minobshchestvo Yakutii: muzhskoi algys v dome archy ne nosit priznakov religioznogo kul'ta." <http://ysia.ru/glavnoe/minobshchestvo-yakutii-muzhskoj-algys-v-dome-archy-ne-nosit-priznakov-religioznogo-kulta/> "Muzhskoi ohuokhai v sentre Yakutska." <http://news.ykt.ru/article/56372> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>111</sup> YSIA. 2018. "Minobshchestvo Yakutii: muzhskoi algys v dome archy ne nosit priznakov religioznogo kul'ta." <http://ysia.ru/glavnoe/minobshchestvo-yakutii-muzhskoj-algys-v-dome-archy-ne-nosit-priznakov-religioznogo-kulta/> News Ykt.ru. 2017. "Muzhskoi ohuokhai v sentre Yakutska." <http://news.ykt.ru/article/56372> (accessed April 3, 2019).

Afanasy Matveev, the Deputy Minister in the Development of the Civil Society in the Sakha Republic:

These gatherings are the initiative of the public organization that introduces the male population of Yakutia to the authentic traditions of Sakha. There is nothing radical in the fact that there are only men who participate. This movement is inspired by the works of Vladimir Kondakov and his book *Aar Aiyy Iteǵele*. The book in itself is a collection of *algys*. The government is aware of these gatherings and works together with them. For example, now an annual male-only *ohuokhai* at Lenin square is a joint project (Afanasy Matveev, the Deputy Minister in the Development of the Civil Society in the Sakha Republic).<sup>112</sup>

There was no such critique when the male-only *ohuokhai* took place several times in Yakutsk. However, when these gatherings were framed in a religious-like context inside a building with the men holding printed *algys*, the public and media reacted strongly. People appeared to be most concerned by the fact that the photograph resembled a sect like setting and had the similarity with a setting for Islamic practices, something that was not positively received by the Sakha public. The media addressed this critique by having the headline: “We are not sectants.”<sup>113</sup>

I made an appointment with Petr, the leader of Üs Tümsüü, to learn more about their organization. I was not permitted to record our conversation or use it for my dissertation. Despite these limitations, Petr was helpful in providing public sources that I could refer to, including their Instagram account and WhatsApp group chat. On their public accounts, Üs Tümsüü describes itself as separate from, but rooted in, the Aar Aiyy Iteǵele organization. They gather at Archy D’iete every Sunday and have several hundred members in their WhatsApp groups.<sup>114</sup> The members use the platform for different purposes ranging from sharing and discussing the teachings of Aar Aiyy Iteǵele to job-seeking and commercial activities. The group chat is also used for sharing thoughts on ‘appropriate’ behaviour for Sakha women, as well as sharing anti-immigrant opinions.

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<sup>112</sup> Министерство по развитию гражданского общества Республики Саха (Якутия).

<sup>113</sup> YSIA. 2018. “Minobshchestvo Yakutii: muzhskoi algys v dome archy ne nosit priznakov religioznogo kul’ta.” <http://ysia.ru/glavnoe/minobshchestvo-yakutii-muzhskoj-algys-v-dome-archy-ne-nosit-priznakov-religioznogo-kulta/> News Ykt.ru. 2017. “Muzhskoi ohuokhai v sentre Yakutsk” <http://news.ykt.ru/article/56372> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>114</sup> 1500 members on five WhatsApp group chats by December 2018.

In early 2019, members of Üs Tümsüü organized raids in bars and restaurants that are popular among customers, who originate predominantly from the Caucasus and former Soviet Central Asia areas.<sup>115</sup> In March 2019, anti-immigrant attitudes in Yakutsk reached a climax when 7,000 Sakha men gathered to express their concern about the Republic's immigration policies after an incident when a man presumably from Kyrgyzstan raped a Sakha woman.<sup>116</sup> This demonstration of Sakha men, which was initiated partially by the members of Üs Tümsüü, attracted media attention on both regional and state levels.<sup>117</sup> The events were framed among other things as a 'political provocation' and an 'anti-immigrant demonstration'. A month later, when the Sakha Republic's day was celebrated on the 27<sup>th</sup> April, for the first time since 2016 *ohuokhai* for men (usually organized by Uraañkhai and Üs Tümsüü), which seemed to be establishing into an annual event, did not take place in 2019.

### **Aiyy Iteḡele**

Lazar' Afanas'ev-Teris was a member of the organization Sakha Keskile. Sakha Keskile was actively involved in Sakha politics in the beginning of the 1990s. In 1997, during the elections to the Sakha parliament, members of Sakha Keskile campaigned as opponents of the ruling authorities (Filatov 2000: 120). Afanas'ev-Teris, a philologist by education, was demoted at his workplace, the Institute of Humanities, from the post of the head of the laboratories to the position of technician (Filatov 2000: 120). After a long break, during which Afanas'ev-Teris continued developing his research, he applied to the Ministry of Justice in 2015 to recognize his organization, Aiyy Iteḡele, as religious.

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<sup>115</sup> Ykt.ru. 2019. "MVS Yakutii prokommentirovalo deyatel'nost' 'Üs Tümsüü'." <https://news.ykt.ru/article/82068> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>116</sup> BBC News in Russia. 2019. "Iznasilovanie v Yakutske: v gorode nachalis' napadeniya na migrantov i massovyie mitingi." <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-47627169> (accessed May 5, 2019).

<sup>117</sup> RBC. March 17, 2019. "V Yakutske proshel miting posle obvineniia migrantov v iznasilovanii." <https://www.rbc.ru/society/17/03/2019/5c8e56c19a794779612f2c74> (accessed May 5, 2019).

Novaya Gazeta. March 18, 2019. "V yakutske proshel miting posle vobuzhdeniya dela ob iznasilovanii i pokhishchenii zhenshchiny." <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2019/03/18/150078-v-yakutske-proshel-miting-posle-vozbuzhdeniya-dela-ob-iznasilovanii-i-pohishchenii-zhenshchiny-protiv-migrantov> (accessed May 5, 2019).

Radio Svoboda. March 27, 2019. "Glava Yakutii nazval miting protiv migrantov politicheskoi provokatsiei." <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29845341.html> (accessed May 5, 2019).

It is likely that Teris was motivated by the earlier successful registration of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele as a religious organization in 2012. Some part of the text of the application to the Ministry of Justice, especially about why Aiyy Iteḡele should be recognized as a religious organization, are identical to parts of the application from Aar Aiyy Iteḡele.<sup>118</sup> Afanas'ev-Teris similarly refers to Freud, Durkheim and textbooks for the definitions of religion (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii... 2015: 6–7*).<sup>119</sup>

The origin of Aiyy Iteḡele according to Afanas'ev-Teris is rooted in *olongkho*, which he sees as “a spiritual (Ru. *dukhovnaia*) school that Sakha had before the 1930s.” Aiyy Iteḡele positions itself as a modern Tengrism with Ürüng Aiyy as the one and only god (Ru. *bog*). Teris argues that the word *aiyy* refers to the invisible creature, which is the reason for the world's existence and everything living, and *ichichi* are the children of *aiyy* (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii... 2015: 6–7*). The nine spiritual heavens (Ru. *dukhovnye nebesa*) of *aiyy* are compared by Teris to Jacob's Ladder from the Bible (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii... 2015: 6*), which is a comparison of Aiyy Iteḡele with Christianity.

A separate section in the application is devoted to yhyakh:

The first yhyakh was organized by Ellei Bootur in the Tuymaada valley. Yhyakh is held during the period of the Great Milking (Sa. *uluu tunakh*) from the 22<sup>nd</sup> May to the 12<sup>th</sup> July. It is a ceremony of offerings to the *aiyy* and his children *ichichi* through sprinkling *kumys* from *cheroon*, which is the main ritual in Aiyy Iteḡele (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii... 2015: 7*).

Afnas'ev-Teris does not question whether Ellei Bootur was a mythical figure or not, for him, Ellei is a forefather of the Sakha who organized the first yhyakh in the Tuymaada valley. Yhyakh takes a central place for Aiyy Iteḡele and is explicitly articulated as the main ritual. The *algys* during the opening ceremony at the Tuymaada Yhyakh was addressed to *aiyy* and *ichichi*, just as Teris describes in his application. In 2015, Aiyy Iteḡele became the second religious organization to be registered by the Ministry of Justice and to claim the status of Sakha religion.

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<sup>118</sup> Several paragraphs are repeated word-for-word from the Aar Aiyy Iteḡele's application.

<sup>119</sup> Ministerstvo Yustitsii Rossiyskoi Federatsii. 2015. “Ekspertnoe zakluchenie v otnoshenii Mestnoi religioznoi organizatsii goroda Yakutskai Aiyy iteḡele (Religiia Aiyy).” No. 14/02-30/6488 from July 7.

## **Tengrism**

In 2016, Afanas'ev-Teris applied again to the Ministry of Justice. This time he wanted to register a religious organization called 'Tangara Iteḡele (Tengrism)'. According to Tangara Iteḡele (Tengrism), Tengri is the one and only creator (Ru. *tvorets*) and not Ürüḡ Aiyḡ as in Aiyḡ Iteḡele, which is the main difference between the two applications. Yhyakh, as with Aiyḡ Iteḡele, is considered to be the main ritual of Tangara Iteḡele. The committee concluded that Tangara Iteḡele was:

An artificial reconstruct based on fragmentarily preserved traditional Sakha beliefs and the compilation of the elements from the religions of Turkic peoples, Buddhism and Christianity (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2016: 6).<sup>120</sup>

In addition, the committee saw the registration of Tengrism as an attempt to establish connections with the other subjects of the Russian Federation and foreign countries on the basis of having Tengism as a common religion. As a result, the application was declined for the following reasons:

1. Tangara Iteḡele does not correspond with the features of a religious organization.
2. The founder of the organization has a double religious affiliation, which contradicts the traditions and principles of religion.
3. Tangara Iteḡele does not organize any religious activities (rituals, worships, ceremonies), religious teachings or training (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii ...* 2016: 7).

The other critique of Tangara Iteḡele was that it "consciously ignores the works of the ethnographers with expertise in shamanism (Ru. *shamanism*) because Tangara Iteḡele contradicts scholarly documented accounts of the Sakha traditional beliefs (Ru. *verovani*)" (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii...* 2016: 7). The expert committee from the Ministry of Justice understands Sakha practices as shamanism based on earlier Sakha scholarship. Therefore, the application was perceived as insufficient because the committee considered Tangara Iteḡele as no more than an artificial reconstruct.

I visited Afanas'ev-Teris in Yakutsk in 2017. His office and home, which he called Sakha *balaḡan* (Sakha wooden house), was situated in the same street where I grew up and lived in

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<sup>120</sup> Ministerstvo Yustitsii Rossiyskoi Federatsii. 2016. "Ekspertnoe zakluchenie v otnoshenii Mestnoi religioznoi organizatsii goroda Yakutsk Tangara iteḡele (Religiia Tengri)". No. 14/02-30/5765 from June 15.

Yakutsk. The neighbourhood, Saisary, is one of the poorest in Yakutsk. The majority of the houses in Saisary do not have access either to central heating or an indoor water supply. During the winter, our fireplace had to be lit at least three times a day. I remember walking every evening with my grandfather to the well to fill a 100 litre canister for drinking water. Yet, none of these chores was as inconvenient as the outdoor toilets that we had to use even when the temperatures went below -50 °C. Nowadays, at the beginning of our street, there is an alcohol market next to the city's cemetery; in the middle of the street, a hunting store where one could buy guns and rifles; and at the very end of this street Afanasi'ev-Teris built his Sakha *balağan*.

Inside the *balağan*, Teris had the signs of the twelve *aiyy* and a big library. During our interview, two middle-aged Sakha men visited him to ask for advice. When they left, Teris said that several thousands of people had visited him to ask for help since he built the *balağan*. When I asked whether there are any regulars who meet at his Sakha *balağan*, Teris changed the subject and continued to talk about his struggles with the state authorities. He was disappointed by the lack of support from the state authorities in developing Tengrism and upset by the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church received more help than the Aiyg Itegele.

In December 2017, Teris passed away. I visited the Sakha *balağan* in the summer of 2018. It was locked up and abandoned. I asked people around and some said that the owners of the land had given a special discount to Teris, which stopped after his death. The organization had lost its leader and location, and is not active anymore.

### **The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious organizations in the Sakha Republic**

Since my focus has been on articulations of religion at and around yhyakh, I have often come across references to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and Islam, as well as to the Bible and the Quran, in the conversations with my interviewees, especially with *algyschyts*. I often noticed icons typical of the Russian Orthodox Church in the mini-buses that I took during my travels to the Olongkho Yhyakhs. I met a priest from the Russian Orthodox Church, who shared his experience of promoting yhyakh among the local population in Aldan, where I also met a Catholic missionary from Slovakia.

There are 246 officially registered religious organizations in the Sakha Republic, including Aar Aiyg Iteḡele, Aiyg Iteḡele, Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, and Buddhism. Each one of them can be identified as a Sakha religion based on the argument that they are all practised in the Sakha Republic.<sup>121</sup> There is an Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church, Catholic Church, Mosque, Buddhist Centre, Baha'i Centre and many other religious houses in Yakutsk alone. The Sakha people are likely to be affiliated to as many religious organizations as people in any other society with the right to freedom of religion. However, there are some organizations, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, that have a longer history and more impact than others among the Sakha.

From the arrival of Russians to the current territory of the Sakha (Yakutia) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Orthodox Church has been present in Sakha society with its missionary activities until these were interrupted by the Soviet regime in 1917. Although the historian Sergey Filatov (2000: 113) argues that the majority of Sakha “remain pagans with a very shallow Christian overlay,” Sakha were exposed to Christianity for almost three hundred years before the establishment of the Soviet Union. Many of my Sakha interviewees perceived Russian Orthodox Christianity as what religion is like, or even what it should be like. All the three Sakha religious organizations that applied to the Ministry of Justice had multiple references and comparisons to the Bible and Christian practices. The Russian Orthodox Church is the biggest religious denomination in Russia, as well as in the Sakha Republic. According to the Information Centre under the President of Sakha Republic, half of the Republic’s population identify themselves as Orthodox Christian.<sup>122</sup>

American anthropologist Marjorie Balzer argues in her article, “Whose Steeple is Higher? Religious Competition in Siberia” (2005: 57–58), that the idea of building a Sakha temple (Archy D’iete), according to her interviews and observations, was copied from the Christian churches. Balzer discusses in this article an interesting public dispute on how the Russian Orthodox archbishop of the Sakha (Yakutia) insisted that the Sakha had no right to build a temple higher than the golden cupolas of the nearby Russian Orthodox Church.

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<sup>121</sup> Migalkin, A. V. 2006. “Analiz religioznoi situatsii v Respublike Sakha Yakutia.” Paper presented at *Osnovy dukhovnoy bezopasnosti Dal’nevostochnogo regiona*. Yakutsk. October 24-25. <http://pravostok.ru/blog/analiz-religioznoi-sityacii-v-respyblike-saha-yakytia/> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>122</sup> Orthodoxy: 44.9%, Shamanism: 26.2%, Non-religious: 23.0%, New religious movements: 2.4%, Islam: 1.2%, Buddhism: 1.0%, Protestantism: 0.9%, Catholicism: 0.4% (Nikolayev 2007).



This dispute demonstrates the powerful position of the Russian Orthodox Church, as does the episode that Tamara Timofeevna from Aar Aiyy Iteḡele told me about the presence of the representatives from the Russian Orthodox Church in the expert committee, which decided whether the Aar Aiyy Iteḡele was eligible to be recognized as a religious organization. A British theologian Michael Bourdeaux (2003: 47) argues, in his study of the religious revival in Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that “the Russian Orthodox Church, *de facto* if not *de jure*, claimed the right to decide which other religions or denominations were to be granted the right of registration.” Bourdeaux (2003: 47) further writes that “local Orthodox clergy were frequently consulted by state officials, adding a decisive voice on which should or should not be registered”, which is what Tamara Timofeevna was referring to during our interview.

Both Balzer (2005) and Filatov (2000) address the competition between the Russian Orthodox Church and the ‘pagans’ (Filatov’s terminology) or ‘shamanic traditions’ (Balzer’s terminology) as characteristic to Sakha society. Due to the historical and political circumstances of the Sakha Republic, the Russian Orthodox Church is often perceived as having a strong connection to the authorities in Moscow. A 1997 law on religion recognizes the spiritual contribution of Orthodox Christianity to the history of Russia, which according to Bourdeaux (2003: 47) demonstrates its privileged position in Russia. Although the Russian Orthodox Church has received more support from the state authorities than other religious organizations, it also went through some turbulent times. Filatov (2000: 121) argues that due to the national image of Orthodoxy, it is often perceived as the faith of the Russians, which limited the Sakha population who wanted to convert to the Orthodox Church. He also argues that the development of religious life in the Sakha Republic can be seen as a reflection, in miniature, of the situation in Russia:

From the restoration of the prerevolutionary situation to a wide pluralism; from attempts by the authorities to control and manipulate the religious situation to the recognition that the religious sphere is autonomous and not accountable to the authorities (Filatov 2000: 122).

I would not necessarily agree that the religious sphere is currently autonomous in the Sakha Republic. As has been discussed above, there are still various state institutions that decide which practices are to be recognized, or not, as religious. Other than that, Filatov’s note on

the tendencies of restoration and revitalization, as well as an increasing pluralism seem to be quite applicable in the Sakha case.

## **Back to Archy D'iete**

Boris was the first *algyschyt* who agreed to be interviewed for this dissertation. He has also been an important and supportive advisor to me during my fieldwork. Every year I visited Boris at Archy D'iete and my last year of fieldwork was no exception.

When I entered Archy D'iete, it was in the middle of the summer renovation. Most of the staff, as well as the regulars, were on vacation. Boris was also planning a trip for the summer:

I am planning a road trip from Yakutsk to Europe. The main goal is to visit the Headquarters of UNESCO in Paris. At first, we were eight people, but then the director of Archy D'iete had to cancel because of the elections.

The head of the Sakha Republic, Egor Borisov, suddenly resigned. Our director, therefore, will stay in Yakutsk and join the election campaign for Aysen Nikolaev (at that time mayor of Yakutsk city).

We will travel as a group of seven: me; a driver; a journalist, who was also a camera operator from NVK Sakha (the main TV broadcasting company in Sakha); *olongkhosut* from Yakutsk; a story-teller from Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrug; a story-teller from Khakassia; and a story-teller from the Novosibirsk region. Our goal is to introduce our variety of Siberian storytelling to the UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

I called the headquarters, and I was told that we could visit the museum section of UNESCO but were not offered an official reception. I am still trying to find contacts there who could help us. I cannot agree on any particular day because I never know how the car will behave and what will happen on the road. If the Paris option does not work out, then I have a good contact in Poland, where we can also present our storytelling (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

Boris organizes road trips every summer. He travelled previously to Mongolia and China. This time, Boris chose Paris as a travel destination because it was the location of the UNESCO Headquarters. Boris hoped that the recognition of *olongkho* by UNESCO would make it possible for the *olongkhosuts* to perform at the headquarters. However, in addition to having no contacts at UNESCO, Boris could not provide any specific dates for a visit since his arrival in Paris largely depended on the condition of the car and roads. As a result, the only offer

Boris received was to come to the Headquarters as a tourist. I imagine the schedule for the events at the UNESCO Headquarters is booked months in advance. However, Boris was not discouraged and had an alternative plan of visiting Poland instead of Paris.

During the interview, I asked Boris about the current situation of the *algyschyt* school:

Afanasy Fedorov (the founder of the school) retired from the College of Culture, so the school moved to Archy D'iete. More than a hundred *algyschyts* have graduated during the last five years with certificates allowing them to work anywhere in the Republic. We have nearly met the demand for *algyschyts*. People of different ages, from their twenties to eighties attend his courses. The majority are women, about 90%. In some groups, there might be only one man. I think that it is great that there is an interest among women but we also need men to join. Gender imbalance is an issue that we have in our field. I believe that it is the reason why Üs Tümsüü organization emerged in the first place (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

When Boris talked about the gender imbalance, he meant not the underrepresentation of women but of men. However, in my opinion, the male *algyschyts* are overrepresented. Although, there were more women graduating from *algyschyt* school, at all the public yhyakhs that I visited during my fieldwork, the *algyschyt* was always a man. Interestingly, Boris suggested that the dominance of women among the Sakha practitioners was one of the reasons that led to the establishment of the Üs Tümsüü organization. Boris continued:

It is not right that everywhere you go, there are only women. Enter any organization in Yakutsk, you will see only women there and no men. Men just wander around, drink and commit crimes. I received a phone call from a man a few days ago who was wondering why female *olonghosuts* took over the *olongkho* scene and asked where the men were. In the old days, only men performed *olongkho*. I agreed with him to some extent but I have also noticed that the male movement has grown stronger during the last few years. We now have *ohuokhai* for men, *algys* of men, both of which have created something near a scandal in the Republic.

The national (Russian) TV criticized it because, they said, the *ohuokhai* dancers looked like they were getting ready for war. The whole thing resulted in FSB visiting Archy D'iete during the Üs Tümsüü's Sunday *algys*. I believe that they still keep an eye on them. Andrey Borisov (the former Minister of Culture in the Sakha Republic) himself was at Archy D'iete and gave them permission to continue their Sunday *algys*.

There are all kinds of people among them [Üs Tümsüü], including ex-prisoners. Vladimir Kondakov from Aar Aiy Itegele used to visit prisoners to read *algys* for them. Muslim men from Caucasus prayed collectively in prison, while Sakha men

did not have an equivalent brotherhood until they began gathering for *algys*. Those who were released established Üs Tümsüü. Prisoners are also humans and especially after their release, they need to be motivated to build a better life. When I was at the Tuymaada Yhyakh I walked passed by the *tühülge* of Üs Tümsüü. About twenty people were standing there holding sheets of paper and reading *algys* (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

I remembered Anna's (from Archy D'iete) words who asserted that only men should organize yhyakh. The same idea emerged about the performers of *algys* and *olongkho*. Although the majority of *algyschyts* and *olongkhosuts* are women in today's Sakha Republic, the narrative that these vocations should be occupied by men was present based on the argument that this is how things were in the old days, suggesting that it was those days that practices were performed in an authentic and 'right' way.

This was the first time I had heard that Üs Tümsüü was established mainly by ex-prisoners. Boris made an interesting observation of the role of *algys* as a uniting activity for Sakha men that helped them to create a brotherhood, which continued to grow beyond the walls of prisons. Lastly, I asked Boris whether he attended the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2018:

I worked at several small *tühülge* for the companies who requested individual *algys*. The Opening and Kün Körsüü ceremonies were performed as usual by Ivan Gerasimovich Vasil'ev – Algys Uibaan. This year he had two wing (Sa. *kynat*) *algyschyts*. According to the records of the Russian ethnographer Khudyakov, in the old times the Sakha people believed that the more *algyschyts* at the 147yhyakh, the stronger the *algys* being sent to the *aiyy*. This year there were more than ten *algyschyts* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, who all graduated from our school (Boris, *algyschyt* at Archy D'iete).

Khudyakov's account of *kynat algyschyts* transformed the *algys* at the opening ceremony of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Once again, a new element of the practice was presented as an old and authentic one. The legacy of the past, old days and scholarly writings seem to be used as the major arguments for the incorporation of this new aspect into Sakha practices.

During the first two years of my fieldwork, I assumed that there was no permanent *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. None of my other informants mentioned the name of the *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Therefore, I did not pay particular attention to who was performing the main *algys* at Us Khatyn before Boris mentioned Algys Uibaan. I called Algys Uibaan and asked whether he would meet me to discuss his work and his contribution to the

Tuymaada Yhyakh. After rearranging appointments several times, caused by his busy summer schedule, we agreed to meet at Archy D'iete.

When I arrived at Archy D'iete, there was a woman waiting for an appointment with Algys Uibaan. She asked me whether she could go first since she had a quick question and little time. I agreed. The woman was planning a wedding for her daughter and wanted to ask Algys Uibaan to perform *algys* for the wedding ceremony but she was worried that *algys* might take up too much time. She went upstairs and came back quickly saying that Algys Uibaan was booked for several weeks in advance, but, luckily, they had friends in common, so he had agreed to find time to perform a short *algys* at the wedding.

I went upstairs and saw Algys Uibaan sitting in a spacious circular room with Sakha wooden decorations, a high ceiling, and big windows that together created a warm and spacious atmosphere. I introduced my project and the conversation began:

In 1991-93, I worked and did *algys* in Megino-Kangalassky *uluus*. In 1995-97, I was in Verkhoyansk where I continued with *algys*. In 1998, when Tuymaada Yhyakh moved to the Us Khatyn area I was appointed to perform the Kün Kōrsüü and the opening ceremony. I send *algys* to *aiyy* every year and recently I was joined by two *kynat algyschyt*. We all come from one school. There are several schools where one can learn about *algys* and become an *algyschyt*.

Afanasi'ev-Teris focused mainly on research, scholarship and the work of the earlier ethnographers; Kondakov's school has a medical approach; whereas we (students of Afanasy Fedorov) follow *ayulġa* (Sa.) ('nature'). I met Afanasy Fedorov at the College of Culture in Yakutsk, where I was also teaching. My background is in Sakha language and literature.

Although I was a scholar myself, I think that there is too much focus on scholarship these days. Scholars are concerned only about proving each other wrong and are caught up in the fight about what ways are the most authentic. This mindset is not healthy. I left academia because my mind began to degrade, I only got dumber there. *Ayulġa* falls asleep when your only concern is the facts. In the old days, *oyuun* and *udagan* (Sa.) (female *oyuun*) did not need an education, why would we need it now? Only feelings and *turuk* (Sa.) ('state of mind', 'state of being', 'state of health') should be present at yhyakh, and scholars should not mess things up there (Algys Uibaan, *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh).

Algys Uibaan had quite an unusual point of view. I have not met any other *algyschyt* so critical of scholarship. It is important to bear in mind that Algys Uibaan, who is in his late 60s, derives his thoughts from the common impression of Soviet scholarship, where critical thinking was not encouraged, especially in the humanities. Therefore, he has an image of scholarship as a

field that works exclusively with facts without reflection, or critical analysis of the earlier established knowledge and norms. At the same time, Algys Uibaan recognizes the importance of schooling for *algyschytтар*. I asked him about *oyuuns*:

*Aiyy oyuuns* are from ancient times. They were able to open their *chakras* so that the air could go through and lift them from the ground. Civilization has developed a human's mind too much. Our sensitive *channels* are blocked by logic. In the old times, there was little knowledge about the world around. Therefore, people used *algys* to seek knowledge of what had happened, is happening and will happen. Feelings (Ru. *chuvstva*) should always come first and only then logic; whereas now, everything is the opposite way round (Algys Uibaan, *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh).

Although the interview was in Sakha, Algys Uibaan frequently used such words as 'chakra', 'channels' and 'energy'. He also used the Russian word for 'feelings' – *chuvstva*. I asked Algys Uibaan about his opinion of today's yhyakh:

There are too many competitions and contests for sports, traditional clothing, *olongkho*, and many other things at yhyakhs. Sometimes I get the impression that none of that would have a place at yhyakhs if there were no rewards and prizes involved.

There are also many restrictions. At the Tuymaada Yhyakh, we get only three minutes each for *algys*, which is nine minutes in total for the whole *algys* ceremony. Three minutes is a regulated length of all speeches at the opening ceremony, including politicians and honoured guests. Whereas at *Kün Kōrsūū* ceremony, there is no time limit and that is why I like it best. I can do *algys* for ten, fifteen, thirty minutes and the longer the Sun does not rise, the more time I have.

Today yhyakh is rather a political instrument, or I would even say a political report. It should not be like that. Yhyakh should only be about religious (Ru. *religioznoe*) and spiritual (Ru. *dukhovnoe*) enjoyment (Algys Uibaan, *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh).

Algys Uibaan saw a threat not only in scholarship but also in what he calls civilization as a whole. I assume that his frustration was caused mainly by the bureaucratic system, where yhyakhs, especially the Tuymaada and Olongkho Yhyakhs, are strictly regulated and rehearsed. He even sees yhyakh as a political instrument and report. Nevertheless, Algys Uibaan continues performing at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, because yhyakh creates a space for him and his *algys*, especially during the *Kün Kōrsūū* ceremony, where no politicians or strict schedules are involved. I asked Algys Uibaan whether there are many people who seek help and *algys* from him:

Yes. I am fully booked several months in advance. When people come to me, I try to make them embrace their dreams. Dreams motivate people and help against their bad habits. Smoking, drinking, cheating, and threatening people on WhatsApp are all bad habits. People spend nearly two decades of their lives in education that often has no use in everyday life (Algys Uibaan, *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh).

Algys Uibaan works with the current needs of the Sakha society. The issues that he named are common challenges for people in the Sakha (Yakutia) and many other places in the world: alcoholism, infidelity, crime, and the search for the meaning of life. We might expect people to contact a psychologist or a doctor with these kinds of issues. However, it seems that in the Sakha society to visit a psychologist is a much bigger taboo than seeking help from an *algyschyt*. Throughout the interview, Algys Uibaan frequently pointed to the failure of the education system, and how, in his opinion, it causes frustration and depression among the people rather than helping them. Lastly, I asked him about his *iteġele*:

Tengrism. The ancient Tangara. The third [religious] organization should be registered. We need to unite ourselves and collaborate with people like you, scholars who can study the roots of Tengrism. Both Teris (Aiyv Iteġele) and Vladimir Kondakov (Aar Aiyv Iteġele) see the roots of Sakha Iteġele in Tengrism. If we all unite, we can be very powerful (Algys Uibaan, *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh).

I asked whether he also meant the Üs Tümsüü organization:

Hmm... those are the ex-prisoners. None of them has any proper knowledge about *aiyy*. They make a fuss complaining that women have become this and that, that foreigners are this and that, which I find quite aggressive. I do not interact with them and have no desire to either. Religion is something different from what they promote. In *ayulġa*, there should be a balance of masculinity and femininity. What we need is to respect each other, be united and reach our common goal – to revive Sakha *iteġele*. In this way, your work will be of help. There are so many scholars, but very little help from them. Most of them are too proud of themselves. One should leave the pride behind and be open to understanding others. Good luck with your research! (Algys Uibaan, *algyschyt* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh).

On one hand, Algys Uibaan saw the interference of scholars into ‘religious’ things as a threat. On the other hand, he regarded the earlier ethnographic materials as authoritative and important sources used for the revitalization of Sakha *iteġele*. He also wished that the various religious organizations and scholars could unite in the common goal of reviving Sakha *iteġele*. Furthermore, Algys Uibaan assumed that I was an active Sakha revivalist based on my Sakha identity and scholarly interest in Sakha *iteġele*. Although, Algys Uibaan hoped for all of the forces to be united, he had no desire to collaborate with Üs Tümsüü because of their radicalism. Interestingly, the narrative of Tengrism as a Sakha religion dominates the current



revivalist movements of the Sakha religion, despite the fact that the religious organization claiming Tengrism is not officially registered.

### **Concluding remarks**

During my fieldwork, I frequently came across narratives of the spiritual or ideological vacuum created after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This vacuum, if I were to use this word, seems to have been perceived as an opportunity to develop, establish and revive practices of a religious character. At the same time, the vacuum seems to have caused concern to the Sakha authorities, who attempted in their turn to administer increasing wishes and demands of the Sakha intelligentsia. As a result, the spiritual centre Archy D'iete was financed and built by Yakutsk city government. Although Archy D'iete is not registered as a religious house and does not profess specific religious teachings, the services that they offer (baptism, wedding, *algys*) generate comparisons and associations with religious houses, such as churches and mosques.

Archy D'iete takes responsibility for the *algys* at the opening and Kün Kōrsūū ceremonies at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. *Algyschyt* Algys Uibaan, who rents a room at Archy D'iete, has been performing *algys* at the Tuymaada Yhyakh since 1998. Archy D'iete also provides courses for people who wish to become certified *algyschyts*. All these aspects demonstrate the crucial role of Archy D'iete not only for the organization of the Tuymaada Yhyakh but for the conceptualization of yhyakh in general in the Sakha Republic.

By the role of Archy D'iete, I do not necessarily mean that there is a unified idea of what it constitutes. The two *algyschyts* that I met who have 'offices' at Archy D'iete, Algys Uibaan and Boris-Ayulğan, have different affiliations to the centre. Algys Uibaan rents a room as an individual entrepreneur, and Boris-Ayulğan is an official employee with a state salary from Archy D'iete. Algys Uibaan and Boris-Ayulğan are both students of Afanasy Fedorov, who established a *algyschyt* school. This, however, does not mean that Archy D'iete is monopolized by the teachings and students of Afanasy Fedorov. There are many other *algyschyts* and *ekstrasens*, who either rent rooms at Archy D'iete or use the information desk of the centre to recruit customers. Moreover, the centre opened its doors for Sunday *algys* to Üs Tümsüü,

who position themselves as the followers of Vladimir Kondakov and Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, which is, in the words of Algys Uibaan, another school of Sakha *iteḡele*.

The other spiritual centre, established initially with the support of the Sakha authorities, namely Yakutsk City Hall, has changed its name from the Conversation centre to Kamelek and is now commonly referred to as Saiyyna. The centre is mainly run with the donations of its regulars and sponsors. As I understand it, the support of Yakutsk City Hall is limited to the donation of the land and a house, where the Saiyyna centre is situated today.

The *algys* offered by Saiyyna at the Tuymaada Yhyakh that I described in Chapter 2 is quite popular among visitors. Unlike Archy D'iete, Saiyyna is oriented towards building a community through courses about their teachings and regular Sunday meetings. A strong focus is put on personal development and its maintenance, based on the teachings of their founder Claudia Maksimova-Saiyyna. Saiyyna's published works are rich in religious terms and have references to the other two central figures in Sakha religious revitalization – Vladimir Kondakov and Lazar' Afanas'ev-Teris.

In addition to the two spiritual centres, there are three organizations who claim Sakha *iteḡele*. These organizations, Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, Aiyy Iteḡele and Tengrism, applied to the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation to be recognized as religions. They all define yhyakh as the main religious ritual of the Sakha people. The registration processes for these organizations identified a number of interesting aspects for this research. Not only did we learn about Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, Aiyy Iteḡele, and Tengrism, but also about the legal requirements for religious organizations set by the Ministry of Justice, as well as the authoritative presence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Federal Security Service, who contributed to the approval process. In addition to having standardized requirements, the expert committee defined the practices of the applied organizations. For example, despite the fact that all three organizations claimed to represent the traditional Sakha religion, the expert committee categorized them as artificial reconstructs, neopaganism, and even accused one of them as being ignorant of the research in shamanism, which the committee perceived as the “true” source of knowledge about Sakha practices.

*Algyschyts* Boris-Ayulḡan and Algys Uibaan refused to call themselves shamans. None of my interviewees at the yhyakhs that I visited used the terms shaman or *oyuun*, nor have I met anybody who identified her/himself as such. The only exception was Vladimir Kondakov,

who described himself as *aiyy oyuun* in his publications and was referred to as such by his followers.

Regarding the articulations of indigeneity, Sakha *iteǵele* was repeatedly compared to Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, and not to practices of people who today are broadly recognized as indigenous in the UN sense of the word. This suggests that Sakha religious organizations want to be compared with the so-called “world religions” and have their practices treated with the same respect as the “major religions”. It might also have to do with the conventional image of religion as an institutionalized and standardized practice, such as Christianity or Islam.

The processes of registration and the involvement of the state institutions revealed the actors behind *religion-making from above*, such as the Ministry of Justice, and *religion-making from below*, such as the organizations Aar Aiyy Iteǵele, Aiyy Iteǵele and Tengrism. Interestingly the organization that claimed Tengrism, in which all of the three religious organizations and spiritual centres in Yakutsk saw their roots, was not recognized as a religious organization because it did not meet the requirements set by the Ministry of Justice and its committee. This demonstrates the importance of the institutions in power, whose standards and understandings some organizations manage to achieve and some do not.

The interviews and exploration of Sakha religions also demonstrated the impact made by the UNESCO recognition of *olongkho*. Afanasi’ev-Teris described *olongkho* as a Sakha spiritual school; Anna from Archy D’iete saw in UNESCO’s recognition the salvation of not only Sakha pride, but Sakha *iteǵele*; and, *algyschyt* Boris planned a road trip with storytellers from Siberia to the Headquarters of UNESCO in Paris. All these examples show the significant role of UNESCO’s recognition in today’s Sakha society.

Moreover, the study revealed some of the motivations of the practitioners and communities that deal with the existing and real problems present in the Sakha society, such as alcoholism, poverty, issues with the mental and physical health, and the integration of ex-prisoners. Last, but not least, across the various interviews with people who actively work on the revitalization and establishment of Sakha religions and the approval of organizations as religious, the role of scholars and scholarship is strongly evident. Therefore, the next chapter will address the role and work of scholars in the conceptualization and revitalization of yhyakh.



## **Chapter 5. Yhyakhs in scholarly writings**

Previous research is crucial for the contextualization of my project. Sakha and non-Sakha scholars, predominantly in the disciplines of history, anthropology and sociology, have already done extensive research on yhyakh and Sakha practices. Their writings are rich in empirical descriptions from various historical periods, in applications of different fruitful theories, and in analysis of earlier scholarship, which together creates a substantial background for my study. They have enabled me to focus on the aspects of yhyakh that I am particularly interested in, namely articulations of religion and indigeneity.

My interest in scholars and their endeavours increased after my first period of fieldwork in Yakutsk. I met and talked to *algyschyts* with backgrounds in the fields of Sakha linguistics and folklore. I learnt about a group of scholars and practitioners who actively produce and disseminate knowledge about the origin, practices and meaning of yhyakh. I observed how ethnographic materials collected through centuries of research on the Sakha people are used by scholars, religious organizations, Sakha politicians and *algyschyts* as sources where Sakha practices are discussed and legitimized today. My observations of echos of scholarly narratives across the interviews with participants and promoters of yhyakhs encouraged me to take a closer look at circulating scholarly writings around yhyakh.

Yhyakh has attracted the interest of researchers for several centuries, which has not only raised the awareness and enabled documentation of yhyakhs but also inspired other scholars to explore these practices further. In the 1930s, Sakha scholars began advancing the field of ethnography with their expertise in the Sakha language and way of life. Considerable work was done on recording, collecting and documenting Sakha practices as well as on the translation, analysis and dissemination of earlier ethnographic research.

Following articulation theory, I focus primarily on the scholarly writings and narratives that have been presented to me by different actors whom I have met in the field. I have not tried to identify and comprehend all historical research on yhyakh and Sakha practices. My

aim has been to focus on those scholarly references that have appeared, or been discussed, in interviews and observations during fieldwork in Yakutsk, and in my review of literature.

Theoretically, this chapter is inspired also by Markus Dressler's model of religion-making, particularly its dimension of *religion-making from (a pretended outside)*, meaning scholarly discourses on religion and, in my case, also indigeneity that provide legitimacy to the other processes, such as religion- and indigenous-making from *above* and *below*.<sup>123</sup> As a result, I became interested in the scholars' backgrounds, academic affiliations, theories and methods, and, particularly, their use of concepts that translate yhyakh and Sakha practices towards the domains of religion and indigeneity.

My study of scholarly publications about yhyakh has been happening in parallel to reading theoretical and methodological literature (f.e. Clifford 2013; Dressler and Mandair 2011; Graham and Penny 2014; Tafjord 2017a; 2017b) for this dissertation, which has made a major impact on the way in which I have read and analysed scholarly writings about yhyakh. My project represents one of many possible approaches to the study of yhyakh. It is shaped by my observations and interpretations during fieldwork and by my current scholarly environment in Tromsø.

The first part of this chapter describes and discusses the writings of contemporary Sakha researchers who work actively in the organization and conceptualization of yhyakh. The second part presents briefly the main historical sources upon which contemporary scholars, Sakha religious organizations and *algyschyts* draw their research and arguments. The last part of the chapter addresses work by non-Sakha researchers, who found an interest in exploring yhyakh after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Altogether, this represents the academic articulations about yhyakh that are most salient today.

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<sup>123</sup> In his study of the making of Turkish Alevi Islam, Dressler argues that writing religion(s) just as the building of nations is a modern practice that relies on modern concepts and semantics. He critically analyses scholars who produced and disseminated knowledge about Alevi, particularly of Fuad Koprulu, who developed an approach that by and large has been accepted by later researchers as a master narrative and continues to impact scholarly and public discourses on Turkish history and religion (Dressler 2013: 186–87).

## Contemporary Sakha scholars

During our first interview, *algyschyt* Boris mentioned an informal and flexible group of researchers and practitioners united by a common interest in yhyakh, which he called the *Laboratoriya yhyakha* (Ru.) ('laboratory of yhyakh'). According to Boris, *Laboratoriya yhyakha* consisted of the following members:

Ekaterina Romanova, the main expert in yhyakh and the author of the annually revised 'Conception of yhyakh' (Ru. *kontseptsiya yhyakha*); Vil'yam Yakovlev, the director of the architectural site "Us Khatyn"; Afanasy Fedorov, the founder of *algyschyt* school; Uliana Vinokurova, a Sakha sociologist; and Svetlana Petrova, a scholar with an expertise in Sakha clothing (Boris, *algyschyt*, 2016).<sup>124</sup>

These names circulate in most of the recent writings about yhyakh across academic and popular genres. In 2017, a new popular compilation 'Yhyakh: in the blessed valley of Tuymaada' (Ru. *Yhyakh: v blagoslovennoi doline Tuymaada*) dedicated to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tuymaada Yhyakh was published.<sup>125</sup> This book is edited by Ekaterina Romanova, Uliana Vinokurova, Vil'yam Yakovlev, Svetlana Petrova and Afanasy Fedorov, who are all the central figures in the study of yhyakh today and to whom Boris referred to as the members of the *Laboratoriya yhyakha*.<sup>126</sup> I introduce them and their work briefly below in order to present how the popular and academic knowledge about yhyakh is produced today by people who are also actively involved in the organization of yhyakhs and to what extent their writings articulate religion and indigeneity,.

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with Boris-Ayulgan in June, 2016 at Archy D'iete.

<sup>125</sup> The book received a number of awards and nominations in Russia: "The best book in regional studies (Ru. *krayevedeniye*)" at the international contest "The book of the year: Siberia – Eurasia - 2017" (Novosibirsk), nomination for the "The best book about Russia" at the festival "The Reading World (Ru. *Chitaushchy Mir*)" (Ryazan) and award in "The best illustrated fiction book" (Ru. *Luchshaya khudozhestvennaya illustrirovannaya kniga*) (Vladivostok). Sakha News. 2017. "V Yakutii proshla prezentatsiya prizera konkursa 'Kniga goda: Sibir'-Eurasia – 2017.'" <http://www.1sn.ru/203106.html> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>126</sup> I was tempted to frame this part of the chapter as the writings of the *Laboratoriya yhyakha*, but I let go of the idea because: 1) the term *Laboratoriya yhyakha* has been used only by Boris and not mentioned by any of its "members"; 2) although the "members" collaborate in research and organization of yhyakhs to some extent, their work is individual and unique just as their visions and hopes for yhyakh; 3) the term can suggest the notion of yhyakh being produced in a "laboratory" which can cause limiting suggestions about the "inventive" nature of yhyakh, which I wish to avoid.



### Ekaterina Romanova

Ekaterina Nazarovna Romanova (b. 1961) is a Sakha ethnographer, a doctor of historical sciences, and one of the most prominent scholars of yhyakh today. In 1987, Romanova defended her doctoral dissertation on yhyakh at The Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Künstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg. The dissertation was published as a monograph in 1994 “Yakut celebration Ysyakh: origins and representations” (Ru. *Yakutskiy prazdnik Ysyakh: istoki i predstavleniia*). Since then Romanova has been working at the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Yakutsk, where she is currently the head of the sector of ethnography of the peoples in North-East Russia.<sup>127</sup>

Romanova positions herself as a representative of the Siberian school of semiotics. In her dissertation, she explores the symbolism of yhyakh and its elements by employing the methods of semiotic analysis inspired by the Russian philosopher and philologist Aleksei Losev.<sup>128</sup> Romanova’s monograph is divided into three parts. The first section discusses the ways yhyakh embodies the ‘worldview’ (Ru. *mirovozzrenie*) of the Sakha, which Romanova (1994: 43) defines as white shamanism (Ru. *beloe shamanstvo*). The Russian word *mirovozzreniye*, similar to the English ‘worldview’ can be used in various contexts without predominantly religious connotations. In this case, Romanova refers to what she calls the white shamanism of Sakha. The second section focuses on yhyakh as the calendar celebration of Sakha marked around the 22<sup>nd</sup> June – the day of the summer solstice. The third section discusses yhyakh as a ‘religious term’ (Ru. *religioznyy termin*). Romanova (1994: 112) suggests that in the past the word *yhyakh* meant ‘rite’ (Ru. *obriad*) or ‘ceremony’ (Ru. *tseremoniia*), and not only the event itself. To support this claim, she suggests the following typology of “yhyakhs in the past” based on ethnographic materials, archival documents, records of Sakha folklore and her own fieldwork observations:

1. Yhyakhs that are connected to the cult (Ru. *kul't*) of *aiyy*:
  - a) *Aiyy yhyakh*, or yhyakh with *algys*; these yhyakhs are ancestral (Ru. *rodovoi*) and arranged in the open air; the main object of worship (Ru. *pokloneniia*) is Ürüŋ aiyy Toion.

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<sup>127</sup> See the full biography on the web-page of the Institute for Humanities Research and Indigenous Studies of the North in Yakutsk. “Ekaterina Romanova”.

<http://igi.ysn.ru/index.php?page=structura&str=etno&nm=romanova> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>128</sup> Semiotics and symbolism was one of the scholarly interests of Losev. Regarding his personal background, although he worked most of his life in the Soviet Union, he was a monk in the Russian Orthodox Church, ordained in a private ceremony (Losev, 2003).

- b) Yhyakh in uraha, held in honour of the main gods (Ru. *glavnye bozhesta*) and ancestors (Ru. *predki*); only men participate in the ceremony (Ru. *tseremoniia*).
  - c) Tunah, Kulun-yhyakh, yhyakhs associated with the cult of horses; family based celebration; the main object of worship is D'ehegey *aiyy*, the patron (Ru. *pokrovitel'*) of horses.
2. Yhyakhs that are not connected with the cult of *aiyy*:
- a) Ytyk yhyakh, in honour of the consecration (Ru. *osvyashcheniia*) of the animal for the *Upper Abaahy*; family event; the main object of worship is Uлуу Toion, a terrible god (Ru. *groznoe bozhestvo*), the head of the *Upper Abaahy*.
  - b) Abaahy yhyakh celebrated in the autumn; family event; the main object of worship is *Uлуу Toion*.
3. Yhyakhs of the situational-everyday confinement (Ru. *situativno-bytovaia priurochennost'*):
- a) Uruu yhyakh, on the occasion of weddings.
  - b) Yhyakh for the occasion of building a new house.
  - c) Kyrgyttar yhyakha, yhyakh where only girls and young women participate.
  - d) Sargy yhyakh, dedicated to the victory in war. Objects of worship are Sakha war gods (Ru. *bozhestva*) (Romanova 1994: 114–115).

This typology illustrates how the translation of yhyakh to a more generic 'rite' or 'ceremony' expands the meaning of the word beyond the description of one specific event celebrated in Midsummer. Although these yhyakhs are presented in one list, it does not necessarily mean that they all existed in the same historical period. It is rather an attempt to systematize knowledge about yhyakhs throughout the history of Sakha based on the materials that were available to Romanova.

Another important academic contribution Romanova made is a semiotic analysis of the elements at yhyakhs, such as *kumys*, white birds, horse, *serge*, horsehair, Sun, Kün Kōrsüü, *algys* and other features characteristic to yhyakh. This part of Romanova's research, from my fieldwork observations, was of particular interest to some *algyschyts* and other practitioners who searched in her writings for the meaning of the various aspects of yhyakh.

By the end of the monograph, Romanova suggests a general definition of yhyakh:

Yhyakh is a unique spiritual richness (Ru. *dukhovnoe bogatstvo*) of the Sakha people. It was and still is the main factor of unification (Ru. *faktor splocheniia*) of the Sakha *ethnos*, its self-expression as a nation (Ru. *samovyrazheniia kak natsii*) (Romanova 1994: 149).

To put Romanova's writings from 1994 into context, by that time Sakha had declared their sovereignty after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Yhyakh was recognized as the national day of Sakha, and Tuymaada Yhyakh had been celebrated three times in Yakutsk under the

supervision of politicians and scholars, including Ekaterina Romanova herself. Her analysis of yhyakh as a uniting symbol of Sakha as a nation corresponded with what would later be known as the national revival of Sakha at the beginning of the 1990s. This period is also characterized by the time when scholars in the humanities were freed from the pressure to having to use theoretical frameworks that were Marxist. This context applies also to the other authors discussed in the first part of this chapter.

While articulating the importance of yhyakh for the self-identification of Sakha, Romanova expresses her concern about contemporary yhyakhs:

Today I have noticed another, no less dangerous tendency towards artificial (Ru. *iskusstvenoi*) demonstrations of yhyakhs, when organizers constantly compete in inventing (Ru. *izobretenii*) new forms of it (Romanova 1994: 149).<sup>129</sup>

This, however, does not mean that Romanova sees yhyakh as a static event where all changes are interpreted exclusively as artificial inventions. She also argues that “yhyakh is a dynamic process, which modifies and gradually transforms” (Romanova 1994: 148). Romanova does not specify or reflect on what particular tendencies she sees as dangerous. Her main concern is the various ways some people practice yhyakh, which she regards as artificial inventions.

Romanova has continued her ethnographic work on Sakha practices. I will focus on one of her latest publications on yhyakh ‘The Yakut [Sakha] national festival ysyakh in transition: historical myth, ethnocultural image, and contemporary festive narrative’ (Ru. *Yakutskii natsional’nyi prazdnik ysyakh v situatsii perekhoda: istoricheskyi mif, etnokul’turnyi obraz i sovremenny prazdnichnyi narrativ*) co-authored with her colleague at the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vanda Ignat’eva in 2011.<sup>130</sup> I selected this article because it is published relatively recently and, demonstrates Romanova’s development as a researcher in comparison to her first monograph on yhyakh, published seventeen years earlier. Another reason is that the article is one of her two works that has been translated into English, which increases its potential audience and international impact.

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<sup>129</sup>“В настоящее время наметилась другая, не менее опасная тенденция – к искусственной демонстрации ысыахов, когда организаторы начинают соревноваться в изобретении все новых их форм” (Romanova 1994: 149).

<sup>130</sup> The article was translated by James Walker and published in *Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia* 50 (4): 42-45 in 2012.

In this article, Romanova, draws on her own field data from 1979–2010 and archival documents that analyze the dynamics of yhyakh’s continuity from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Romanova (2011: 29) applies the prism of cultural memory, where yhyakh is seen as a memory of the Sakha “original southern ancestors”. She refers extensively to Sakha ethnographer Gavriil Ksenofontov and agrees with his statement that:

Ysyakh is the centre axis and symbol of the faith of ancient religious worldviews (Ru. *very drevnikh religioznykh vozzrenii*) of the Sakha, which inherited the latest achievements of steppe nomadism<sup>131</sup> (Gavriil Ksenofontov in Romanova 2011: 43).<sup>132</sup>

Romanova continues to explicitly translate yhyakh as something within the domain of religion, by frequently using the same concepts as she did in her monograph from 1994: *poklonenie* (‘worship’), *bozhestva* (‘god’, ‘deities’), *osvyashchenie* (‘consecration’), *religioznykh* (‘religious’) and *pokrovitel’* (‘patron’). These characteristic elements disappeared from yhyakh during Soviet times, when the event became in the words of Romanova (2011: 31) “a mediator of *Homo Sovieticus*”, where the first *kumys* was offered to Stalin whom she describes in parentheses as “the main Soviet god (Ru. *bozhestvo*)”. She also discusses yhyakh as an ethnonational project of the early 1990s:

The first president of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolaev, united the political, intellectual and cultural elite of the republic around the idea of establishing ethnopolitical symbols and ideology. Reflections concerning the ethnocultural image of the republic, its brand, resulted in the declaration of yhyakh as a national day (1991) and as the key ethno-symbol (Romanova 2011: 35).<sup>133</sup>

Romanova herself was one of the central figures in conceptualizing the Tuymaada Yhyakh in Yakutsk. To learn about her involvement and opinion about yhyakh, I met her for an interview in July, 2016:

It is important to stay aware of the unifying power of yhyakh. We [Sakha intelligentsia] had lengthy discussions and eventually realized that we should consider yhyakh as a calendar celebration (Ru. *prazdnik*) because yhyakh

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<sup>131</sup> “Ысыах есть центральная ось и символ веры древних религиозных воззрений якутов, унаследовавших самое последнее достижение степного номадизма”.

<sup>132</sup> The English text is from the English edition of this article (Romanova 2012: 43)

<sup>133</sup> “Первый президент Якутии М. Николаев объединил политическую, интеллектуальную и творческую элиту республики вокруг идеи формирования новых этнополитических символов и идеологии. Рефлексия по поводу нового этнокультурного облика республики, ее имиджа, в итоге отразилась в новом государственном статусе праздника Ысыах (1991), как ключевого этносимвола” (Romanova 2011: 35)

symbolizes the new beginning and renewal of nature, and the start of a New Year. Only after developing its calendar function, did we begin looking at yhyakh as a worldview (Ru. *mirovozzrenie*) and religious ritual (Ru. *religioznyi ritual*), especially during the last few years. Yet, it is first and foremost a calendar celebration, the Sakha New Year, a national holiday (Ru. *natsional'nyi prazdnik*) and only after that a religious ritual (Ru. *religioznyi ritual*). Now yhyakh is developing towards becoming a national brand of Sakha. I personally support such development as long as yhyakh is treated as a sacred (Ru. *svyashchennyi*) day. I want tourists and guests to understand that yhyakh is not simply entertainment, but our sacred heritage (Ru. *svyashchennoe naslediye*). My biggest dream and hope is that one day yhyakh will be recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage. Yhyakh is changing and transforming with time like a dynamic tradition (Ru. *dinamichnaia traditsiia*). Let it be a brand, let it go to the global arena, let Sakha people be proud to be Sakha<sup>134</sup> (Romanova 2016).

Romanova repeated several times during the interview that the initiative to “revive” yhyakh came not from the Sakha intelligentsia, but was a demand from the Sakha population. On the one hand, Romanova argues for the development of yhyakh in different directions, for instance, in becoming a national brand. She also revises her ‘Conception of Yhyakh’ annually and presents it to the Yakutsk City Hall, where she participates in updating and confirming the plan for the next Tuymaada Yhyakh. On the other hand, she is concerned with presenting yhyakh primarily as a sacred heritage (Ru. *svyashchennoe nasledie*) of the Sakha people and questions other interpretations of yhyakh, which Romanova (2012: 53) sees as “the alarming trend of the domination of neofolkloristic theatricalization”<sup>135</sup>.

One of Romanova’s strongest objections to contemporary yhyakhs is directed towards Olongkho Yhyakh, which she analyzes as the invention of tradition (Ru. *izobretenie traditsii*) resulting from the UNESCO’s recognition of Sakha epic style *olongkho*:

Folkloristic (Ru. *fol'klornaia*) modification of the festive tradition (Ru. *prazdnichnoi traditsii*), where the culture of *olongkho* is institutionalized as the fundamental ethnoideology (Ru. *etnoideologiya*) of yhyakh, created problems, connected not only with the destiny of yhyakh, but with the future of the traditional culture (Ru. *traditsionnoi kul'tury*) in general (Romanova 2011: 37).

Romanova (2011:37) argues that the language of *olongkho* is incomprehensible to the majority of Sakha, which makes *olongkho* a symbol of intraethnic (Ru. *vnutrietnicheskikh*)

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<sup>134</sup> Interview took place in June, 2017 Romanova’s office and was conducted in Russian.

<sup>135</sup> In Russian edition “Сегодня наметилась тревожная тенденция доминирования в праздничном нарративе неофольклорной театрализации, где эпическое повествование превращается в просмотр некоего слайд-шоу” (Romanova 2011: 38)

differences instead of a symbol of togetherness. From the perspective of finding a uniting symbol of Sakha, such an argument can indeed be valid. However, that was not the major motivation of UNESCO's recognition of *olongkho*. Romanova also emphasized during the interview that "at yhyakh people should worship (Ru. *poklonyant'sa*) *aiyy* and not *olongkho*", which demonstrates her personal understanding of yhyakh as an event dedicated for the worship of *aiyy*.<sup>136</sup>

Despite her disagreement with the promotion of *olongkho* after its recognition by UNESCO, Romanova is positive about the international recognition of Sakha practices. In fact, she wishes for the Tuymaada Yhyakh to be recognized as World Heritage by UNESCO. This was announced in the news on Ykt.ru prior to the Tuymaada Yhyakh-2018 with the headline 'Tuymaada Yhyakh may become UNESCO's masterpiece' (Ru. *Ysyakh Tuymaady mozhhet stat' shedevrom UNESCO*).<sup>137</sup> However, there is no definite confirmation that Tuymaada Yhyakh is being considered by the UNESCO committee yet.

The combination of ethnographic fieldwork from the end of the 1970s, decades of research, recognition from fellow scholars, Sakha intelligentsia, *algyschyts*, Sakha authorities, and access to ethnographic materials in the archives make Ekaterina Romanova one of the most influential figures in producing and disseminating knowledge about yhyakh today. She publishes predominantly in Russian, except for her two journal articles that were translated into English.<sup>138</sup> As with any other scholar, she explores and applies various theories and methods, while staying consistent in her aim to find the origin of yhyakh, demonstrate its continuity and contribute to its revitalization. Regarding articulations of religion and indigeneity in her research on yhyakh, I found multiple and consistent translations towards religion, where yhyakh is classified by Romanova, among other things, as a religious ritual (Ru. *religioznyy ritual*).

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<sup>136</sup> Interview at Romanova's office in Yakutsk, Summer 2016.

<sup>137</sup> News Ykt.ru. 2018. "Ysyakh Tuymaady mozhhet stat' shedevrom UNESCO." <http://news.ykt.ru/article/70450> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>138</sup> Romanova, Ekaterina. 2012. "The Yakut [Sakha] National Festival Ysyakh in Historical Myth, Ethnocultural Image, and Contemporary Festival Narrative." *Anthropology & Archaeology of Eurasia* Vol.50. № 4: 42–55.

Romanova, Ekaterina. 2013. "The visual heritage of the northern Turkic Sakha in the works of the first photographers (the late XIX - early XX centuries)." *Language and Culture in The Changing World. "Karadeniz"* Vol. 6: 108–117.

## Vil'yam Yakovlev

Vil'yam Fedorovich Yakovlev-Tühülgen (born in the 1940s<sup>139</sup>) is a Sakha artist and ethnographer. As has been mentioned in previous chapters, Yakovlev is the architect and director of the ethno-architectural site “Us Khatyn”, where Tuymaada Yhyakh is held annually. Although Yakovlev is not a typical scholar with an academic degree working at a research institution, he is included in this review because he is one of several Sakha practitioners who use scholarly methods and sources for their writings and collaborate closely with more conventional scholars.

In 1993, Yakovlev published the book *Hitching post – serge* (Ru. *Konovvaz' – serge*) dedicated to the study of the Sakha hitching post *serge* based on the ethnographic fieldwork collected largely in his home-region Suntaar. Uliana Vinokurova, a Sakha scholar in social sciences, describes Suntaar as “a place made famous from the ancient times (Ru. *isstari*) by great *olongkhosuts* and Sakha wood carvers with knowledge in Sakha sacred building” (Vinokurova in Yakovlev 2015: 93).

Yakovlev's recent book, *Tus-Ilge. Tusulge – sacred place'* (Ru. *Tus-Ilge. Tusulge*<sup>140</sup> – *svyashchennoye mesto*), published in 2015, is a compilation of his essays and newspaper articles from the period 1999 to 2014. The Sakha name of Vil'yam Yakovlev-Tühülgen comes from the word *tühülge*, which emphasizes the role of the practice for his personal identity.<sup>141</sup>

Yakovlev discusses not only the Sakha architectural constructions in his writings but also yhyakh, what he describes as Sakha religion and the origin of the Sakha people, topics that are especially relevant for this research. In one of his essays, Yakovlev argues that:

Yhyakh is the arena for the revitalization (Ru. *vozhzhdenie*) and preservation (Ru. *sokhranenie*) of objects of intangible cultural heritage (Ru. *objektov nematerial'nogo kul'turnogo nasledii*) of Sakha that is at risk of extinction: the ritual of Kün Körsüü, *algys* ceremony, *ohukhai* dance, the traditional methods of crafting Sakha costumes and its further popularization, production of Sakha music instruments, including Sakha drums (Yakovlev 2015: 142).

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<sup>139</sup> The only record mentioning Vil'yam Yakovlev's birthdate is by U'yana Vinokurova in the introduction to his book *Tus-Ilge. Tusulge – svyashchennoye mesto*: “Vil'yam was born on the eve of the Victory Day” (referring to the Great Patriotic War, the Eastern Front of World War II)” (Yakovlev 2015: 93).

<sup>140</sup> *Tusulge*, or *мюсюлгэ* is a Russian way of writing *tühülge*.

<sup>141</sup> There are 38 *tühülge* in the Sakha Republic that were designed by Yakovlev-Tühülgen (Yakovlev 2015: 94).



Increasing attendance at the Kün Kōrsūū and *algys*, setting the Guinness World record for the ‘Largest Gathering of people with Sakha costumes’, and the popularity of Sakha drum bands in contemporary Sakha Republic, all suggest that yhyakh is succeeding as an arena for the revitalization of Sakha practices that Yakovlev was concerned was at risk of extinction. Nevertheless, Yakovlev indicates further issues that trouble him:

Organizers compete in inventing (Ru. *izobretenii*) the new forms of yhyakh, without taking into consideration the holy of holies postulates (Ru. *sviataia sviatykh postulyaty*) of yhyakh culture (Ru. *kul'tury*): commandments (Ru. *zapovedei*), canons (Ru. *kanony*) of organizing rituals (Ru. *obriady*) and designing cult (Ru. *kul'tovykh*) spaces and attributes (Yakovlev 2015: 143).

Yakovlev juxtaposes two different processes that he observes among Sakha: *revitalization*, which he sees as reflexive attempts to preserve Sakha practices that are at risk of extinction; and *invention*, presented as a disrespectful and close to heretic movement. Yhyakh, on the other hand, is articulated by Yakovlev using vocabulary that is typically Christian<sup>142</sup>: ‘postulates’, ‘canons’, ‘commandments’ and ‘holy’.

Another interesting notion that Yakovlev presents in his writings is the verb *yhyakhtyyr* (Sa.) (‘sprinkling’), which he reflects on in the discussion about the origin of the Sakha:

The sacrificial ritual (Ru. *obriad zhertvoprinosheniia*) through *yhyakhtyyr* reached its solemnity when the Sakha horse-breeders began spreading in the Lena<sup>143</sup> meadows. *Yhyakhtyyr* represents the universe as a synthesis of astral (Ru. *astral'nykh*) views that have nothing in common with the later shamanic (Ru. *shamanskikh*) movements. The Sakha people’s religion (Ru. *religiia*) is rooted in white faith (Ru. *belaia vera*) (Yakovlev 2015: 140).

Yakovlev bases his argument on the theory of the migrated origin of Sakha to the current territory of the Sakha republic. According to Yakovlev Sakha had practised *yhyakhtyyr* prior to the arrival of the Russians, which suggests the practice has continued for several centuries.

Yakovlev continues to translate Sakha understanding of the world and *yhyakhtyyr* towards the domain of religion, when he uses concepts such as ‘sacrificial ritual’, ‘shamanic’ and ‘astral’. At the same time, he foresees a potential critique that these words could also be included in what he calls the later shamanic movements and so he argues that Sakha religion

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<sup>142</sup> In Sakha context, ‘Christian’ is predominantly used with the connotation of the Russian Orthodox Church, unless specified differently.

<sup>143</sup> Yakovlev refers to the Lena River that flows through the whole territory of the Sakha Republic.

is rooted in white faith. Similarly to Romanova, who describes Sakha practices as white shamanism (Ru. *beloe shamanstvo*), Yakovlev defines Sakha practices as ‘white’, which might also have to do with an attempt to oppose earlier translations of Sakha practices as “dark practices”.<sup>144</sup>

In 2009, Us Khatyn was included in the “List of the Immovable Monuments of History and Culture” as the sacred (Ru. *sviashchennaia*) territory *Ytyk Sir* (Sa.) (‘Sacred Land’) by the Government of the Sakha Republic. Yakovlev states in his General Conception of the ethno-architectural complex “Tuymaada Yhyakh” at Us Khatyn<sup>145</sup>, developed through consultations with Ekaterina Romanova, Rozaliya Bravina and Uliana Vinokurova:

Us Khatyn is a sacred (Ru. *sviashchennaia*) territory of the Sakha people, where the legendary forefather of the Sakha people Ellei Bootur celebrated yhyakh – a ritual of worshipping (Ru. *pokloneniia*) *aiyy* and spirits (Ru. *dukhi*) of the area (Yakovlev 2015: 150).

According to this conception, the choice of using the Us Khatyn area for the Tuymaada Yhyakh was based on the premise that Ellei Bootur organized the first yhyakh at this location. Once again the narrative of Ellei Bootur as a forefather of the Sakha and initiator of the first yhyakh makes an appearance. The popularity of this narrative might be due to the fact that it links many aspects of Sakha people: their origin, horse-breeding, *olongkho* and yhyakh.<sup>146</sup>

At Us Khatyn, there are currently the Ceremonial zone, the Guest zone, 14 ritual (Ru. *ritual’nykh*) centres and 83 *tühülge*. Most of these constructions, except some of the private *tühülge*, were developed and built under the supervision of Vil’yam Yakovlev, including Aal Luk Mas and Altan Serge.

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<sup>144</sup> A number of missionaries and political exiles with European Christian background described Sakha practices as black and dark shamanism (Ru. *chernoye shamanstvo*), for example Vasily Troschansky (1943-1898), whose work I will discuss later in this chapter.

<sup>145</sup> Ekaterina Romanova was the first to introduce the notion of the ‘Conception of Yhyakh’, which is the document that she works on throughout the year and presents annually to the Yakutsk City Hall. The document is not public and I had no access to it. However, I noticed that some *algyschyts*, representatives of Yakutsk City Hall and Sakha scholars sometimes mention the conception and treat it like a general guidebook of how yhyakh should be celebrated. Yakovlev has also his own conception that focuses primarily on the architectural sites at Us Hatyn.

<sup>146</sup> The narrative is about a young man, Ellei Bootur, who travels from the south through the Lena River to the current territory of the Sakha people, where he meets a rich Sakha man Omogoy Baai. Omogoi Baai employs Ellei Bootur, who impresses the Sakha with his various skills and knowledge of building houses, horse-breeding and performing *olongkho*. According to the narrative, Ellei Bootur holds the first yhyakh and teaches Sakha to make *kumys* from mare’s milk.

The role of *serge* at yhyakh is seen by Yakovlev as something more than just a hitching post for horses. He translates *serge* into Russian as an altar for the cult (Ru. *kul'tovyi altar*) at yhyakh (Yakovlev 2015: 97). Today *serge* is a Sakha symbol used also by the Sakha diaspora to mark the *tühülge* of their yhyakhs. Currently, there are permanent *serge* in several places across the world: Yalova (Turkey), Gualala (California, USA), Toledo (Spain), Gannat (France) and Reykjavik (Iceland) (Yakovlev 2015: 160).

### **Afanasy Fedorov**

Afanasy Semenovich Fedorov (b. 1941) is a Sakha *algyschyt*, director of the *algys* and Kün Kōrsüü ceremonies at Tuymaada Yhyakh, and a founder of an *algyschyt* school in Yakutsk. Both *algyschyt* Boris and Algys Uibaan from Archy D'iete described Afanasy Fedorov as their mentor. Afanasy Fedorov has been teaching at the College of Culture and Art in Yakutsk since 1992. My interest in Fedorov's work is twofold: first, I am interested in his role as the director of the ceremonies at Tuymaada Yhyakh; second, in his school for *algyschyts*.

Fedorov's name with a phone number was on the public list of *algyschyts*, aimed at visitors who wish to contact *algyschyts*, which was hanging on the wall at Archy D'iete when I visited. In July 2016, I met him for an interview and asked him the same question that I had asked my interviewees at the researcher tent: "Could you please tell me about yhyakh and its role for you?"

I am a professional actor and it was acting that brought me to yhyakh. After my graduation from Shchepkin Theatre School, I got a job at the theatre in Yakutsk. In 1989, I was encouraged by Andrey Borisov [Minister of Culture in the Sakha Republic from 1990 to 2014] to go to the archives at the Institute of Humanities Research to learn about Yhyakh for the role of *oyuun* in a theatre piece. When I began reading about *oyuun* and yhyakh, I became so fascinated and returned to the archive every day. One of the women working at the archive suggested that I look at Ksenofontov's works.<sup>147</sup>

I found Ksenofontov's translations of Müller<sup>148</sup>, who recorded Kün Kōrsüü in detail. Using these instructions, together with Ekaterina Romanova, we revitalized (Ru. *vozrodili*) Kün Kōrsüü. First, we organized Kün Kōrsüü in my home village

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<sup>147</sup> Interview with Afanasy Fedorov at his office in Yakutsk. July, 2016.

<sup>148</sup> Gerhard Friedrich Müller, a German historian and ethnographer.

Dupsu, and then at Tuymaada Yhyakh a year later in 1991 (*algyschyt* Afanasy Fedorov).

The preparation for a role of *oyuun* in a theatre piece inspired in Fedorov a life-long interest in yhyakh. Kün Kōrsūū was the first attempt to restore the Sakha practice of yhyakh based on the archival materials after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Romanova also mentioned, when I interviewed her, that the first yhyakhs at Yakutsk Hippodrome consisted exclusively of the Kün Kōrsūū ceremony and that the event only later grew into the two-day long celebration.<sup>149</sup> The finding of Ksenofontov's works appears to have been of major significance in making the first steps in establishing public yhyakhs.

From 1991 to this day, Fedorov has worked on the scenarios of the opening ceremony, Kün Kōrsūū and *algys* ceremonies. I asked him whether he ever performs *algys* himself at the Tuymaada Yhyakh:

No, I usually send my students. It is too noisy there. In fact, it has been a while since I attended Tuymaada Yhyakh. I do more important and more powerful (Ru. *boleē vazhnyi i sil'nyi*) *algys* on the 21<sup>st</sup> June on my own where I send *algys* for the success of the Tuymaada Yhyakh (*algyschyt* Afanasy Fedorov).

It was interesting to learn that although Fedorov directs the main ceremonies at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, he does not attend the event itself. He regards *algys* performed on his own as more powerful and important in comparison to the *algys* performed by his students at Us Khatyn. To understand more about the role of the *algyschyt* I asked him how he understands *algyschyt* and the importance of his school:

*Algyschyt* is a translator. *Algyschyt* is not a white or black shaman but a blesser (Ru. *blagoslovitel'*). People often ask me whether I am a white shaman (Ru. *belyy shaman*). This question could have been relevant in the past when white shamans existed but not today. I am a blesser. Anyone can become *algyschyt*, as long as one *itegeier* (Sa.) ('believes') in *aiyy* (*algyschyt* Afanasy Fedorov).

Fedorov, just like other *algyschyts* that I interviewed for this project, distances himself from the notion of shaman and translates *algyschyt* into *blagoslovitel'* in Russian, which like its English translation 'blesser', has religious connotations. At the same time, Fedorov does not deny that there were 'shamans' among the Sakha in the past. In his description of *algyschyt*, Fedorov emphasizes that anyone can become *algyschyt* as long as one *itegeier* in *aiyy*. Such

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Ekaterina Romanova at her office in Summer, 2016.

an understanding of *algyschyt* makes it a lot more open and inclusive in comparison to the notion of shaman that comes with a set of pre-established expectations. Although Fedorov does not identify himself as a shaman, according to his official biography he has participated in international congresses on shamanism in Alaska (1993), Japan (1998) and Moscow (2000).<sup>150</sup> The application of the term ‘shamanism’ in international events and the abandonment of the concept ‘shaman’ among the Sakha exemplifies how the use of ‘shaman’ has become rare among the Sakha particularly compared with the notions of shamanism that frame international meetings and are actively used to this day in other places.

We continued the interview:

I teach at my school and give certificates to students so they could do *algys* and lead yhyakh on their own. There are many who claim to be *algyschyt* today who do not do things right (Sa. *söpkö*). Therefore, I train people, so that they learn the correct way of doing *algys* (*algyschyt* Afanasy Fedorov).

Fedorov’s *algyschyt* school is the one mentioned by Boris in Chapter 4. Yhyakh and Sakha religions. As was discussed earlier, three generations of *algyschyts* had graduated from this school by 2018. Although the institute that issues the certificates changed from the North-Eastern Federal University to the College of Culture and Art in Yakutsk and then moved to the Archy D’iete, Afanasy Fedorov has remained the director and main tutor at the school. The establishment of a specialized school for training *algyschyts* demonstrates not only the demand in Sakha society but also the institutionalization of Sakha practices. Afanasy Fedorov’s concern about *algyschyts* who are not trained at his school demonstrate his attempts to standardize *algys*. These certificates can also be seen as a way to legitimize the qualification of being an *algyschyt* to contribute to the potential recruitment for a position, for instance at Archy D’iete.

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<sup>150</sup> Kino-teatr.ru “Fedorov Afanasy Semenovich.” <https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/acter/m/sov/39161/bio/> (accessed April 3, 2019).



Image 39. Afanasy Fedorov with choroos performing *algys* at yhyakh.<sup>151</sup>

Thinking about my observations during the first night at Tuymaada Yhyakh when I saw a field full of drunk men, I asked Afanasy Fedorov whether it was the drinking at Us Khatyn that discourages him from attending the event:

Partially. I get very irritated when I see drunk people at the yhyakh. It takes time to educate the masses that *tühülge*, where yhyakh is celebrated, is sacred place (Sa. *ytyk-sir*), just like a church (Ru. *tserkov'*). I do not see any drunk people in churches, why would people come drunk to yhyakh then? Are we less worthy than Russians to be respected in the same way? Is our *iteġele* less worthy than Christianity? (*algyschyt* Afanasy Fedorov).

Comparing Sakha *iteġele* to Christianity and *tühülge* to a church, Fedorov emphasizes the religious character of yhyakh. This also demonstrates a connection between Sakha *iteġele* and Sakha ethnic identity versus Russian Orthodox Christianity and Russian ethnic identity when

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<sup>151</sup> The image is taken from: Romanova, Ekaterina, ed. 2017. *Ysyakh: v blagoslovennoi doline Tuymaada*. Yakutsk: Bichik.

Fedorov questions whether Sakha practices are less worthy than Russian ones. Another issue that Fedorov raised during our conversation was the gender roles in Sakha society:

Men are becoming like women these days. Sakha men are facing a crisis, which is demonstrated in the increasing rates of alcoholism and violence among them. For the opening ceremony at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, I wanted to show an image of strong Sakha men, where 385 men will dance to celebrate 385 years since the Sakha people joined Russia. I will also include 385 women. Yhyakh is a celebration of fertility and I want to emphasize that (*algyschyt* Afanasy Fedorov).

That Sakha men are facing a crisis was a narrative repeated in many of my interviews, especially in the interviews with *algyschyts*, who attempt to provide inspiration and help to men in various ways, as, for example, through the dance for men at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Fedorov articulates another popular narrative: the voluntary incorporation of Sakha people into the Russian state, to which he dedicates the dance performance at the opening ceremony of 385 men and women that symbolizes the 385 years since Sakha joined Russia. Overall, according to his book and in our interview, Fedorov understands yhyakh as first and foremost *sier-tuom*, which is often translated from Sakha as ‘a ritual’.

### **Uliana Vinokurova**

Uliana Alekseevna Vinokurova (b. 1947) is a Sakha sociologist currently working as a Professor at the Department of Sociology and Human Resources, North-Eastern Federal University (NEFU). Vinokurova graduated at the Pushkin Leningrad State University in 1971, where she also obtained a doctoral degree in 1994.<sup>152</sup> Vinokurova’s main expertise is in social processes in the Arctic and Arctic circumpolar civilization. Therefore, she approaches Yhyakh as a space for the analysis of Sakha social dynamics and self-identification.

Vinokurova bases her research on surveys that she conducted periodically from the 1990s to 2010s. In the article ‘Yakut values at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Ru. *Yakutskkiye tsennosti v nachale XXI veka*) (2017), she describes her approach as rooted in the application of indigenous methodology and its links to the idea of duality.<sup>153</sup> She is one of the first Sakha

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<sup>152</sup> See full biography at: SVFU. “Uliana Alekseevna Vinokurova.” <https://www.s-vfu.ru/staff/716376> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>153</sup> The article is written in Russian, where Vinokurova writes ‘indigenous methodology’ in English without translating it into Russian in her text. Example: “*Indigenous Methodology как методологическая парадигма для исследования коренных народов направлена на обогащение*



scholars who refers to indigenous methodologies in her research. Referring to Bagele Chilisa<sup>154</sup> (2000) and Margaret Kovach<sup>155</sup> (2009), Vinokurova (2017: 91) underscores the importance of Sakha researchers' contribution to Sakha scholarship, where 'insider' perspectives are incorporated into the study.

Regarding the theoretical concept of duality, Vinokurova argues that it represents the fundamental values of the Sakha people. She sees in duality the reason of Sakha people's self-preservation [Ru. *samosokhranenie*], where the concepts of man–woman, man–animal, man–residence and man–society are examples (Vinokurova 2017: 92).

Another central framework that Vinokurova applies is the theory of Arctic circumpolar civilization as a historical phenomenon in the development of mankind that she discusses in her book *Arctic Circumpolar Civilisation* (2016). After the declaration of Sakha sovereignty, the first president of Sakha, Mikhail Nikolaev, promoted the importance of the Arctic region and the role of Sakha people have, and had, in the Arctic. Interest in the Arctic was a catalyst, among other things, for research focused on Arctic issues from natural sciences to humanities, where Vinokurova became one of the pioneers in approaching the concepts of Arctic identity and Arctic civilization from the Sakha context.

There are a number of other interesting studies by Vinokurova. However, I here focus merely on her writings about yhyakh:

Yhyakh was preserved as the village celebration (Ru. *prazdnik*) during the Soviet times. In the climate of active globalization in the post-Soviet period, there was a need to develop a model of yhyakh for the city. City (Ru. *gorodskoi*) yhyakh is a new phenomenon, where a large population of people from different nationalities and cultures had to be taken into consideration. There was a need to find new uniting symbols, new forms of celebration and rituals (Vinokurova 2017: 19).

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*науки мышлением, практикой, интерпретацией менталитета коренных народов их собственными учеными (indigenous scholars) с целью обеспечить лучшее понимание и принятие коренных народов как субъектов истории, имеющих богатое культурное и интеллектуальное, аксиологическое наследие и современный потенциал этнического развития"* (Vinokurova 2017: 91).

<sup>154</sup> Bagele Chilisa has written extensively about indigenous research and indigenous methodologies. Geographically her research has focused on the Bantu community in Botswana.

<sup>155</sup> Margaret Kovach is a professor at the University of Saskatchewan, who has conducted studies on indigenous methodologies and indigenous knowledge. Kovach's research focus is on the First Nations of Canada.

Vinokurova makes an important distinction between the city yhyakh and yhyakh in the village. The significance of such a distinction is not about the authentic village versus the invented city yhyakhs. Quite the contrary, it shows the diversity of yhyakhs oriented to different kinds of audiences, where each has its legitimate place. However, due to the scale of bigger yhyakhs like the Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh, new elements, in my opinion, are simply more visible and, thus, more vulnerable to critique.

Although Vinokurova looks at yhyakh primarily as a space for the expression of the Sakha identity, she also describes it in religious terms:

People come to yhyakh to receive the blessing (Ru. *blagoslovenie*) from the higher powers (Ru. *vysshyyh sil*). This spiritual (Ru. *dukhovnyi*) component of the holiday (Ru. *prazdnik*) became accessible through the dissemination of the Sakha cosmogonic (Ru. *kosmogonicheskikh*) worldview to the new generation of Sakha. This was possible due to the introduction of the courses in the culture of *korennye* peoples in the Sakha Republic to the school program, strengthening the national self-awareness of Sakha in the post-Soviet period, and the contribution of the activists working for the revival of the cultural and spiritual (Ru. *dukhovnykh*) values supported by the Yakutsk city's authorities (Vinokurova in Romanova 2017: 20).

Vinokurova recognizes the role of the joint effort of politicians and Sakha intelligentsia in the revitalization of the spiritual (Ru. *dukhovny*) component of yhyakh and similar to her colleagues who work on the conceptualization of yhyakh, and she articulates the event in religious terms such as 'blessing', 'higher powers' and 'cosmogonic worldview'.

### **Svetlana Petrova**

Svetlana Ivanovna Petrova (b. 1954) is a Sakha scholar specializing in Sakha material culture. She defended her doctoral dissertation 'Ritual clothing of Sakha people' (Ru. *obriadovaya odezhda naroda Sakha*) at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy Sciences in Novosibirsk in 2002. Currently, Petrova works at the Department of Folklore and Culture at the Institute of Languages and Culture of the North-Eastern peoples of Russia at NEFU.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> See full biography at: SVFU. "Svetlana Ivanovna Petrova." <https://www.s-vfu.ru/staff/724705>. (accessed April 3, 2019).

The increasing interest in Sakha clothing is quite evident during yhyakh when people dress in Sakha costumes and put on their silver Sakha accessories. The recent expansion of the contests in Sakha costumes has resulted in a wider interest not only from the population but also from scholars. Svetlana Petrova addressed these issues and suggests a historical classification of Sakha clothing:

1. The first and most archaic (Ru. *arkhaichnyi*) pre-Christian period was when clothes were designed to facilitate a life in harsh climatic conditions.
2. The second period started from the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the influences from other cultures became visible in Sakha clothing. With the development of trade and ethnocultural connections, the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked with dresses that increased in length and were Russified (Ru. *russifitsirovannyi*).
3. The third period from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by the extinction of Sakha authentic (Ru. *iskonnoi*) clothing. Original elements of costumes disappeared just like the metal decorations. Sakha clothing lost its functional meaning completely.
4. The fourth period starts from the 1990s when Sakha people became interested in the roots of their culture, including Sakha clothing. Individuals, small and big companies began specializing in the reconstruction and production of Sakha clothing (Petrova 2017: 63–65).

Petrova emphasizes the religious components of yhyakh and Sakha costumes arguing that in the past clothes were first and foremost connected to the ritualistic practices, for example, the rituals that were addressed to *aiyy* – like yhyakh. In her opinion, clothes had a mediating function between the surrounding environment and *aiyy*, and served as a material protection for humans against the negative powers of nature (Petrova 2017: 65). She also did a study of *aiyy oyuun* clothing, which she translates into ‘white shaman’ (Ru. *bely shaman*).

Petrova’s analysis of Sakha clothes as Russified is one of the few times I encountered the term ‘russification’. From the way I read Petrova, the term is used to indicate Russian influence on Sakha clothing rather than to imply that Sakha and their practices were Russified as a result of the Russian colonial politics.

Clothing is, perhaps, the most visual and accessible marker of Sakha’s national identity. Romanova mentioned in our interview that only twenty years ago Sakha people were not

wearing Sakha costumes because of shame,<sup>157</sup> which contrasts considerably with the current situation in the Sakha Republic when more than 16,000 people wearing Sakha costumes at the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2017 set the Guinness World Record. Petrova encourages exhibitions and contests of Sakha costumes because according to her such events “not only represent a revival of Sakha clothing and material culture but also Sakha self-determination, which is vital in times of a globalizing world” (Petrova 2017: 65).

### **Remarks**

Although I discuss Sakha scholars who writes about yhyakhs only from the 1990s, I would like to remind the reader that Sakha scholars have been active in academia for about a hundred years. This century of Sakha scholarship led to a large amount of research on Sakha practices, most of which I, unfortunately, have no space to discuss in this dissertation. There are many other fundamental publications in the disciplines of history, ethnology, folklore studies, linguistics, literature, art, political and social sciences.<sup>158</sup> However, for this project, I am focusing only on the scholars who actively work on the organization and conceptualization of yhyakh.

As we learnt in the first part of this chapter, some of the organizers and developers of yhyakhs are researchers like Ekaterina Romanova, Uliana Vinokurova, Svetlana Petrova and intellectuals like Vi’yam Yakovlev and Afanasy Fedorov. Despite their differences in backgrounds, approaches and, sometimes, views, they share a common goal of revitalizing yhyakh. The word ‘revitalization’ (Ru. *vozhrozhdenie*) is used frequently by Sakha scholars in conversations and writings about yhyakh. The narratives of restoring (Ru. *vosstanovlenia*), and bringing back Sakha practices from the ancient times (Ru. *isstari*) are central in the discussions and descriptions of Sakha scholars, whose works were reviewed in this chapter. The “ancient times” vary from referring to the time before the arrival of Russians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (before the formation of the Soviet Union) depending on the author, but it is always associated with the pre-Soviet period.

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with Ekaterina Romanova in Summer, 2017.

<sup>158</sup> Major works include: Alekseev 1975, Bravina 2005, Gogolev 1980, Kolodeznikov 1991; and Struchkova 2005.

The frequent articulations of yhyakh as religious ritual (Ru. *religioznyi ritual*), spiritual wealth of Sakha (Ru. *dukhovnoe bogatstvo Sakha*), symbol of ancient religious worldviews of Sakha (Ru. *simvol drevnikh religioznykh vozrenii Sakha*), sacred heritage (Ru. *sviashchennoe nasledie*), holy of holies (Ru. *sviataia sviatykh*), sacrificial ritual (Ru. *obriad zhertvoprinosheniia*) and ritual of worshipping (Ru. *ritual pokloneniia*) all suggest that yhyakh is perceived and discussed as a religious practice. The key aspects of yhyakh such as *tühülge*, *serge*, *algys* and *Kün Kōrsüü* are similarly translated towards the domain of religion: blessing (Ru. *blagoslovenie*), ritual (Ru. *ritual*), ‘*tühülge* is a sacred place like a church’ (Ru. *tühülge eto sviashchennoe mesto kak tserkov*’), ‘*serge* like an altar for a cult’ (Ru. *serge kak kul'tovyi altar*’), *aiyy* spirits (Ru. *dukhi aiyy*) and postulates and commandments (Ru. *postulaty i zapovedi*).

Regarding articulations of indigeneity, only Uliana Vinokurova explicitly approached research of the Sakha through, what she calls, ‘the paradigm of indigenous methodologies’. This might be a result of her cooperation with foreign scholars and her access to research published in English. There are also repeating narratives about traditional customs (Ru. *traditsionnyi obychai*), traditional culture (Ru. *traditsionnaia kul'tura*), traditional heritage (Ru. *traditsionnoe nasledie*) and ancestors (Ru. *predkov*) present in the writings of Sakha scholars that can be read as characteristics of the UN description of indigeneity. Petrova talked about Russification, as well as other Sakha authors who discussed the influences and impact that the Sakha people faced with the arrival of Russians without a specific focus on colonization.

Two other noteworthy concepts are ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’. The word *shaman* is used by Sakha authors either on occasions when they described yhyakhs from the ancient times and refer to the earlier ethnographic materials or in their claims that there are no ‘shamans’ among Sakha today. According to Romanova, Yakovlev and Afanas'ev *belyi* or *aiyy oyuun*, which they translated as ‘white shamans’, became extinct after the arrival of Russians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whereas *khara* or *abaahy oyuun*, translated as ‘black shamans’ were banished and sentenced to death by the Soviet authorities. The term *shamanism* is used extensively, especially when the authors analyze Sakha practices in their writings, while the term ‘shaman’ is often replaced by *algyschyt*. When references are made to shamans among the Sakha today, it is commonly used to describe the practitioners from the past and not the current ones.

Yhyakh was often articulated as a national holiday, national symbol, self-expression of the nation and unifying factor of ethnos. The presence of such strong national narrative around yhyakh reflects the political situation in the beginning of the 1990s when a number of events, including the declaration of Sakha sovereignty, encouraged the development and expression of Sakha self-determination, where yhyakh was seen by politicians, scholars and practitioners as one of the national symbols of Sakha. As Vinokurova argues the current status of yhyakh and other Sakha practices is the joint effort of Sakha intelligentsia, as well as, according to Romanova, of the Sakha population.

Another very common feature that I noticed was how both scholars and practitioners refer extensively to the archival ethnographic materials that I will now turn to.

### **A critical look at historical sources used by scholars today**

Already after the first field trip to Yakutsk, it was evident that ethnographic materials played a central role in discussions and writings about yhyakh. I took Romanova's monograph *Yakutsky prazdnik Yhyakh* (Ru.) ('Sakha Yhyakh holiday')<sup>159</sup> as a departure point for exploring the pre-Soviet research on yhyakh. The majority of the archival sources used by Romanova are located at the archive of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Yakutsk. In June 2017, I went there to request access to the pre-Soviet documents about yhyakhs. My request was declined. I was told the condition of the documents was very poor, which meant that only the employees of the Institute whose research was directly dependent on the archival materials had access to them.<sup>160</sup>

In this part of the chapter, I shall briefly introduce authors from the past whose work on yhyakh are used extensively today. I hope that learning about the backgrounds of these authors, who today are recognized as the classics of research in Sakha practices, will

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<sup>159</sup> Romanova, Ekaterina. 1994. *Yakutsky prazdnik Yhyakh: Istoki i predstavleniya*. Novosibirsk: Nauka.

<sup>160</sup> I was limited to the modern editions of the ethnographic materials. Although it felt discouraging to be denied access to the original texts that many of Sakha scholars refer to in their writings, it prevented the project from growing into a broader historiographical analysis of yhyakh; and this was never the aim of the present study.

contribute to the contextualization and offer a better understanding of contemporary articulations of yhyakh and Sakha practices.

### **Gavriil Ksenofontov (1888–1938)**

Romanova presents the Sakha ethnographer Gavriil Ksenofontov in her writings, to whom she refers in most of her studies published about yhyakh. Although the original writings of Ksenofontov are in the archives available only to the staff of the Research Institute in Humanities, there are some contemporary editions of his works in libraries and bookstores in Yakutsk.<sup>161</sup> Ksenofontov devoted most of his academic life to collecting various Sakha folkloristic materials during his expeditions. Today, these texts are extremely valuable as they provide material for researching Sakha practices, language, and livelihood from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century seen through the eyes of a Sakha researcher.

Gavriil Ksenofontov was born into a middle-class Sakha family in 1888. He went to the Siberian Imperial University and became one of the first university-trained lawyers of Sakha origin.<sup>162</sup> D'yachkova, a Sakha historian, reflects on the university environment Ksenofontov was a part of, in his biography:

At the university Gavriil was inspired by the Siberian intelligentsia, who argued for the cultural and economic independence of Siberia, ideas which later were named as regionalism (Ru. *oblastnichestvo*). The influence of these views is reflected in Ksenofontov's works (D'yachkova in Ksenofontov 1992a: 9).

Ksenofontov presented the papers 'Origin of the Yakuts' (Ru. *proiskhojdeniye yakutov*) and 'Evolution of the kumys celebration—ysyakh' (Ru. *evolutsia kumysnogo prazdnika – ysyakh*) in Irkutsk. In St. Petersburg, he worked in the museums, archives and libraries to analyse collected ethnographic materials on Sakha practices; and in Moscow he actively participated in the 'League of militant atheists' (Ru. *soyuz voinstvuyushchikh bezbozhnikov*) (Dyachkova in Ksenofontov 1992a: 11-13).

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<sup>161</sup>Ksenofontov, Gavriil. 1992a. *Shamanizm. Izbrannye trudy*. Yakutsk: Sever-Yug.

Ksenofontov, Gavriil. 1992b. *Uraangkhai Sakhalar: Ocherki po drevney istorii Yakutov*. Yakutsk: Natsional'noye izdatel'stvo Respubliki Sakha (Yakutia).

Ksenofontov, Gavriil. 2004. *Elleyada: Materialy po mifologii i legendarnoi istorii Yakutov*. Yakutsk: Bichik.

<sup>162</sup> The first university in Siberia. Today known as Tomsk State University.



In 1929, Ksenofontov published a book entitled '*Khrestets: shamanism and Christianity: facts and conclusions* (Ru. *khrestets: shamanizm i khristianstvo: fakty i vyvody*) whose main argument was that Sakha practices have a large number of parallels with Christianity. Throughout the book, Ksenofontov highlights these parallels, one of which is the suggestion that the Sakha 'shaman' is a 'folk healer' (Ru. *narodnyi tselitel'*) just like Jesus Christ was viewed 'in the past as a healer' (Ksenofontov 1929: 125–126). Drawing parallels between Sakha 'shamanism' and Christianity, as Dyachkova analysis suggests, can be seen as a search for common ancient roots, which was typical for the scholarship of that time (Dyachkova 1992a: 33).

Ksenofontov must be considered progressive for his time in terms of his critique of the colonial ways of doing research. He criticises ethnographic materials left by the Russians in the pre-Soviet period for applying 'ready-made' sociological and ethnological schemes that tended to be borrowed from the classics of Western European colonial ethnography (Ksenofontov 1992b: 22).<sup>163</sup> Moreover, he argues that it is not only written sources that should be recognized as valid carriers of historical memory but other types such as, for example, oral narratives like *olongkho* in the case of Sakha should be considered:

Grand heroic poems, like *olongkho* of the Sakha, are still waiting for collectors and researchers. No less rich [in comparison to *olongkho*] in religious poetry (Ru. *religioznoi poezii*), mysteries (Ru. *misterii*) of 'white shamans (*aiyy oyuuun*)' but 99% of this information can be considered as lost to scholarship, because by the time Sakha got an opportunity to write them down they had already turned to Christianity and completely abandoned the cycle of their ancient religious rituals (Ru. *drevnikh religioznykh obriadov*). The mysteries of 'black shamans (Ru. *abaasy oyuuuna*)', healers (Ru. *lekarey*), sorcerers (Ru. *koldunov*) that are preserved, are only the lowest level of folk religion (Ru. *narodnoi religii*), which cannot represent the official religion (Ru. *religiya*) of the cattle herding people (Ksenofontov 1992b: 171).<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> "Элементы древней якутской культуры познаются ими при помощи готовых социологических и этнологических схем, обычно позаимствованных у классиков западноевропейской колониальной этнографии" (Ksenofontov 1992b: 22)

<sup>164</sup> "Грандиозные богатырские поэмы, или былины якутов "олонгхо" - все еще ждут своих собирателей и исследователей. Не менее богатую религиозную поэзию, мистерии их, так называемых, белых шаманов (айыы ойууна) на 99% нужно признать погибшей для науки, ибо, когда явилась возможность записать якутские тексты, якуты уже перешли к христианству и совершенно забросили весь цикл своих древних религиозных обрядов. Сохранившиеся до наших дней мистерии якутских черных шаманов (абаасы ойууна), лекарей, колдунов, представляют собой лишь нижний, подвальный этаж народной религии, который отнюдь не

*Olongkho*, according to Ksenofontov, is rich in ‘religious poetry’ just like the ‘mysteries’ of *aiyy oyuun*, which he translates as ‘white shaman’. Furthermore, Ksenofontov argues that Sakha traditionally practice white and black shamanism:

In the present day [early 20<sup>th</sup> century], only black shamanism is preserved, whereas white shamanism began collapsing (Ru. *razrushat'sia*) quickly after Christianization and is only left in a few remnants. However, with the help of retrospective analysis the main elements of Sakha white belief (Ru. *beloi very*) both from the point of view of dogmas (Ru. *dogmatov*) and rituals (Ru. *obriadov*) can *easily* be restored (Ksenofontov 1992b: 329, emphasis added).<sup>165</sup>

Perhaps it was this proposed easy restoration that inspired contemporary Sakha scholars and practitioners to attempt to revitalize the Sakha white shamanism. Interestingly, Ksenofontov describes Sakha practices contemporary to his times as ‘black’ and not representative of what he calls ‘the official religion’ of Sakha. A similar tendency towards dividing Sakha practices into white and black is still present among Sakha today, as well as a disparaging of the contemporary practices of Sakha, and the narrative of the lost ‘white shamanism’. Ksenofontov categorizes Sakha practices as shamanism, which could either be the result of his scholarly training or his encounter with the writings of earlier Sakha ethnographers. Whether Sakha practices were compared to shamanism or Christianity, Ksenofontov consistently translates them towards the domain of religion.

Ksenofontov’s major contribution that he achieved due to his broad academic background was a summary of previous ethnographic materials and research on Sakha people. His two-volume book *Uraanghai*<sup>166</sup> *Sakhalar*,<sup>167</sup> first published in 1937, was republished in a run of 50,000 copies in 1992. The first volume of the book was one of the first

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может характеризовать официальную религию скотоводческого народы”(Ksenofontov 1992b: 171).

<sup>165</sup> “Причем надо заметить, что я в настоящее время полно сохранилось лишь “черное” шаманство, а “белое” со времени принятия якутами христианства начало быстро разрушаться и сохранилось в немногочисленных пережитках, но тем не менее все основные моменты “белой веры” якутов-скотоводов как в отношении догматов, так и в обрядовой стороны, могут быть легко восстановлены при помощи ретроспективного анализа”(Ksenofontov 1992: 329).

<sup>166</sup> *Uraangkhai* (Sa. *Ураанхай*) is the ethnonym that Ksenofontov uses for Sakha people based on his hypothesis that northern Sakha-reindeer herders and Viluyusk Sakha-cattle breeders were not ethnically Turkic in their origin. This ethnic group Ksenofontov names *Uraangkhai Sakhalar*, where *uraangkhai* is a linguistic metamorphosis of ‘orochon’ with transitional forms ‘oron-kon’, ‘uran-kan’, ‘uraanykaan’. According to this hypothesis, *Uraangkhai Sakhalar* originated from Turkified Tungusic peoples from Manchuria, Amur, Baikal and the Lena River (Ksenofontov 1992b: 16).

<sup>167</sup> Ksenofontov, Gavriil. 1937. *Uraangkhai Sakhalar: ocherki po drevnei istorii Yakutov*. Irkutsk: Vost.-Sib.obl.kn.izd.

attempts to systematize the previous research on the origin of the Sakha people. The authors who were discussed in the book and whose works were translated and analysed by Ksenofontov are known to be the pioneers of Sakha ethnography – Eberhard Isbrant Ides, Philipp Strahlenberg, Gerhard Müller, Waclaw Sieroszewski, Vasily Troshchansky and Waldemar Jochelson. Although the focus of the book is primarily on theories of the origin of the Sakha people, the ethnographic materials that were discussed by Ksenofontov are extensively used by contemporary Sakha scholars with a broad interest in Sakha history and records of Sakha practices in the past.

In 1938, Gavriil Ksenofontov was arrested and sentenced to death based on unfounded accusations of espionage by the Soviet authorities (Ivanov in Ksenofontov 1992b: 10). His name was rehabilitated only in 1957 and some of his works were published only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Ksenofontov was in one respect, an ‘insider’ scholar who was concerned with his people’s origin and practices. At the same time, it is important to recognize that having been trained in the historical and anthropological methods and theories, having engaged with fellow intellectuals throughout his life, Ksenofontov was coming from a specific academic environment, for example, regionalism (Ru. *oblastnichestvo*) that was developed in a specific historical period, and one which influenced his ideas. Both the historical situation at the time when Ksenofontov did his research (during the establishment of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialistic Republic) and at the time when his work was published or re-published and became available to the masses (during the 1990s, when the Declaration of the Sakha sovereignty came about) illustrates how much the political situation may influence or limit the dissemination of one’s research.

### **First records about the Sakha**

I shall introduce briefly some key authors from Ksenofontov’s historiographical review, whose writings are used by scholars today. Most of the authors that I discuss wrote about a wide range of issues related to the Sakha people and their surroundings. Although only a few of them have written specifically about yhyakh, their records and analyses of Sakha practices have played a major role in the organization and conceptualization of yhyakh today.

The first written sources about Sakha people were authored by European travellers and ethnographers from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries: Eberhard Isbrant Ides, Philip Johan von Strahlenberg and Gerhard Müller. According to Ksenofontov, these early ethnographers were more objective because they were free from the Tsarist political agendas due to their foreign background (Ksenofontov 1992b: 23). My observations during fieldwork and my readings suggest that this attitude towards the earlier historical sources is present to this day among the Sakha. However, it is important to recognize that scholars from the past also had certain backgrounds and were surrounded by ideologies that influenced their writings. They were for example informed by European Christian ideas from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*Eberhard Isbrant Ides* (1657–1708) was a Danish traveller and diplomat, who travelled from Moscow to China through Siberia in 1692, where he met the Sakha people. Ides left one of the first records of yhyakh:

They [the Sakha] are convinced of the existence of some god in the sky, which they consider themselves obliged to for their property, wives and children. Throughout a year Sakha have only one big celebration in the springtime. During the celebration, Sakha make a bonfire and abstain from drinking, except for drinking *kumys*, which they sprinkle one by one from the eastern side. *Kumys* is like vodka from horse milk, which they usually drink (quoted in Ksenofontov 1992b: 25–26).<sup>168</sup>

As this excerpt shows Sakha views were already religionized in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Ides, who recorded Sakha practices applying the Christian vocabulary available to him to describe his observations.

*Philipp Strahlenberg* (1676–1747) was a Swedish officer, who was sent to Siberia for 13 years as a prisoner of war. Strahlenberg's records are from a Siberian town of Irkutsk, where he had some contact with Sakha people and the Sakha language. One of the most significant contributions to the ethnography of the Sakha is that Philip Strahlenberg classified the Sakha language as belonging to the Turkic linguistic group (Ksenofontov 1992b: 34).

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<sup>168</sup> “Они (якуты) убеждены в существовании некоего бога в небе, которому считают себя обязанным своим имуществом, женами и детьми. У них в году всего лишь один праздник, они празднуют его весной, с большой торжественностью. Церемония состоит в том, что они разжигают большой костер и поддерживают его во все время, пока длится праздник; они воздерживаются в это время от питья, но употребляют свой кумыс или арак на изготовление возпаний, которые они, один друг за другим, приходят выливать с восточной стороны. Этот кумыс представляет собой водку из молока, которую они обычно употребляют” (in Ksenofontov 1992b: 25–26).

*Gerhard Müller* (1705–1783) was a German born Russian historian, who participated in the Second Kamchatka expedition, which reported on life and nature of the further (eastern) side of the Ural mountain range. From 1733 to 1743, nineteen scientists and artists travelled through Siberia to study people and collect data to make maps. Müller described and categorized practices of Siberian groups, including the Sakha. He was invited to co-found the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Peterburg.<sup>169</sup> Müller was the first one to leave written notes about Ellei, the legendary ancestor of the Sakha (in Ksenofontov 1992b: 45).

In his historiographical review, Ksenofontov refers to Müller's paper 'Notes about Siberian shamans or sorcerers' (Ru. *izvestiye o shamanakh ili koldunakh sibirskikh*), where Müller describes Sakha yhyakh (Ksenofontov 1992b: 63). These records were published as an attachment to Troschansky's 'Evolution of black belief (shamanism) among the Yakuts' (Ru. *Evolutsia chernoi very (shamanstva) u Yakutov*) in 1902. Most likely Afanasy Fedorov was referring to this document when he mentioned in our interview that he found the descriptions of Kün Kōrsū ceremony at yhyakh in Müller's writings.

These sources are very important because they provide the evidence of Sakha people celebrating yhyakh at least from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and having a narrative about Ellei Bootur, which is also what many contemporary visitors of yhyakh have told me when I interviewed them.

### **Political exiles**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, ethnographic work on the Sakha was primarily written by political exiles. I will focus on the following four authors: Khudyakov, Sieroszewski, Troshchanky and Jochelson. First, because they are amongst the most cited authors by Sakha scholars today, and, second, because their works were re-published in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and made available for a wider audience.

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<sup>169</sup> Müller is best known for his Normanist theory and for the central role of Vikings in the establishment of the state among Eastern Slavs. Imperial Russia did not support this theory, mainly due to the ongoing war with Sweden and emerging Russian nationalist movement. Müller was also criticised for his stands on Scandinavian and German superiority and the inferiority of Slavs.

Ivan Aleksandrovich Khudyakov (1842–1876) was a Russian folklorist, ethnographer and revolutionary. He went to Kazan Imperial University and then to Moscow University where he studied Slavistics at the Faculty of History and Philology. Between 1860 and 1866, he published several compilations of Russian songs, proverbs, stories and riddles, including a book in which he criticized the monarchy, ‘The word of St. Ignatus for true Christians’ (Ru. *Slovo sv. Ignatiia dlia istinnykh khristian*). In 1866, Khudyakov was arrested in connection with the assassination attempt on the Emperor of Russia, Alexandr II, and sentenced to exile in Verkhoyansk. During his years in exile, he learnt Sakha, compiled a Sakha-Russian dictionary and translated the Old Testament from Russian into Sakha (Khudyakov 1969: 14).

Khudyakov’s monograph ‘A brief description of Verkhoyansk district’ (Ru. *Kratkoe opisaniye Verkhoyanskogo okruga*) is not only the first detailed ethnography of the population of Verkhoyansk but also of Sakha people in general. None of the works that he wrote during his years in exile passed censorship. By coincidence, the manuscript for ‘A brief description of Verkhoyansk district’ was found in 1879 (Khudyakov 1969: 9). For a hundred years, private individuals and archives had kept the manuscript before it was finally published in 1969.<sup>170</sup> One of its fourteen chapters is dedicated specifically to yhyakh, which Khudyakov describes as a ‘celebration of *kumys*’ (Ru. *prazdnik kumysa*). He writes that “in the old times, if the organizer of yhyakh would invite only one ‘shaman’, it was a shame” (Khudyakov 1969: 258).<sup>171</sup>

Algys Uibaan referred to Khudyakov’s records when he talked about the decision to include two additional *algyschyts* during the opening ceremony at the Tuymaada Yhyakh (July, 2018). It should be noted that Khudyakov was referring to what people from Verkhoyansk had told him about yhyakhs from the past and was not describing his own observations when he made this comment. Based on conversations with settlers from Verkhoyansk, Khudyakov gave the following description of yhyakh ‘in the past’:

At the time when mares foal, the milk of mares who foaled for the first time this year is kept separately from the milk of mares who previously foaled. Similarly, milk of cows who calved for the first time this year is collected separately for making

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<sup>170</sup> Khudyakov, Vladimir. 1969. “Kratkoye opisaniye Verkhoyanskogo okruga.” The book was digitalized and is in open access at the National Library of the Sakha Republic <https://e.nlrs.ru/online/6365> (accessed April 3, 2019).

<sup>171</sup> “Если в старину хозяин, приготовляющийся брызгать ысыах, приглашает только одного шамана, это стыд” (Khudyakov, 1969: 258).

butter. People gather from the settlements in the radius of 100-200 *versts* [about 100-200km].

When people are gathered, the bark is stripped from the lower half of the three larches that are connected at their tops and stuck in the ground. If yhyakh is organized by a rich man, nine leather jugs, sewed from an oxhide are placed under the larches. Meanwhile, 'shamans' put on the hats from one leg (skin) of the white foam, a coat from the skin of one white foal and prepare to sprinkle with special *khamyiakh* [Sakha big spoon] used only for yhyakh.

Behind each of the 'shamans', there are seven virgin girls, who follow the 'shaman' and wave their arms in the air so that when one hand reaches their breast, the other hand is in distance of the cubit<sup>172</sup>, while they trample with their legs. In front of each *shaman*, there are nine virgin boys; they also wave their arms and dance, wishing for happiness. After that 'shamans' begin to sprinkle (Khudyakov 1969: 258–260).<sup>173</sup>

Many aspects of this description are nearly identical to the ways in which *algys* is performed at the opening of the Tuymaada Yhyakh today, with the major exception that the leader of the ceremony is introduced not as a *shaman* or *oyuun*, but as an *algyschyt*. Khudyakov describes this yhyakh, contemporary to him at that time, as the shortened version of the old yhyakh (Khudyakov 1969: 272).<sup>174</sup>

In another chapter called 'Sorcery and shamanism' (Ru. *Koldovstvo i shamanstvo*) Khudyakov discusses and defines Sakha practitioners:

'Shamans' are the translators of 'gods' on earth. They are the interpreters of 'god's will', givers of health and diseases, abundance and hunger, good and evil.

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<sup>172</sup> The cubit is an ancient unit of length that had several definitions according to each of the various different cultures that used the unit. These definitions ranged between 444 and 529.2 mm (17.48 and 20.83 in).

<sup>173</sup> *В то время, когда кобылы жеребятся, кобылье молоко не жеребившейся прежде четырехтравой кобылы собирают особенно, не смешивая его с молоком тех кобыл, которые уже жеребились прошлым летом. Также молоко в первый раз отелившейся коровы собирают отдельно и делают из него масло. И созывают людей на расстояние 100 или 200 верст. Когда весь народ соберется, приносят три лиственницы и с нижней половины сдирают кору и затем, соединивши их верхушками, втыкают в землю на дворе. Если справляет праздник самый богатый человек, то под эти лиственницы становятся девять кожаных жбанов (сири ыабас), каждый из них шит из одной бычьей шкуры. Между тем шаманы, сколько их есть, надевают шапки из одних ног (кожи) белошерстного жеребенка, дохи из одной шкуры белого жеребенка и приготавливаются брызгать особым плоским праздничным хамыйахом, отличным от обыкновенного кухонного. Сзади шаманов становится за каждым из них по семи чистых девушек (т.е. девственниц), и, идя за шаманом, они обеими руками махают к себе воздух так, чтобы когда одна ладонь приближается к груди, другая была от нее на расстоянии локтя, кроме того притоптывают ногами. Спереди шаманов становятся на каждого по девяти чистых юношей; они тоже махают руками и пляшут, прося тем счастья. Они бывают одеты в ту же одежду из белого жеребенка как и шаманы. После того шаманы становятся брызгать (Khudyakov 1969: 258–260).*

<sup>174</sup> "нынешний ысыах есть только сокращение старинного" (Khudyakov 1969: 272).



Therefore, they are divided into good (holy) and evil, who shaman (Ru. *shamanyat*) for the devil (Ru. *d'yavol*).

Very occasionally there might be a sorcerer-shaman (Ru. *koldun-shaman*) and a sorceress-shaman (Ru. *koldun'ya-shamanka*)

Even the regular shamans (Ru. *prostye shamany*) are dangerous people: there are some who do not have shadows, while others have two: one of their own, and the other of their 'devil' (Khudyakov 1969: 303–306).<sup>175</sup>

Khudyakov suggests a typology of Sakha 'shamans' and uses concepts that are typical of religious and Christian vocabularies. He adds in Sakha terminology and translations throughout the text. His reflexivity is also demonstrated in the preface, where he warns the reader that his observations are based on conversations with the settlers of Verkhoyansk, who are only about fifty people.

After a long illness, Khudyakov was moved from Verkhoyansk to Irkutsk psychiatric hospital, where he died in 1876. He was buried in a mass grave, which is not identified to this day.

*Wacław Sieroszewski* (1858–1945) was a Polish writer, Socialist Party activist and a soldier in the Polish League of World War I-era. He spent 12 years in Siberian exile (1880–1892) for activities deemed subversive to the Russian Empire, and during this period wrote an extensive ethnographic account of the Sakha people. In 1892, Sieroszewski travelled to Irkutsk, where he finished his ethnographic work 'Yakuts: Experience of ethnographic research' (Ru. *Yakuty. Opyt etnograficheskogo issledovaniya*). The book was published in Saint Petersburg in 1896 and then republished in 1993 with financial support from the gold mining company Zoloto Yakutii.<sup>176</sup> After living for over a decade among the Sakha and having married a Sakha woman (who helped him with the translations), Sieroszewski wrote an ethnographic

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<sup>175</sup> *Шаманы – переводчики богов на земле. Они толкователи божеской воли, податели здоровья и болезни, изобилия и голода, добра и зла. Потому они и делятся на добрых (святых) шаманов и злых (едунов, сизмэх ойуун), которые шаманят только на дьявола. Очень редко бывают еще колдуны-шаманы (аптах-ойун) и колдуньи шаманки (аптах-удабан). Однако и простые шаманы – страшные люди: из них есть такие, у которых тени не видно (күлүгэ кестүбэт бабадьы), и другие, у которых две тени: одна их собственная, а другая их дьявола* (Khudyakov 1969: 306).

<sup>176</sup> On the first page, "ZolotoYakutii", addresses the Sakha people: "From now on, people who live in the land of the Sakha will independently decide over their riches. For us, it is first and foremost an opportunity to pay our debts to the community and the nature. Sovereignty is not only about political and economic rights. It is also about development of the spiritual culture and revitalization of historical traditions. Our duty is to support these processes as much as we can. The return of the remarkable Wacław Sieroszewski's "Yakuts" to the larger audiences will be a modest, yet significant step in this direction."

account of the Sakha with sections on geography, climate, language, livelihood, economy, family structure, material culture, folklore and beliefs. He is still well remembered among the Sakha, especially in Verkhoyansk, according to my interviewees and observations at the Olongkho Yhyakh 2016 in Verkhoyansk.

He writes about yhyakh in the section about the social structure of the Sakha:

At the beginning of the ceremony, nine virgin boys positioned according to their age and height, stand one after the other facing south. The boy standing in the front sings, and the others pick up and lift *choroons* towards the sky three times, then sprinkle *kumys* on the ground as a sacrifice, and send the rest to the people standing in a circle. At the same celebration, Sakha addressed *kumys* to their 'white god', who is a father, 'creator' (Ru. *tvorets*) and 'patron' (Ru. *pokrovitel'*) of Sakha people, to the white horse and white mares, sang *aikhal* and repeatedly shouted *urui*. The celebration was not only religious (Ru. *religiozny*) but also had a social role. *Kumys* songs are mostly devoted to the descriptions of nature, enumeration of different clan groups and their relations, rather than praises and prayers to the supreme deity (Ru. *verkhovnoe bozhestvo*) (Sieroszewski 1993: 446).<sup>177</sup>

This description resembles Khudyakov's records of the past yhyakhs. Sieroszewski's use of *tvorets* ('creator'), *belyi bog* ('white god') and *verkhovnoe bozhestvo* ('supreme deity') give rise to descriptions of yhyakh as a religious practice. In fact, he describes yhyakh as an event with a religious (Ru. *religiozny*) role, which is an explicit example of the religionization of Sakha practices.

Sieroszewski distinguishes between two types of yhyakhs: the smaller one in the springtime, and the bigger one in the summertime. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sieroszewski was worried about the potential extinction of yhyakh:

Indeed, yhyakh is now on the decline: they are hardly celebrated, and even if they are, then they are celebrated in new ways. Several years ago, I was on a big yhyakh held by a rich Sakha man from the Namsky *uluus*. No one was sitting on the

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<sup>177</sup> "В начале торжества девять непорочных юношей, все меньше возраста и роста, с бокалами все уменьшающейся величины, становились друг за другом лицом на юг. Стоящий во главе пел, а они подхватывали и троекратно возносили к небу чороны, затем отливали в жертву кумыс на землю, а оставшийся передавали в круг. На этом же празднике освящали в честь "Белого Бога", отца, создателя, и покровителя якутов, белого жеребца и белых кобыл, пели айхал и многократно кричали уруй. Весь праздник, как видно, искони носил не столько религиозный, сколько родовой, общественный характер. В кумысовых песнях, ысыях тогюлю, более отводят места описанию природы и перечислению разных родовых групп и их отношениям, чем восхвалениям и молитвам Верховному Божеству" (Sieroszewski 1993: 446).

traditional carpets; those present were in a yurt, ‘gentlemen’, who played cards and drank vodka. No games, no songs, only boring indistinctive talks. If yhyakh is organized in the old way, it is celebrated without much enthusiasm – everyone seems to play a comedy (Sieroszewski 1993: 446).<sup>178</sup>

Already, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sakha the old times were romanticized and yhyakhs were criticized for being inauthentic, modernized and spoiled. Sieroszewski depicted the yhyakh attended by him as a comedy because of the presence of playing-cards and vodka. Although gambling and alcoholism are associated with bad behaviour by neglecting such adaptations of yhyakh, Sieroszewski contributed to a static understanding of Sakha culture.

*Vasily Troshchansky* (1858–1934) was a Russian activist, who was sentenced to a lifelong exile for his involvement in the group *Zemlya i Volya* (Ru.) (‘Land and Will’). During his years in exile, Troshchansky studied Sakha practices. His observations were published in his main work ‘The evolution of black faith (shamanism) among the Yakut’ (Ru. *Evolutsia chernoi very (shamanstva) u Yakutov*) in 1902. One of the first Sakha writers, Alexey Kulakovskiy describes Troshchansky as “the first ethnographer who approached Sakha beliefs (Ru. *verovaniya*) scientifically and compared them to the practices related to the Sakha peoples and by this shed light on many unclear concepts” (in Troshchansky 2012: 1).<sup>179</sup>

Throughout his text, Troshchansky is concerned with the idea that despite the fact that Sakha began their conversion to Christianity a hundred years ago, they still were not familiar with the Gospel and Christian values. He also emphasizes the duality of Sakha practices bringing the examples of ‘good’ *aiyy* and ‘dark’ *abaasy*:

Everything auspicious to human-beings is united in the concept of *aiyy*, because it favors humans, whereas everything inauspicious in the world is *abaasy* (Troshchansky 1902: 19).<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> “Действительно, ысыах и теперь, несомненно, в упадке: их почти не справляют или справляют на особый, новый лад. Несколько лет назад я был на большом ысыахе у богатого Намского якута. На узорчатых разостланных под чечирами (зеленые деревца) кобыльих коврах никто не сидел; присутствующие толпились в юрте, где “господа” играли в карты и пили водку. Чай, водка, скучная, несуразная толкотня. Ни игры, ни песен! Если случается теперь, что у якутов справляются по-старинному ысыахи, то они проходят, как я заметил, без всякого увлечения – все будто играют условную комедию” (Sieroszewski 1993: 446).

<sup>179</sup> “Трошчанский первым дошел к верованиям якутов с научной точки зрения, провел много параллелей с верованиями родственных якутам народов и тем самым пролил свет на многие непонятные термины” (in Troshchansky 2012: 1)

<sup>180</sup> “Все благоприятное человеку объединено в общем представлении, отмечаемых словом айыы, а все неблагоприятное – словом абаасы, так что всякое олицетворение постольку айыы, поскольку оно благоприятствует человеку, и постольку абаасы, поскольку ему не благоприятствует” (Troshchansky 1902: 19).

Troschansky's dualistic translations of Sakha practices as 'shamanism', which he sees as 'black belief', must be read in light of his own Christian background. These translations during decades of research grew stronger and stronger in Sakha scholarship.

Waldemar Jochelson (1855–1937) was a Russian ethnographer, born in Vilnius. He was arrested and sentenced to exile for ten years in Yakutsk for his participation in the revolutionary group *Narodnaya Volya* (Ru.) ('People's will'). During his exile, Jochelson undertook ethnographical studies of peoples of the Russian North, including the Sakha. He took part in the Jesup North Pacific Expedition to North Asia initiated by the American Museum of Natural History (New York), which resulted in the collection of rich ethnographic material about the Sakha.

In the 1990s, the American anthropologist Marjorie Balzer and Sakha activists (Zinaida and Vladimir Ivanov-Unarov, Aiza Reshetnikova, Vera Solov'eva) together began the process of repatriating Jochelson's work to the Sakha public. As a result, Jochelson's text written in English *Kumys Festivals of the Yakut and the Decoration of Kumys Vessels* (1903) was translated into Russian and Sakha and published in 2015 under the supervision of Ekaterina Romanova.<sup>181</sup> Jochelson's text on yhyakh was the first published work dedicated exclusively to yhyakh, which he describes as a 'kumys festival' emphasizing the role of *kumys*:

The spring *kumys* festival takes place in the open air. In the midst of a large smooth grass meadow, a kind of altar is erected. The ceremony commences with sacrifices to the Lord Bright-Creator and to the other creators. Their names are uttered by the steward of the festival, who may be a shaman or an elder member of the clan. The sacrifices consist of libation of *kumys*, in the direction of the dawn, to every deity; and formerly horses were often consecrated by being driven to the east.

In front of the altar stands the steward, having on one side of him the owner of the drove, and on the other the latter's wife. All three face to the east side of the sky, where the benevolent deities have their abode. On the right side of the altar stand nine innocent youths in a row, and on the left a row of nine pure maidens, with goblets filled with *kumys* consecrated to the benevolent deities.

The steward addresses a prayer to the "creators", begging for blessing – an increase of horses and cattle, a good harvest of hay, good health for the people and animals, and an abundance of food. Then, while making a libation to the ground, he addresses the local deity, "the owner of the place" [*aan doidu ichchite*], asking him

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<sup>181</sup> Jochelson, Waldemar. 2015. *Kumysnyi prazdnik i dekorativnoe oformlenie kumysnykh sosudov*. Yakutsk: SMIK-Master.

not to harm the inhabitants of the spot and the members of the clan. After that, the steward with the help of the sacrificial ladle proceeds to the divine. He throws the ladle towards the sky: and if it falls with the front part upwards, it portends the granting by the deities of future abundance; and all the people utter the joyful cry “*Uroi!*”

Then the boys and girls give the goblets [*choroons*] with the sacrificial kumys, according to the directions of the steward, to the elder and honoured members of the clan, both male and female. These, after placing themselves – the men on the right and the women on the left of the altar – drink off the kumys from the goblets, and pass them on to the less important and the younger people. Behind every honoured or aged member of the clan, sit or stand his domestics, less esteemed relatives, young men, and labourers. When the goblet is emptied, it is given back to the steward or the host to be filled.

The whole day passes with songs, round dances, games, races and other contests, and shamanic performances. The poetical choral songs [*olongkho*] of the young men and girls, in praise of the spring and love, are most interesting (Jochelson 2015: 24).<sup>182</sup>

I recognize many of my own observations of yhyakhs between 2016-2018 in Jochelson’s short but informative account. *Algyschyt*, just like ‘the steward’ that Jochelson described, is usually surrounded by young boys and girls during the ceremony, and in recent yhyakhs I observed, the gender separation (women on the left and men on the right) is becoming increasingly common during the *algys*. Another interesting aspect of Jochelson’s account is how he extensively used concepts typical of religious or Christian vocabularies to describe practices at yhyakh: ‘creators’, ‘blessing’, ‘prayers’ and, especially, ‘Lord Bright Creator’. This choice of terminology should be seen in light of his working academic vocabulary from that time. However, it is crucial to recognize that Jochelson contributed to the religionization of yhyakh just like the other political exiles discussed in this part of the chapter.

### **Remarks**

In his book, Jochelson ([1903] 2015: 24) tells us that yhyakh that he recorded was arranged entirely for his benefit. Indeed, it was common for the pre-Soviet ethnographers to request Sakha to perform yhyakh for their research purposes (Müller and Sieroszewski also did this).

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<sup>182</sup> The terms in square brackets are used in the Sakha translation of Jochelson’s book, republished in 2015. The English text is Jochelson’s original text.

Yhyakh today is widely criticized by Sakha scholars for being too modern (Romanova 1994: 149, Yakovlev 2015: 143). It seems, however, that from the very first written accounts of yhyakh writers were critical about yhyakhs contemporary to them and frequently referred to the “old times”, creating nostalgia among the Sakha and contributing to the romanticization of Yhyakh (Khudyakov 1890, Jochelson 1903, Sieroszweski 1896).

Gavriil Ksenofontov during his very short, yet influential, career, became not only the first ethnic Sakha theorist on the origin of Sakha people but contributed to the dissemination of previous research on the Sakha people and their practices. Ksenofontov’s research is highly respected by Sakha and international scholars today. One of the most famous researchers of shamanism, Mircea Eliade, relied on materials collected by Ksenofontov for his comparative work on the practices that he categorized as shamanism (Balzer, 1996b: 309).

The notion of shamanism appears frequently in the writings of political exiles from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Khudyakov 1890, Sieroszewski 1896, Troschansky 1903, Jochelson 1903). These authors had all been educated in Russian and European schools, where they most likely learnt about the paradigm of shamanism. In their materials they often presented the Sakha terms and their translations in Russian or English, where it is evident that the translations of Sakha terms like ‘oyuun’ and ‘udagan’ to ‘shaman’ was a result of the author’s decision. The first ethnographers and political exiles were mainly Christian, which was reflected in the way they commented on ‘dark and devil shamans’.

Overall, the records of the scholars discussed above are vital to Sakha research, as they are historical sources about Sakha people and their practices. At the same time, it is important to contextualize the scholarly and political environments of these authors where such colonial derogatory observations such as “Sakha are the tribe with a primitive culture who show capacity for higher material culture and intellectual capacity” were quite common (Jochelson 2015: 15–16). I do not mean that such remarks should disqualify their fundamental and significant contribution, but they should be taken into consideration, especially as some treat them as unbiased and authentic sources of Sakha practices.

## **Contemporary non-Sakha scholars**

During my fieldwork, I noticed how scholarly work was often articulated as an outside and objective opinion on yhyakh. The earlier ethnographic studies, as I discussed above, were largely perceived as sources of authentic Sakha practices based on the argument that they were presenting unbiased perspectives. This notion of scholars being objective and neutral, Dressler and Mandair (2011) denote as a position *from (a pretended) outside*. I think that it is important to talk about all scholars as providers of knowledge from (a pretended) outside, including the group of contemporary international scholars. I find it crucial to do so, because these scholars are often framed as ‘outsider’ scholars with the implication that they have an ‘unbiased’ position, which as I argue is not the case for any scholar.

The globalization of research is a reality for contemporary scholars, including those who study yhyakh and Sakha practices. One important aspect of this globalization is production of academic knowledge in English. The dissolution of the Soviet Union allowed international scholars to travel and conduct studies in the Sakha Republic, who made important contributions to the analysis of Sakha practices. In this part of the chapter, I focus on the studies in English that I came across during my observations at yhyakhs and readings about yhyakh.

### **Marjorie Balzer (Georgetown University, USA)**

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer is professor at the Department of Anthropology, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., USA. Her research is in social theory, inter-ethnic relations, religion, the growth of nationalism, and anthropology of the Russian Federation. Her extensive fieldwork has focused on the Sakha since 1986 (Balzer 2005: 58). In her studies, she discusses the Sakha organization Kut-siur, and the practitioners Lazar’ Afanas’ev-Teris, Vladimir Kondakov and Saiyyna. She also extensively refers to the research of Sakha scholars, such as Gavriil Ksenofontov, Anatoly Gogolev, Ekaterina Romanova and Uliana Vinokurova. Her thematic approach is located in her words at the crossroads of medical-psychological anthropology, political anthropology, and the study of new religious movements (Balzer 2008: 96).



In her article “Flights of the Sacred: Symbolism and Theory in Siberian Shamanism”, Balzer (1996b: 306) focuses on the significance of birds in what she calls ‘shamanic cosmologies’, where she attempts to explore various theories about shamanism applying syncretic models of interpretations of Sakha practices. In her other article, co-authored with Uliana Vinokurova and also published in 1996, Balzer suggests the following description of Sakha ‘religion’:

Sakha religion has evolved into a complex blend of Russian Orthodoxy, Turkic cosmology, animism and shamanism, with focus on sacred sites and trees. Though shamanism was driven underground in the Soviet period, it was not entirely destroyed.

An annual *yhyakh* celebration, evolved from Turkic spring fertility traditions, has taken various forms since World War II, after a hiatus due to Stalinist repression. Its popularity represents a resurgence of cultural awareness more than a religious ritual, although aspects of it for some are religious.

Historical memory recovery has been stimulated by a revision of the Soviet propaganda that stressed the peaceful incorporation of Yakutia into the Russian Empire and belittled the degree of economic efficiency and literacy among pre-revolutionary Sakha (1996a: 104).

Balzer’s broader interest in nationalism within Russia is apparent in her analysis of *yhyakh*, where she identifies dissemination of the narrative about the peaceful incorporation of Sakha to Russia. Balzer’s description of Sakha religion, although quite generic, accentuates the complexity and diversity of post-Soviet Sakha practices. The fact that she departs from applying the term ‘Sakha religion’ and then filling into this concept her observations and analysis, argues for her explicit religionization of Sakha practices. Moreover, she identifies one category as more distinctive for the Sakha – shamanism. Translating Sakha practices into shamanism and the Sakha *oyuun* into shaman, Balzer also attempts to find ‘a shaman’ during her fieldwork:

Shamans, healers, and charlatans are all making a living and building reputations in post-Soviet Siberia. Sometimes a prospective patient, anthropologist, or a combination of the two, as I have been, has trouble telling them apart (1996b: 313).

Balzer is not only occupied with searching for the symbolism of Sakha practices and drawing parallels between the shamanism of different peoples, she also distinguishes two different tendencies of Sakha intelligentsia:

While some members of Sakha intelligentsia rail against “superficiality” and “artificiality” in ritual re(creation), others, for example, members of the group Kut-siur, have revived rituals they learned from archives and have repopularized the powerful concept that words themselves have spirit (*ichchi*), especially when used in prayer (1996b: 312).

Already by 1996, Balzer noted that the focus of the practice, which she calls ‘prayer’ (most likely meaning *algys*), is directed to the words instead of, for example, the practitioner. I find this observation important because it demonstrates how Sakha practitioners attempt to deal with the common expectations of having supernatural powers by re-directing the agency from themselves to the words of *algys*. Perhaps it was the development of this idea that led to the popularization and increased number of *algyschyts* in today’s Sakha Republic.

In 2005, Balzer published an interesting study, “Whose Steeple is Higher? Religious competition in Siberia,” where she argues that religion has become an idiom through which competing definitions of homeland and national pride are being shaped. In this article, Balzer translates *Archy D’iete* as ‘the House of Purification’, *aiyy* as ‘benevolent spirits’, *algys* as ‘prayers’, and continues her analysis of yhyakh:

The Archie D’iete has taken over the function of organising *Yhyakh* for the city of Yakutsk.

Some critics, such as Teris (Lazar Afanas’yev), founder of the socio-religious group Kut-Siur (Heart-Soul-Mind), maintain that the sacred meaning of *yhyakh*, celebrating the summer solstice, fermented mare’s milk (*kumys*) and fertility among all living beings, is getting lost in national-level politicisation. Defenders of the festival, such as minister of culture Andrei Borisov, point to the power and beauty of opening improvisational prayers (*algys*) as affirmations of much-needed annual purification, of renewal at both the personal and cultural levels. Organisers such as Afanasi Fedorov and Vilyam Yakovlev take the spiritual aspects of the ceremonies quite seriously (2005: 61-62).

Balzer continues to approach Sakha practices as religion. Unlike the majority of Sakha scholars, she approaches yhyakh from the perspective of actors involved in its promotion and conceptualization.

Balzer’s role in the study of Sakha people is not limited to the processes of writing. She has actively contributed to the cultural exchanges between the Sakha and the US, for example by organizing the meeting of, in her words, “Native American and Native Siberian leaders” (Balzer 2008: 107). Of all the different peoples living in the United States, Balzer compared the Sakha, whom she categorizes as Native Siberian leaders, to the Native Americans. She also

helped Sakha activists to contact the American Museum of Natural History, where Jochelson's work on yhyakh was kept.

In 1996, Balzer approached Sakha practices with an aim of "making comparisons among Siberian and other peoples, and exploring various theories about shamanism and the analysis of anthropology data more generally" (1996b: 306). She frequently refers to Piers Vitebsky, an anthropologist from the University of Cambridge known primarily for his works on what he calls 'shamanism'. Vitebsky's research continues to contribute to the image of shamanism as a category descriptive of the practices of different communities around the world. In 2008, Balzer argues that:

Whether called shamanism or neo-shamanism, shamanic or animistic, folk-urban religion or 'benevolent spirit teaching', nature worship or ancestor worship, such faith-based striving links indigenous Siberian peoples to spiritual revitalization trends throughout the world (Balzer 2008: 105).

Within the twelve years between her two articles, Balzer's focus on comparing Sakha to other peoples who practice 'shamanism', transitioned to comparing Sakha to other 'indigenous' peoples around the world. This can be seen as an example of indigenizing Sakha people and their practices. Thus, another complex and globalizing notion was applied to the Sakha.

### **Takako Yamada (Kyoto University, Japan)**

Takako Yamada is a Japanese social anthropologist with a research interest in the practices of the Ainu, Sakha and Tibetan peoples. Along with Balzer, Yamada was amongst the first foreign researchers who studied Sakha practices after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1999, Yamada published the book *An Anthropology of Animism and Shamanism*, in which she compares practices of the Ladakhi in Western Tibet, the Ainu in Japan, and the Sakha through the prism of shamanism:

The Sakha have been well known in the field of ethnography by animistic belief and shamanic tradition. They hold a three-dimensional concept of the universe and have a vast knowledge of spiritual beings in the universe, as well as holding a tradition of white shamans and black shamans (Yamada 1999: 93).

Yamada applies anthropological research methods to study what she defines as 'the shamanic tradition of the Sakha'. Her discussion about Sakha conceptions of 'the universe', 'soul', 'spiritual beings' and 'encounters with shamans' ends with an analysis of yhyakh:

Irrespective of the scales of the *ysyakh*, the program of each *ysyakh* in Yakutia includes prayers and songs to the gods in the upper world, the ceremony for greeting the sunrise and/or the feast of *khumus*, round dance (*osuokhai*), various contests, and, if possible, horse races.

It should be noted that most of the cultural elements restored in the festival are confined to food, clothes, performing arts, athletic games and shamanic rituals. Today everyday lives of the Sakha are no more traditional but thoroughly modernized (Yamada 1999: 130).

Yamada's translations of *algys* as 'prayers', *aiyy* as 'the gods in the upper world' and ceremonies at yhyakh as 'shamanic rituals' suggest that yhyakh is a 'shamanic event' rich in religious content. Yamada also stresses the notion of revivalism and how only some aspects of Sakha culture are restored, whereas she sees the everyday lives of the Sakha as "no more traditional but thoroughly modernized". Furthermore, yhyakh is seen not only as a shamanic practice but as a political act:

The revival of *ysyakh* is connected to political motives. The government, either local or national, has an intention to utilize the occasion to revitalize and recreate an ethnic identity of Sakha, which can be the centripetal force of political integration in the Republic. In fact, due to the national policy during the former Soviet Union, people's way of everyday life had been no more visibly different from that of the Russians. Only their mother tongue was different, though they were educated in Russian. After independence, people have realized that their culture had been suppressed and almost entirely discarded (Yamada 1999: 131).

This observation about the role of the government is important to the study of yhyakh because it demonstrates uncertainty about whether it is the local or the national government's responsibility to organize yhyakh. Although Tyumaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh are financed from the budgets of Yakutsk City Hall and the Republic respectively, there are often political representatives from Moscow who give speeches at the opening ceremonies. After all, such manifestations as the voluntary incorporation of Sakha to the Russian state at the Tuymaada Yhyakh exemplify a continuation of bigger national narratives. Without analysing the motivations of either the local or national government has in organising yhyakh, Yamada draws her analysis from the Soviet context and how Sakha "realized that their culture had been almost entirely discarded" (Yamada 1999: 131).

Yamada's reflections on the political situation around the yhyakhs that she visited, as well as Balzer's interest in the larger Russian political environment can be seen as particular

to international scholars in contrast to the majority of Sakha scholars discussed in this chapter, who are more focused on the origin, meaning and symbolism of Sakha practices.

**Susan A. Crate (George Mason University, US)**

Susan A. Crate is a professor of anthropology at George Mason University, USA. An environmental and cognitive anthropologist, she began her research in Sakha communities in 1991. In her article “Ohuokhai: Sakha's Unique Integration of Social Meaning and Movement”, Crate writes about her exploration of the circle dance *ohuokhai*:

Over the half millennium of historical change, including Russian colonization, sovietization and desovietization, *ohuokhai* has both maintained its original sacred meaning and evolved new functions. [...]

[...]Exploring first the dance’s origin and evolution over time, I analyze the dance in the contemporary post-Soviet context, highlighting the dance as both a central symbol of ethnic identity and an expressive form threatened due to disinterested youth, increasing exposure and access to mass media forms, indigenous language loss, and continuing economic, political, and environmental issues (Crate 2006: 164).

Foreign scholars, unlike Sakha, more frequently articulate the narrative of Russian colonization of Sakha. Referring extensively to Piers Vitebsky, Marjorie Balzer and other Sakha scholars, Crate argues that *ohuokhai* maintained its ‘sacred’ meaning over the half millennium, arguing for the historical continuity of the dance and Sakha people. For example, she defines yhyakh, citing Ksenofontov, and describes practices at yhyakh citing Romanova:

Yhyakh is a transplant of Central Asian pastoralist *kymys* (fermented mare’s milk) festivals that were first organized in the subarctic more than 500 years ago by Ellei, the great father and cultural hero [with reference to Ksenofontov] (1975: 11).

The Ürüng oiuun (white shaman), enacts the ceremony, offering *kymys* and other sacrificial foods to the sky deities and saying prayers that are echoed in the communal response of *ohuokhai* [with reference to Romanova 1994: 15] (Crate 2006: 163).

Crate’s study, similarly to some Sakha scholars, is focused on the search for the origin and historical continuity of Sakha practices and its current role for the Sakha: “... at the Yhyakh festivals shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, *ohuokhai* functioned as Sakha’s main expression of ethnic solidarity and hope” (Crate 2006: 171). A narrative of “the disappearing

tradition” is also present in Crate’s analysis: “today’s youth are not carrying on the *ohuokhai* tradition and it is a challenge to instil an appreciation for ethnic traditions in the next generations” (Crate 2006: 177). At the same time, Crate recognizes that *ohuokhai* today is most powerful as it functions as a vehicle for ethnic and cultural revival.

Crate is one of the scholars who write about yhyakh as ‘a festival’, which seem to be more common in texts in English in comparison to studies written in Russian and Sakha.

### **Eleanor Peers (University of Aberdeen, UK)**

Eleanor Peers obtained her PhD from the University of Cambridge with a dissertation on regional newspaper discourse and cultural change in Buryatia and Sakha (Yakutia). Referring to the classics of studies in nationalism (Talal Asad 1993, Anthony Smith 2010), applying social anthropological methods (participant observation, interviews) over a ten-year period, and having an extensive contextual knowledge of the region, Peers offers one of the most significant studies on yhyakh.

Peers’ article “Soviet-Era Discourse and Siberian Shamanic revivalism: How Area Spirits Speak through Academia” (2015) is an attempt to address, particularly, the role of scholars in the processes that she describes as “Siberian revivalism”:

There is a close interaction between Sakha (Yakutia)’s community of shamanic practitioners and sections of the republic’s academic establishment – a legacy of the crucial role academics have had in the Sakha nationalist revival. The connections cut both ways, in that there are academics who have become shamanic specialists or their helpers – echoing the career of anthropologist-turned-shaman Michael Harner, for example – and shamanic specialists who have published what they present as authoritative or academic texts (Peers 2015b: 114–115).

Although it can be seen in encounters with contemporary Sakha, this observation about the mutual conversions of academics and practitioners is surprisingly rarely articulated. During my fieldwork, I got the impression that this is how things work: for some practitioners, their academic background served as a source of legitimation for what they did; whereas for some scholars, the desire to find out the origin of Sakha practices and their meanings appeared to be the driving force, which motivated them to test and implement their findings in real life. The Tuymaada Yhyakh can be seen as one of these projects.

Regarding the categorization of Sakha people and their practices, Peers argues that:

The Sakha people are an indigenous Siberian community; their territories have been under Russian administration since the early seventeenth century. Yhyakh – is a shamanic ritual, which has come to be regarded as a quintessential traditional Sakha practice (Peers 2015b: 117).

Yhyakh is translated to ‘shamanic’ ritual and the Sakha people as an ‘indigenous Siberian community’. In her research, Peers focuses on various aspects of yhyakh and Sakha practices from consumption and regulation of alcohol at the event to the study of Sakha identity politics:

The Yhyakh phenomenon is a good illustration of the extent to which a politicized project to revive an authentic Sakha shamanism has infiltrated Sakha (Yakutia)’s mass popular culture. Key members of the Sakha nationalist intelligentsia staged prominent Yhyakh festivals during the early 1990s, and since then the Yhyakh has become one of the Republic’s most important holidays. Alongside this flurry of commercial activity and political communication, the community of festival organizers, academics, and shamanic specialists is anxiously striving to reproduce the Yhyakh rituals that appear in the pre-Soviet ethnographic literature on Sakha culture (Sieroszewski, Khudyakov, Jochelson) (Peers 2015c: 250).

Peers raises the question that I also frequently ask myself: “Why is the preservation of the entity called ‘Sakha traditional culture’ any more important in maintaining the Sakha people’s distinctiveness than their own perception of themselves, relative to people they see around them?” (Peers 2015a: 4). Such observations differ substantially from the writings of the Sakha scholars discussed earlier in this chapter. This demonstrates, in my opinion, not only the differences of approach from the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the community but also the differences between schools of research and theoretical frameworks. The Sakha scholars I have discussed were primarily interested in the semiotics of Sakha practices and their revitalization, while scholars like Balzer and Peers focus on theories of nationalism and approach the Sakha case as one within a wider national context, as well as through other global notions such as shamanism and indigeneity.

**Sergei Filatov (Moscow State University, Russia)**

Filatov is a Russian scholar of religion, who is interested in comparing shamanism and Christianity. In his article, “Yakutia (Sakha) faces a religious choice: Shamanism or Christianity”

(2000: 113), Filatov examines how Orthodox Christianity and shamanism, in his words, compete with each other in the Sakha case. By problematizing the weak position of the Orthodox Church among the Sakha, he sees it partially as a result of the relatively late Christianization of the Sakha, which left the Sakha “pagan or dual-believers with a very shallow Christian overlay” (Filatov 2000: 113).

Filatov attempts to find the answers to why the Russian Orthodox Church failed to become a serious ideological and social force in the Sakha Republic. He identifies two factors. First, a strong influence from the local authorities in the religious revival, which had a serious impact when the then president of the Sakha Republic, Mikhail Nikolaev, dropped financial support for the Orthodox Church in 1997. Secondly, based on interviews conducted with Sakha, Filatov sheds light on why other religious organizations (for example Protestantism, Catholicism or Pentecostals) can be more attractive for Sakha. His answer is that Orthodoxy was perceived by Sakha as too national, as the faith of Russians, while the others were faiths for everyone (Filatov 2000: 121).<sup>183</sup>

Filatov describes Sakha practitioners, including Lazar’ Afanas’ev-Teris as “neo-pagans” and argues that:

Afanas'yev and his fellow-believers are striving not only to assert monotheism but to break free of shamanist ideas, which are all that remains of the entire pagan belief system in the consciousness of the Yakut nation. They promote a reconstructed or new religion which will 'raise the Yakuts spiritually and morally' and have banned the practice of shamanism among themselves.

Shamanistic ideas are nevertheless a real form of religiosity for Yakuts today. This makes it impossible for the neopagans simply to reject shamanism and their attitude to it remains ambivalent (Filatov 2000: 118).

Filatov critically observes how Afanas’ev-Teris and his ‘fellow-believers’ attempt to distance themselves from the ‘shamanistic ideas’. He categorizes Afanas’ev-Teris’s views as “a reconstructed or new religion” and juxtaposes them with his own understandings of Sakha practices that he defines as “shamanism, a real form of religiosity of Yakuts today”. Filatov also briefly mentions yhyakh in this article:

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<sup>183</sup> Filatov’s interest in the role of the Russian Orthodox Church might be due to the fact that he is working for a journal, – “*Religiia i pravo*”, – run by the Slavic Centre for Law and Justice (providing legal help to the Orthodox Christian organizations and citizens).



The College of Culture, which trains the directors of Houses of Culture, has deliberately turned itself into a training centre for specialists in conducting pagan rites, prayers and festivals. The college director, Vil'yam Yakovlev, believes that it is not folklore that is being revived (though this is what the Ministry of Culture has instructed him to do), but religion.

From the beginning of the 1990s, the neopagans campaigned for the right to build an Aiy Centre in Yakutsk as the main national temple of their sun god, but they were obstructed by the authorities. In 1999, the authorities allocated the Tri Berezy region on the outskirts of Yakutsk for the Yyssakh Yakut national cultural centre. 'We will wait and see whether this will be a cultural or cult centre', says Ukhkhan.

The neopagan movement does not confine itself to religious issues and is also involved in politics. The party programme aims to turn Yakutia into the national republic of the Yakut nation, maintain confederal links with Russia, confirm the Yakut pagan identity in all spheres of life, reorient the education system towards national traditions and revive the traditional economic system. The neopagans are full of missionary enthusiasm, believing that they have access to the original unsullied truth that has been lost by other nations but preserved in the Yakut consciousness (Filatov 2000: 119).

Filatov's description of the Sakha case is rich in terms such as 'neo-pagans', 'pagan rites', 'prayers', 'neo-pagan movement', 'national temple' and 'missionary enthusiasm', which all make the case for his analysis of the 'religious choice' of the Sakha. Yhyakh is mentioned in the discussion, where Filatov refers to the interview with Sakha activist Ukhkhan, who suspected the Us Khatyn centre, where Tuymaada Yhyakh is celebrated, was becoming a "cult" centre. He also points to the nationalistic ambitions of 'neopagans' and their 'missionary enthusiasm'. Overall, the article is read as raising concerns about the Sakha activists who frame their views in a way that are seen as religious by Filatov.

### **Olle Sundström (Umeå University, Sweden)**

Olle Sundström is a Swedish historian of religion, specializing in his own words, "in the study of so-called shamanism" (Sundström 2018: 9). His expertise is primarily in previous research on Samoyedic<sup>184</sup> peoples and in the analysis of the concepts 'religion' and 'shamanism' in the

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<sup>184</sup> Nenets, Enets, Nganasans and Selkup peoples are often categorized as a group of Samoyedic peoples based on their languages belonging to the Samoyedic language group.

former Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. Based on historiographical research, Sundström concludes that:

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the word shaman did not occur in most of the indigenous languages of northern Russia and Siberia. The exception to this was some Manchu-Tungus languages, for example, Evenk, from which the very word is supposed to have its origin (Sundström 2012: 355).

The important thing to note is that the concept 'shaman' was created by so-called outsiders – by European visitors – and that this category served its functions in these visitors' approaches to the indigenous Siberian cultures (Sundström 2012: 356).

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, the concepts 'shaman' and 'shamanism' have been predominantly used either by European travellers, exiles and scholars, or in writings where authors referred to these European visitors. In both instances, as Sundström argues, these categorizations served their functions in the eyes of the authors. Such a critical perspective of the usages of the terms 'shamanism' and 'shaman(s)' can be representative of Håkan Rydving's school of thought within the history of religions, where Sundström was trained.

Sundström's particular interest in religion and shamanism resulted in research into the different ways these concepts were defined, used and regulated, primarily within the Soviet and Russian scholarly, public and legal contexts. He also uses the term himself and concludes in his article "Is the shaman indeed risen in post-Soviet Siberia? Post-secular Religious Practice," that:

The birth of shamanism as a practised religion, common to the indigenous peoples of northern Russia, Siberia and the Far East – as well as to other peoples on the globe – took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Like all other religions, it has, of course, its prehistory, as well as its internal controversies and differences. With a creative reformulation of a supposed tradition to fit present day conditions, Siberian shamanism has come into existence (Sundström 2012: 383).

To make his case, Sundström extends his research to the practices of other Siberian peoples, including Sakha. Based on previous studies about Sakha practices, including those of Marjorie Balzer, Takako Yamada and Sergey Filatov, Sundström discusses among other things yhyakh:

As is the case with many major feasts it is not self-evident what is actually being celebrated. *Ysyyakh* is a New Year festival since the New Year is considered to begin with the arrival of summer. In today's celebration you also find several particular rites, derived from the traditional religion: the greeting of the rising sun; the lighting of the fire, which is kept burning during the whole feast and onto which

the ceremonial leader pours libations of *kumys* to the *aiyyylar*; prayers to Ürüŋ Aiyy Toion are offered up, as well as to the 'spirit of the earth'; the round dance *osoukhai* is performed (Sundström 2012: 374).

Just as before there are today also many features that could be classified as secular, such as wrestling competitions, beauty contests and horse racing. [...] It is generally considered that in the remote past the ceremonial leader of the *ysyyakh* was an *aiyy oyuun*, a 'white shaman', even if the financier and organiser of a particular feast, generally a male elder, at times might perform this function. In contemporary *ysyyakh* celebrations, leading politicians, academics or well-known intellectuals are not uncommonly the ones leading the festivities and giving the speeches. But reinstated also is the white shaman, who leads prayers, lights the ceremonial fire and performs libations (Sundström 2012: 375).

This account is also an example of how the study of yhyakh is being disseminated further to scholars with a wider interest. Translations of Sakha practices as shamanic made by Balzer, Yamada, Filatov and other earlier scholars served as a grounding for further comparisons within the studies of shamanism, as for example, they did for Sundström.

## **Concluding remarks**

This review of contemporary scholars focused on the Sakha revival is far from comprehensive. Each year new research, new projects and new theories are challenged and applied to the processes that Sakha people are facing today. One should rather treat this chapter as a representation of a wider academic interest in yhyakh.

The last part of the chapter focused on the English writings about yhyakh and Sakha practices and, unsurprisingly, it is the part where the term 'indigenous', also in its UN understanding, has been used more frequently by scholars. This suggests the conclusion that only the English articles of Uliana Vinokurova, who uses indigenous methodologies, Ekaterina Romanova and contemporary international scholars who write in English apply the indigenous discourse to the analysis of Sakha practices. The appearance of 'indigenous' in writings in English also suggests its usages are predominant in international settings. If in the case of Romanova, the application of 'indigenous' is a result of translation, for Vinokurova it was a decision that she took after reading Chilisa and Kovach. Whereas for international authors uses of 'indigenous' mainly differentiated between referring to 'indigenous' in a sense of something local and 'indigenous' in the UN understanding of the concept.

Regarding the translation towards the domain of religion, there are plenty of instances about yhyakh and Sakha practices that made these links, instances given by Balzer (Sakha practices as Sakha 'religion', *algys* as 'prayers', *aiyy* as 'benevolent spirits', 'yhyakh as a religious ritual'); Yamada ('yhyakh is a shamanic ritual', *aiyy* as 'spiritual beings', Sakha practices as 'animistic belief', practitioners as 'white and black shamans'); Crate ('white shaman', 'sacrificial food'), Peers ('yhyakh is a shamanic ritual'); and Filatov ('Sakha shamanism', 'Sakha pagans and dual-believers'). Olle Sundström as the only representative of the religious studies discipline in this list was also the only person who critically discussed the term 'shamanism' in the Sakha context. As he argues, the notion of 'shamanism' appeared in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which corresponds with the first translations of Sakha practices and practitioners by political exiles who wrote about shamans among the Sakha from the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the important and distinguishing features of the writings of international scholars is the application of theories on nationalism and the focus on the political context of the Sakha in the analysis of Sakha practices. They also articulate the narrative of Russian colonization in comparison to Sakha scholars who predominantly write about the peaceful incorporation of Sakha into the Russian state. Another interesting point is that yhyakh is often referred to as 'a festival' in English texts, whereas in Sakha and Russian text yhyakh is generally described as *prazdnik* (Ru.) ('holiday', 'celebration'). On a few occasions when I used the Russian word *festival* during the interviews about yhyakh with Sakha scholars, I was corrected and told that "yhyakh is not a *festival*' but *prazdnik*."

Further studies of yhyakh became possible, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, because of the previous, and important research on Sakha practices and ethnographic materials, primarily done by political exiles and Sakha scholars. I would like to stress this point because none of the contemporary non-Sakha scholars discussed in this chapter is proficient in Sakha language or has lived for a long period of time in the Sakha Republic. Empirically and, sometimes, analytically, their writings are based on short-term fieldwork trips and on the writings of Sakha scholars and political exiles.

Sakha, starting with Gavriil Ksenofontov, have been active in producing ethnographic studies since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ksenofontov's texts were written and published in Russian, and, sometimes, in Sakha. During the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

the writings of political exiles were translated and re-published in Russian. In addition, nearly all Sakha speak Russian as their first or second language. All these factors made it possible to conduct ethnographic and anthropological studies in the Sakha Republic using only the Russian language. This, however, is not to suggest that the research of non-Sakha scholars is any less valid. There are some advantages that they have that many Sakha scholars do not, for instance, access to broader international research, methodological and theoretical frameworks, as well as a greater freedom in terms of critically analysing the political context of Sakha practices.

Sakha scholarship has developed from being research *on* Sakha people during the scientific expeditions (Ides, Strahlenberg, Müller) and by political exiles (Khudyakov, Sieroszweski, Troschansky, Jochelson) to research *by* Sakha peoples (Ksenofontov, Romanova, Vinokurova, Petrova) and, finally, to a research *with* Sakha scholars and people (Balzer, Crate, Filatov, Peers, Yamada). The writings of these intellectuals reach and are used as the secondary sources for a broader audience of scholars from different fields who have not had the chance to visit the Sakha Republic, as the example of Olle Sundström demonstrates.

I would also like to note significant connections between Sakha and non-Sakha researchers, who often work in collaboration, inspiring and critiquing each other's work. One of the examples of this cooperation is the joint UK-Siberia project on "Peoples of the north-eastern Russian Federation: choosing a new adaptive strategy under conditions of globalisation – a social anthropological approach" (2013-2019) co-directed by Piers Vitebsky. The aim of the project is research in the field of social anthropology and ethnography in North-East Russia.<sup>185</sup> Eleanor Peers and Uliana Vinokurova are members of the project, as well as nineteen other researchers from Yakutsk, Moscow, Finland, Estonia and Norway.

Scholarship on Sakha practices is indeed becoming more international, more interdisciplinary and is continuously producing new research, including mine, which is also, as mentioned earlier, no more than yet another approach to the study of Sakha practices.

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<sup>185</sup> Full description of the project: Arctic Union. "Reestr nauchnykh proektov po arkticheskoi tematike uchastnikov Natsional'nogo arkticheskogo nauchno-obrazovatel'nogo konsortsiuma." <http://arctic-union.ru/napravleniya/reestr-proektov/detail.php?ID=284397> (accessed April 3, 2019).



## **Chapter 6. Concluding remarks and reflections**

I have tried to provide a multisided, yet focused ethnographic description of one of the most attended and celebrated events of the Sakha – yhyakh. One of the major steps in approaching yhyakh with regard to my theoretical and methodological strategies was my personal shift from writing about yhyakh exclusively in the singular form to also using its plural form. I began distinguishing between writing about yhyakh in the singular form as a reference to the annual holiday of the Sakha, and yhyakhs in the plural form as a reference to the multiple events called “yhyakh”. This carries an important and, to some degree, empowering distinction that allows yhyakhs to be seen as varied practices instead of imagining one particular kind of yhyakh with specific norms, standards and expectations. The majority of the scholarly and media publications that I have come across, as well as some *algyschyts*, predominantly use the singular form of the word – yhyakh, whereas many of the people whom I interviewed at the yhyakhs that I attended talked about yhyakhs in the plural. The conversations about yhyakh in the singular can indeed escalate to heated debates about what yhyakh should be like, especially when each institution, scholar or a regular visitor have their own ideas of yhyakh. Moving away from the singular yhyakh was one of the most liberating decisions that I made for this study, and one that contributed to the demonstration of the complexity of the practice.

A major goal of this dissertation, drawing on Clifford’s understanding of articulations and Dressler and Mandair’s model of religion-making, has been to stay attentive to the complexities met across the research process. Inspired by the larger research project, “Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds and Global Networks”, a particular attention was placed into the ways different practices and things are articulated and become recognizable

as ‘religious’ and ‘indigenous’. The design of the thesis itself is a conscious attempt to allow different voices to introduce yhyakhs. By conscious attempt, I mean a recognition of the uneven powers of the presented voices. Religious organizations and state institutions represent authoritative bodies, whereas religious leaders and scholars are usually perceived as yhyakh experts, which makes their opinions seem more credible and valid. Therefore, chapters describing conversations with regular visitors of yhyakhs and their understandings of yhyakhs come prior to my description of the “expert” opinions of people and institutions in power. Such a reverse order of the more conventional structure of a thesis is first and foremost an attempt to equalize unequal voices in terms of representation and to demonstrate the multitude of opinions in this particular study.

In meetings with people, institutions, and texts, I have kept my focus on articulations, performances and translations of people, practices, ideas and objects into or toward the two central concepts of this study – religion and indigeneity. Treating both religion and indigeneity as destinations of translation processes rather than given and defined concepts, I have explored their various understandings and usages at and around yhyakhs. It was particularly interesting to learn about the meanings attributed to these two concepts, the comparisons made with them, and the conversations and debates they opened up in my empirical material.

### **Tentative answers to my research questions**

A multitude of both overlapping and conflicting meanings of yhyakh appeared as I read about the practice of yhyakh, participated at yhyakhs, and as the interviewees talked about their experiences and visions of yhyakhs. I applied Dressler and Mandair’s model in order to reflect on the complexity of yhyakh(s) and different actors with various kinds of engagement and interest in yhyakh(s). I have focused on what I have identified as religion-making and indigenous-making *from below, from above, from (a pretended) outside and in cultural encounters*. This model has been applied to all my research questions. Below I briefly summarize my findings.

My first overarching research question was **how yhyakhs were understood and performed by their participants and promoters**. From the early stages of the project, the intent was to conduct a study based on fieldwork at the annual Tuymaada Yhyakh over a



period of three years. While preparing for my first field trip to Yakutsk in 2016, I learnt about the Olongkho Yhyakh, which had emerged after UNESCO's recognition of the Sakha epic style *olongkho* as the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Intrigued by the potential contribution of the second largest public yhyakh to this study, I decided to visit it too. As a result, the collected material at the Tuymaada Yhyakhs and Olongkho Yhyakhs over a period of three years, discussed in Chapter 2. Tuymaada Yhyakh 2016-2018 and Chapter 3. Olongkho Yhyakh 2016-2018 accordingly, served as the main data for this research.

To learn about the understandings of visitors of yhyakhs, I attempted to identify articulations, performances, and translations of *religion- and indigenous-making from below*. As the interviewees talked about yhyakh, I came across what I have identified as the translations of yhyakh and practices at yhyakhs *towards* the domain of religion. Yhyakh was described by some of my interviewees as a sacred ritual (Ru. *sviashchennyi ritual*), or spiritual holiday (Ru. *dukhovnyi prazdnik*), whereas *algys*, *ohuokhai* and *olongkho* as practices that help people receive energy (Ru. *energiia*) from nature (Sa. *ayulǵa*) and *aiyy*. *Algys* was frequently described as a ritual (Ru. *ritual*), prayer (Ru. *molitva*) and purification (Ru. *ochishchenie*). The performances of *algys*, *ohuokhai* and *olongkho* on the day of attending yhyakh were often perceived to be the most effective, which was one of the participants' motivations for attending yhyakhs. Yhyakhs were seen as religious events not only by some people who attended them but also by those who decided not to attend them. For example, a Christian exchange student from Finland in Yakutsk and an Orthodox Christian sister of one of my interviewees felt that it was inappropriate for them to attend yhyakh because of their religious affiliation.

I discussed indigenous-making at yhyakhs by identifying articulations of indigeneity in the broader UN understanding of the term, including the performances of Sakha as a distinctive community with a distinct language, culture, and beliefs, as well as articulations of historical continuity with pre-settler societies. Yhyakh was commonly described by my interviewees as the Sakha national day (Ru. *natsional'nyi den' Sakha*) or the Sakha national holiday (*natsional'nyi prazdnik Sakha*). The Sakha profile of yhyakh was also articulated when some of my interviewees characterized yhyakh as the day when they feel Sakha. For some, it motivated them to go to yhyakhs, where the attendance itself was seen as a celebration of yhyakh and embracement of one's Sakha identity. Thousands of women and men among the

participants and organizers of yhyakhs used different ways of expressing their Sakhaness from wearing Sakha costumes and accessories to performing various Sakha practices. For others, on the contrary, the perception of yhyakhs as events for Sakha people was the reason for not attending them. For example, one of my interviewees, who identifies herself as ethnically Sakha told me that her feeling of not belonging to Sakha people intensifies at yhyakhs because she is constantly reminded there that she does not speak Sakha. Knowledge of Sakha language was often perceived as the identifier of one's Sakhaness. Although the articulation of yhyakh as a Sakha event dominated in most of my observations and conversations, there were people with Russian, Evenki, Even, Dolgan, Yukaghir and Chukchi costumes, which demonstrated that not only the Sakha celebrated yhyakhs. The *tühülge* designated for the *korennye* ('rooted', 'indigenous') peoples of the North were present at all Tuymaada and Olongkho Yhyakhs that I attended. These *tühülge* were usually representations from Evenki, Even, Dolgan, Yukaghir and Chukchi peoples. At the Tuymaada Yhyakh, there were also people from Russkoye Ust'e. Although Sakha were not described as *korennye* people, two of my interviewees described yhyakh as the Sakha *korennoi prazdnik* ('rooted', 'indigenous' celebration). There were other articulations of indigeneity that appeared when some of my Sakha interviewees discussed the trauma caused by the arrival of the Russians, for example the challenges of entering and attending educational institutions with Russian as the main language of instruction, which many of the Sakha children did not understand prior to kindergarten or school.

In my search for *religion- and indigenous-making from above*, I discussed how yhyakh and practices at yhyakhs were defined and confined as religious and indigenous by the organizers and promoters of yhyakhs. Tuymaada Yhyakh is organized by the Yakutsk government, whereas Olongkho Yhyakh by Sakha Republic government. The representatives of these state institutions, the mayor of Yakutsk City and the Head of the Sakha Republic, gave the welcoming and concluding speeches at the opening and closing ceremonies at the Tuymaada and Olongkho yhyakhs. Through these speeches, I, along with the thousands of spectators, learnt about the understandings of yhyakhs from the point of view of politicians. The organizers primarily promoted yhyakh as a Sakha national holiday. This is not particularly surprising considering the fact that yhyakh was officially declared by the Sakha authorities as the national holiday (Ru. *natsional'nyi prazdnik*) of the Sakha Republic in 1991. However, it did not mean that yhyakh was organized only for Sakha people. Most of the political speeches

at yhyakhs emphasized the friendship between Sakha, Russians, and small-numbered *korennye* (Ru. 'indigenous', 'rooted') peoples. The performance of the fraternity of peoples went hand in hand with the narrative of the voluntary incorporation of the Sakha to the Russian state into 1632. None of the negative or controversial sides of the "incorporation" were reflected upon at the official events of the yhyakhs that I attended. On the contrary, the incorporation of the Sakha into the Russian state was celebrated at the Tuymaada Yhyakh every fifth year, including the Tuymaada Yhyakh 2017.

Regarding the articulations of religion, some politicians used extensively religious terms in their speeches when describing yhyakh. For example, Aysen Nikolaev (the former mayor of Yakutsk and the current Head of the Sakha Republic) during his speeches at the Tuymaada Yhyakh and Olongkho Yhyakh described Sakha *aiyy* as the great gods (Ru. *velikiye bozhestva*) and creators (Ru. *sozdateli*), and *algys* as blessings (Ru. *blagosloveniiia*) and prayers (Ru. *molitvy*) sent by *algyschyts* on the day of yhyakh. My search for the organizers of *algys* at the Tuymaada Yhyakhs led me to the 'Centre of Spiritual Culture' (Ru. *Tsentr dukhovnoy kul'tury*) Archy D'iete and the 'Centre of Spirituality' (Ru. *Tsentr dukhovnosti*) Kamelek. They were supported, to varying degrees, by Yakutsk government and were responsible for the main *algys* ceremonies at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. The Archy D'iete, in addition to being responsible for *algys* at the opening, closing and Kün Kōrsüü ceremonies, is the institution, where *algyschyts* are trained and certified to perform yhyakhs across the Sakha Republic. *Algyschyts* that worked at Archy D'iete described yhyakh as a religious ritual (Ru. *religiozny ritual*) and Archy D'iete as a place, where they connect to *aiyy* and perform the ceremonies of *algys*, baptism (Ru. *kreshcheniye*) and wedding. The *algys* offered by Kamelek was amongst the most popular practices at the Tuymaada Yhyakhs that I visited. Although anybody could participate in *algys* during the yhyakhs, Kamelek is a closed community, which one can join only after taking an obligatory course. The teachings of Kamelek about *aiyy*, *algys* and Sakha *iteġele* were rich in religious articulations, for example according to its founder Saiyyna, the universe (Sa. *kuiaar*) sent its messengers (including Jesus Christ, Buddha and Muhammad) to the world.

To learn about *religion- and indigenous-making from (a pretended) outside*, I discussed scholarly understandings and references to scholarly work that I came across at the yhyakhs, which I visited and whether they had articulations of religion and indigeneity. The specific

guidelines for yhyakhs, mainly at the Tuymaada Yhyakh, were developed by scholars, such as the annually revised *Conception of Yhyakh* (Ru. *Konseptsia ysyakha*) by the Sakha historian Ekaterina Romanova and the *Conception of Us Khatyn* (Ru. *Konseptsia Us Khatyna*) by the Sakha ethnographer Vil'yam Yakovlev. Both Romanova and Yakovlev described yhyakh as, among other things, a religious ritual (Ru. *religioznyi ritual*) and a sacred day for the Sakha (Ru. *sviashchennyi den' Sakha*). Their publications about yhyakh are rich not only in articulations of religion, but also in reflections on the distinct role of yhyakh for Sakha people. For example, Romanova (2012: 53) argues that yhyakh is the key ethno-symbol (Ru. *etno-simvol*) and sacred heritage (Ru. *sviashchennoe nasledie*) of the Sakha people. The recognition of scholars at yhyakhs was also demonstrated when the granddaughter of the Polish ethnographer Wacław Sieroszewski visited Olongkho Yhyakh 2016 as an honoured guest. Some of my interviewees perceived her presence as the highlight of the yhyakh and meeting with her as a reminder of her grandfather, who published one of the most influential ethnographies of the Sakha people.

In my search for *religion-, and indigenous-making in cultural encounters*, I reflected on the translations of yhyakh and practices at yhyakhs towards the domains of religion and indigeneity that were made in what I have identified as cultural encounters at the yhyakhs that I have visited. One of the encounters of such translations occurred at Aal Luk Mas, where one of the *algys* ceremonies took place at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. There were nameplates on the walls of Aal Luk Mas, where Sakha *aiyy* were translated into “*Tvoretz*” in Russian and “*Creator*” in English. These comparisons made *aiyy* recognizable for both Russian and English speaking audiences and created a new set of expectations and potential categorization. For example, “*Tvoretz*” and “*Creator*” could be seen as the translations towards religion considering the associations of these words with Christian vocabulary in Russian and English. This encounter could also be seen as religion-making from above if we take into account that the nameplates with translations in English and Russian were put there by the organizers of the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Another meeting that I have identified as a cultural encounter was the interview with an American student in Yakutsk, who visited Tuymaada Yhyakh. During our interview, she described the *algyschyt* from the opening ceremony as a shaman, which was the only time the term ‘shaman’ was applied to *algyschyt* by any of my interviewees. The translation of *algyschyt* as shaman can be seen as part of both the religion- and indigenous-

making processes. Regarding the translations *towards* indigeneity, my American interviewee was also the only respondent who compared Sakha to other peoples who are widely recognized as indigenous, namely the Native Americans in the United States.

My second overarching research question was **what actors were involved in the organization of yhyakhs and what were their motivations**. There are numerous yhyakhs that take place annually in and outside the Sakha Republic organized by various individuals, communities and authorities with various interests. I discussed, based on the conversations with some of the organizers of yhyakhs that I have visited, the motivations for arranging or contributing to the organization of yhyakhs. Although this study is primarily based on the public yhyakhs with thousands of participants, I have also had an opportunity to visit yhyakhs of a smaller scale, which made an important contribution to this study.

*Religion- and indigenous-making from below.* At the first Tuymaada Yhyakh that I visited, I was a guest at the *tühülge* of my uncle's company. Maria, the director of the company, was in charge of organizing the *tühülge* and delegating the tasks to be done among her employees. An important factor of having their own *tühülge* for the company was the possibility of cooking horse in the proper Sakha way. The preparations for yhyakh looked, from the side, like a team-building event, where each employee was engaged in a common activity with a common goal. During one of my first visits to Archy D'iete I was invited to attend Tölkö Yhyakh, which was described as the 'real yhyakh'. The organizers of Tölkö Yhyakh were largely concerned with revitalizing Sakha *iteġele* and old ways (Sa. *bylyrgylyy*) of celebrating yhyakh. It was also very important for them to pass on this knowledge to the next generations. The sports competitions were specifically aimed at the young boys, whom the organizers hoped would find pride in being Sakha. The commitment of local participants to help with organizing yhyakh was particularly noticeable at Olongkho Yhyakh 2016, when hundreds of residents of Verkhoyansk contributing to the organisation of the yhyakh by hosting the guests and visitors, sewing clothes for dancers, or donating food and sponsoring prizes for various competitions. The volunteers felt pride in hosting a Republic-wide yhyakh in their small town of Verkhoyansk, which seems to have been the biggest motivation helping the organizers.

*Religion- and indigenous-making from above.* I approach the Sakha authorities as the actors from above not only because they are the developers of the two largest public yhyakhs but mainly because they recognized yhyakh as the Sakha national holiday. Such political

validation of yhyakh gave Sakha people space to express their pride of being Sakha. Extensive resources are allocated annually to finance Tuymaada and Olongkho Yhyakhs by the state authorities. A number of scholars (Balzer 1996b, Peers 2015c, Yamada 1999) analysed yhyakh as a part and symbol of Sakha nationalist revival. Politicians, along with *algyschyts*, emphasize the importance of *algys* sent to *aiyy*, and by that religionizing yhyakh. As mentioned earlier, Yakutsk City Hall finance to some extent Archy D'iete and Kamelek, both of which contribute actively to the religionization of yhyakh and practices at yhyakh. In addition to the state authorities, the representatives of another authoritative institution, the Russian Orthodox Church, participating in the promotion of some yhyakhs. In Aldan, where public yhyakhs were not regularly organized, a Russian Orthodox priest conducted a number of meetings with the local population to encourage them to attend Olongkho Yhyakh. As a result of the combined work of the Aldan authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church, hundreds of residents of Aldan participated in the yhyakh, including the priest.

*Religion- and indigenous-making from (a pretended) outside.* In the conversations with the representatives of the state institutions, *algyschyts* and regular visitors of yhyakhs, scholars and scholarly research were often articulated as objective, unbiased and legitimate opinions, making them one of the biggest influences in conceptualizing contemporary yhyakhs. Among the organizers of yhyakhs, especially the Tuymaada Yhyakh, there are Sakha scholars in Sakha history, Sakha folklore, Sakha linguistics, and Sakha material culture. The first Tuymaada Yhyakhs in the 1990s consisted primarily of the Kün Kōrsū ceremony, which was one of the practices that Sakha scholars, including Ekaterina Romanova, attempted to restore, based on early ethnographic records of Sakha people. The ethnographic site Us Khatyn developed by Vil'yam Yakovlev, where Tuymaada Yhyakh has taken place since 1998, was also based on the works of these early ethnographers. The informal group of Sakha scholars that one of my interviewees, *algyschyt* Boris, named as the 'Laboratory of Yhyakh' (Ru. *Laboratoriya Yhyakha*) is closely involved in the promotion and conceptualization of yhyakhs. Most of them are united by the purpose of revitalizing yhyakh and often use pre-Soviet ethnographic descriptions of yhyakhs to reproduce what they claim are authentic yhyakhs. For example, the decision of having three instead of one main *algyschyt* at the opening ceremony of the Tuymaada Yhyakh in 2017 was explained by reference to the ethnographic records left by the Russian ethnographer, Ivan Khudyakov, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Religion- and indigenous-making in cultural encounters.* The most evident example of cultural encounter that I have come across in discussions with and about the organizers of yhyakhs, was the recognition of *olongkho* by UNESCO. The authority and influence of an international institution, such as UNESCO, united the Sakha authorities and Sakha intelligentsia and resulted in the establishment of a new yhyakh – the Olongkho Yhyakh. Thus, among other things the popularization of *olongkho* resulted in popularization of yhyakhs. The concept of Olongkho Yhyakh was new in a number of ways. It was an yhyakh devoted to a Sakha practice and not to *aiyy*, which caused controversy for some people, including Ekaterina Romanova. The location of Olongkho Yhyakh changes every year and this results in significant expenditure in the Republic’s budget, which has created some negative reactions in the Sakha public. However, Olongkho Yhyakh has become a symbol and reminder of the prestigious recognition from one of the most respected international institutions, UNESCO. This pride is strongly present in the Sakha society even thirteen years after the official recognition.

My third and final overarching question was **what narratives circulate at yhyakhs and about yhyakh**. I had this question in mind when I attended yhyakhs, visited various institutions and organizations, as well as when I read media and scholarly texts about yhyakh.

With regard to *religion- and indigenous-making processes from below*, I have discussed the narratives that I encountered in my observations at yhyakhs and around yhyakh. One of the most common narratives that I came across at yhyakhs was the revitalization of the old ways (Sa. *bylyrgylyy*). The notion of the “old ways” according to my observations referred to one of two periods, either the pre-Soviet times, meaning before 1917, or the times before the arrival of the Russians, meaning before 1632. The romanticization of Sakha practices was present in the attempts of revitalizing, for example, the Sakha traditional costumes, Sakha traditional architecture, and Sakha traditional *kumys*-brewing style, all of which can be seen as performances of indigeneity.

During my research, I learnt about three social groups that claimed to be recognized as religious: Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, Aiyy Iteḡele and Tengrism. All of them stated yhyakh as their main religious ritual, which is the reason why I have included a discussion of these organizations into my dissertation. Aar Aiyy Iteḡele was the first organization registered by the state authorities in 2011 and described in various media articles, including Wikipedia, as the Sakha religion. It is also the most active organization in comparison to Aiyy Iteḡele and

Tengrism, both of which are currently on the decline after the death of their founder Lazar' Afanas'iev-Teris in 2018. Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, however, is primarily known through another organization for Sakha men only, Üs Tümsüü, who claims to follow the teachings of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele. Üs Tümsüü members gather regularly for *algys* at Archy D'iete on Sundays, organize large *ohuokhai* dances and celebrate yhyakh. They are increasingly known for their nationalistic views and ideals on distinctive social roles based on gender. All these organizations claimed continuity with pre-Russian Sakha practices, just like the Archy D'iete, Kamelek and *algyschyts*. Another common feature among these actors that I observed was that they concentrated their efforts on people suffering from poverty, alcoholism, infertility, criminal past, financial struggles, and mental and physical illnesses.

The discourses of the institutions in power seem to have caused considerable impact on the development of the practices, individuals and groups that claim religion and indigeneity. This I identified as *religion- and indigenous-making from above*. For example, the members of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele published a book "like the Bible and the Quran" and translated the text from Sakha into Russian to fit the criteria of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. According to one of the founders of Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, Tamara Timofeevna, such measures were not considered before the organization began the registration process. In addition to the Ministry of Justice, the Federal Security Service has shown its concern about the Sakha profile of the organization and unease regarding its potential nationalistic appearance. For the same reason, the employees of the Federal Security Service were present at Archy D'iete during the Sunday *algys* of Sakha men from Üs Tümsüü. Not only were the state authorities involved in the registration process of Aar Ayu Iteḡele, but also another religious denomination, namely the Russian Orthodox Church, whose representatives suspected Aar Aiyy Iteḡele of executing 'dark practices' (Ru. *chernye verovaniia*). As my review of previous research has shown, Sakha practices were consistently translated as 'the dark practices', especially by the ethnographers and scholars with Christian backgrounds from the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Remnants from these translations seem to have been preserved to this day. Among the various spaces where narratives initiated by actors in power are transmitted to the public are yhyakhs. For instance, at the Tuymaada and Olongkho Yhyakhs narratives about the fraternity of peoples, the voluntary incorporation of Sakha



people to the Russian state, and the unique history and distinct culture of Sakha are performed and disseminated to the Sakha public.

The impact of scholars in my material is largely demonstrated through the traces of the scholarly knowledge produced in a period of several centuries whom I group into the narratives produced through *religion- and indigenous-making from (a pretended) outside*. Yhyakh and other Sakha practices were defined and re-defined by *algyschyts*, religious organizations, and state-institutions, including the Ministry of Justice based on selected scholarly works. Aar Aiyy Iteḡele referred to scholars who suggested special definitions of religion, including Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and Ol'ga Lobazova. The committee of the Ministry of Justice also referred to scholarly work and re-defined practices of the applied organizations as 'neopagan' (Ru. *neoiazycheskie*), despite the fact that they (Aar Aiyy Iteḡele, Aiyy Iteḡele, Tengrism) claimed to represent the 'traditional religion' (Ru. *traditsionnaia religiia*) of the Sakha before the arrival of Russians. Both the committee and organizations sought legitimization for their arguments within scholarly works. These were some of the multiple examples of the normalization of scholarly knowledge about religion and of scholarly ideas about what religion should be like, which has resulted in a systematization of Sakha practices to make them fit in certain pre-established categories.

The very first records about the Sakha described yhyakh, making it one of the longest and most studied Sakha practices. Yhyakh was described by various scholars as specific and distinct to Sakha practice, yet simultaneously systematized throughout history and fitted into various categories such as religious ritual, shamanic practice, cultural memory, and indigenous festival.

Sakha practices are continually translated into different languages (e.g. Russian, English, and German) and simultaneously categorized in various ways by various actors and institutions (e.g. travellers, scholars, judiciary, state authorities, and media). Many of the narratives that appeared through such translations, I identify as *religion- and indigenous-making in cultural encounters*. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century European travellers, Russian missionaries, political exiles, Sakha and non-Sakha scholars produced records of Sakha through their particular personal and academic perspectives, which all have contributed and still contribute to knowledge about yhyakhs and the way yhyakhs are perceived by the state, media and the public today. Written first predominantly by people with Christian

backgrounds, Sakha ideas and practices were described with European Christian terminologies, such as 'God', 'benevolent spirits', 'sacred rituals', 'communal prayer', which have contributed to the perception of yhyakh as a religious practice. From 19<sup>th</sup> century Sakha onwards, practices were increasingly categorized as shamanic and to this day Sakha people are seen as the practitioners of shamanism, especially by some anthropologists, including Marjorie Balzer and Eleanor Peers. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, another globalizing category – indigenous – was occasionally applied to the Sakha people and their practices, specifically in texts published in English both by Sakha and non-Sakha scholars. Once *aiyy* was translated to creator(s), *iteǵele* to religion, *algys* to prayer, and *algyschyt* to priest or shaman new sets of assumptions were created about Sakha practices. In addition to the translations from one language to another (for example from Sakha to Russian or English), there are continuous translations to the working languages and ideologies of various institutions with specific terminologies. For instance, the Ministry of Justice, the Federal Security Service and the Russian Orthodox Church operate with particular vocabularies, which they apply to Sakha practices. As this study has shown, sometimes such translations have attracted unwanted attention to Sakha practices, and other times they were effectively appropriated by the Sakha.

### **Final remarks**

Although the articulations of yhyakh as a religious and indigenous practice are overrepresented in this dissertation, which is the result of my particular focus, I would like to remind the readers that the majority of visitors, according to my observations, attended yhyakhs to see sports competitions, concerts and to celebrate the event with friends and family. There is a variety of other ways of approaching the study of yhyakh(s), and I presented only a partial and unfinished glimpse to these events with a specific focus, aim, and background. Further research could usefully explore the issues that were met across this study, including the notions of *algyschyt*, Sakha masculinity and gender norms, as well as the processes of romanticizing the past, the role of scholars and scholarly work in the legitimization and justification of Sakha practices, the materialization of Sakha identity, the popularization of yhyakhs, the institutionalization of Sakha practices, and the development of religious organizations in the Sakha Republic.

I have applied Dressler and Mandair's model heuristically with ambitions to open multisided reflections and fruitful discussions. The dimensions of the model have been employed as directions rather than as closed entities that needed to be filled. Each of these dimensions have raised valuable discussions separately, as well as through the dynamics of their overlaps and interconnectedness. The model has helped me to see how processes of religion-making and indigenous-making at and around yhyakh(s) reflect and shape political and historical realities of the Sakha people. However, the most useful aspect of the model was its focus on the agency of different actors, whose articulations I have attempted to present in this dissertation, as well as their understandings and motivations. Indeed this presentation is limited and my discussions are partial. However, my ambitions have never been oriented towards creating a holistic image of either yhyakh, Sakha religion or indigeneity in the Sakha context. On the contrary, this dissertation offers an analysis of material that simultaneously challenge any views, regardless of how established and 'scholarly proven' they are, but also takes seriously and with respect any claims, regardless of how contested and controversial they are. I hope that I succeeded to demonstrate the complexity and dynamics of the processes that are identified as religion- and indigenous-making in this dissertation, and the power of the vocabularies involved in constituting these processes.

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## GLOSSARY

- Aal Luk Mas* (Sa. *аал лук мас*) wooden construction located at Us Khatyn
- Alaad'y* (Sa. *алаадьы*) small fried pancakes often used during *algys*
- Algys* (Sa. *алгыс*) special good-will words, addressed to people with wishes of good-will; words, that are pronounced in different life-situations with prayers for the well-being and the good outcome (Sleptsov 2004)<sup>186</sup>
- Algyschyt* (Sa. *алгысчым*) a person performing *algys*; an expert of special good-will words, master of singing these words; someone, who is known for effectivity of his/her good-will words and recognized for his/her eloquence (Sleptsov 2004)
- Archy* (Sa. *арчы*) is an ancient Sakha ceremony of expelling bad spirits from the houses, humans and other various objects by smoking (Sleptsov 2004)
- Archy D'iete* (Sa. *арчы дьуэтэ*) is a place where *algys* is performed and offered to the population. There are several Centres of spiritual culture (Ru. *tsentr dukhovnoy kul'tury*) called *Archy D'iete* in several towns and villages in the Sakha Republic, including Yakutsk.
- Ayulǵa* (Sa. *айылǵа*) nature
- Aiyy* (Sa. *айыы*) a unifying general name of upper creatures, embodying the good matter, nature, and being (similar to Christian gods<sup>187</sup>) (Sleptsov 2004)
- Balaǵan* (Sa. *балаǵан*) Sakha wooden dwelling, often a log squared house
- Bylyrgylyy* (Sa. *былыргылыы*) in old times; in ancient times
- Choroon* (Sa. *чороон*) Sakha wooden vessel used for drinking *kumys*
- Deibiir* (Sa. *дэйбиир*) Sakha fan made of horsehair; remedy against mosquitoes. Today, *deibiir* is a part of Sakha costume used both by men, women and children
- Dygyn oonn'uulara* (Sa. *дыгын оонньуулар*) games of Dygyn; Sakha sports games at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Dygyn Darkhan is a legendary forefather of the Sakha.
- D'öhögöi oonn'uulara* (Sa. *дьөһөгөй оонньуулар*) games of D'öhögöi; horse racing competition at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. D'öhögöi Aiyy is often articulated as a patron of horses and horse breeding for the Sakha.
- Öidöbül* (Sa. *өйдөбүл*) understanding; view
- Ekstrasens* (Ru. *экстрасенс*) psychic
- Ichchi* (Sa. *иччи*) an internal spirit, master of the area (*Sakha e-dictionary SakhaTyla.ru*)
- Iliñ kebiher* (Sa. *илин кэбинэр*) Sakha front neckless

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<sup>186</sup> Sleptsov, Petr A. 2004. *Tolkovyi slovar' yakutskogo yazyka (1)*. Novosibirsk: Nauka

<sup>187</sup> The reason *aiyy* were compared to the Christian gods in this dictionary is likely due to the history of Christianization of Sakha people, which make Christianity a recognizable unit for comparison.

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- Itegeier* (Sa. *итэҕэйэр*) often translated into 'to believe' (Sleptsov 2004)
- Iteḡel* (Sa. *итэҕэл*) believe in something (Sleptsov 2004)
- Kamelek* (Ru. *камелёк*) indoor fireplace that Sakha used before the arrival of electricity; often used by *algyschyts* for *algys*
- kehii* (Sa. *кэһии*) small gifts; typically given to hosts when travelling
- keliñ kebiher* (Sa. *кэлин кэбиһэр*) Sakha back neckless
- Khaladai* (Sa. *халадай*) spacious long Sakha dress for women with long sleeves
- Khallaan* (Sa. *халлаан*) sky, heaven
- Kharyskhal* (Sa. *харысхал*) protection, amulet
- Khomus* (Sa. *хомус*) Sakha mouth harp
- Khoton* (Sa. *хотон*) cowshed
- Kihi* (Sa. *киһи*) human; person
- Korennnye* (Ru. *коренные*) rooted; indigenous
- Kumys* (Sa. *кымыс*) Sakha drink made of fermented mare's milk, preferably of Sakha breed commonly used for *algys* and at yhyakhs
- Kumysopitie* (Ru. *кумысопитие*) *kumys* drinking; often translated into 'libation ritual' in English
- Kün Kōrsüü* (Sa. *күн көрсүү*) Sun greeting; one of the main ceremonies at the Tuymaada Yhyakh. Kün Kōrsüü takes place at dawn when people can catch the first rays of sun, usually, with raised hands
- Mors* (Ru. *морс*) Russian non-alcoholic drink made of berries
- Laboratoriya yhyakha* (Ru. *лаборатория ысыаха*) laboratory of yhyakh; informal group of Sakha scholars and practitioners with focus on the revitalization of yhyakh
- Ohuokhai* (Sa. *оһуохай*) Sakha circular dance performed usually at yhyakhs
- Olongkho* (Sa. *олонхо*) Sakha epic style. *Olongkho* that was recognized as Intangible Heritage of the Humanity by UNESCO in 2005.
- Oyuun* (Sa. *ойуун*) Sakha practitioner; often translated into 'shaman'
- Salamaat* (Sa. *саламаат*) Sakha dish commonly made from butter, flour and sault. Salamaat is typically used as a dip for *alaad'y* during *algys*
- Serge* (Sa. *сэргэ*) Sakha hitching post for horses. *Serge* is used as a decorative symbol of horse-breeding among the Sakha
- Shaman-derevo* (Ru. *шаман-дерево*) shaman-tree
- Sir ahattyu* (Sa. *сир аһатыы*) feeding of the land; offering to the land. Sakha practice often performed while travelling
- Toion Aan* (Sa. *Тойон Аан*) Master's doors. Toion Aan is a wooden construction that symbolizes entrance to Us Khatyn designed by Vil'yam Yakovlev

*Religion and Indigeneity at Yhyakh*

- Tuymaada Yhyakh* (Sa. *Туймаада Ыһыаҕа*; Ru. *Ысыах Туймаады*) yhyakh organized annually on the last weekend of June in Yakutsk since 1991
- Tühülge* (Sa. *Түһүлгэ*; Ru. *Тюсюлгэ*) area where yhyakh is held; marked areas at yhyakh
- Tunakh* (Sa. *тунах*) dairy
- Tüpte* (Sa. *түптэ*) smoked dried horse dung. Typically used for *algys*. *Tüpte* is also known as a remedy against mosquitos among the Sakha
- Turuk* (Sa. *турук*) state of mind; state of being; state of health
- Udağan* (Sa. *удаган*) female *оуун* (Sleptsov 2004)
- Uluus* (Sa. *улуус*) a Sakha term for an administrative territory in the Sakha Republic
- Uraaŋkhai* (Sa. *урааҥхай*) is the ethnonym that Ksenofontov uses for Sakha people based on his hypothesis that northern Sakha-reindeer herders and Viluyusk Sakha-cattle breeders were not ethnically Turkic in their origin. This ethnic group Ksenofontov names *Uraaŋkhai Sakhalar*, where *Uraaŋkhai* is a linguistic metamorphosis of ‘orochon’ with transitional forms ‘oron-kon’, ‘uran-kan’, ‘uraanykaan’. According to this hypothesis, *Uraaŋkhai Sakhalar* originated from Turkified Tungusic peoples from Manchuria, Amur, Baikal and the Lena River (Ksenofontov 1992: 16)
- Uraha* (Sa. *ураһа*) cone-shaped wooden Sakha construction used often at yhyakhs
- Us Khatyn* (Sa. *ус хатын*) three birches; the ethno-architectural area, designed by Vil’jam Yakovlev and commissioned by Yakutsk City Hall, where Tuymaada Yhyakh was held from 1998 to this day. *Us Khatyn* is situated twenty kilometres north from Yakutsk.