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# The Post-Colonial Ecology of Siberian Shamanic Revivalism

## *How Do Area Spirits Influence Identity Politics?*

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### Abstract

The Sakha national revival in Sakha (Yakutia), Siberia, aims to recover dying elements of Sakha culture, in order to preserve the Sakha people's distinctive identity. And yet this revival is itself imbued with assumptions rooted in the European cultures that initiated modernist colonisation. Contemporary Sakha shamanism reflects the tensions within the nationalist revival, in the contrasting tendencies for activists, firstly, to recover what is seen as the old, genuine shamanic practice—and, secondly, to assimilate foreign spiritual techniques. But when these two strands of endeavour are examined with reference to the perceptions of person and environment that formed the basis of pre-Soviet Sakha life, it becomes apparent that they complement each other. Both facilitate the intersection of contrasting knots of relationship, predicated on differing ontologies. Sakha people currently live and work within institutions that have their roots in European modernism. However, older Sakha relationships with a live natural environment have not entirely disappeared. The authors suggest that the persistent presence of an environment imbued with spiritual agency differentiates the Sakha shamanic revival from the European traditions that shape its central motivations. This case reveals the importance of attending to place and environment, in the discussion of post-colonialist identity politics.

## Keywords

Shamanism – post-colonialism – the natural environment – ontology – Siberia

### 1 Introduction

Over recent years, there have been murmurings in the chatrooms used by young Sakha<sup>1</sup> people about the shamanic rituals that now punctuate public events in their Republic, Sakha (Yakutia), in north-east Siberia. Individuals have wondered why it is now deemed necessary to ask for the area spirits' blessings over a new shopping mall, for example, or an academic conference. These conversations highlight the contrasting ontologies that underpin the ongoing Sakha national revival. The spiritual entities inhabiting the live natural environment Sakha communities have experienced for centuries have irrupted into modernist, secularist post-Soviet cultural forms, which, in themselves, do not countenance these spirits' existence. In this article, we elucidate the way these ontological clashes are shaping the Sakha shamanic revival, along with the nationalist cultural revival that encompasses it. We show how the Sakha peoples' continuing engagement with a living natural environment constitutes the Sakha national revival as a non-European field of endeavour and action, even if it is embedded in institutions and conventions that have their roots in post-Enlightenment Europe.

The Sakha national revival, like its equivalents in other parts of the former Soviet Union, aims to recover lost or dying elements of Sakha culture, in order to preserve the Sakha people's distinctive identity in the face of modernising social and economic change. Successive Russian-dominated states have governed Sakha territories since the early seventeenth century; Sakha (Yakutia) remains one of the Russian Federation's federal subjects. Sakha communities have experienced particularly rapid transformation over the twentieth century, as part of the Soviet administration's energetic assimilation of indigenous Siberian populations into a modern, socialist society. And yet the Sakha revival is itself imbued with assumptions that have their origin in the European cultures that initiated contemporary forms of colonialism and modernism: it corresponds with the post-colonialist projects Talal Asad discusses in *Genealogies of Religion* (Asad, 1993, 1–26). Sakha nationalists seek to normalise particular

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1 Sakha people call themselves *Sakha* in their own language, however the Russian-language word is *Yakut*. We here follow the Sakha usage.

aspirations and endeavours within Sakha communities, in order to improve Sakha society as a whole—in common with both neo- and post-colonialist politicians and activists across the world. Who, then, are the authors of the Sakha cultural revival, and in what sense are they Sakha?

As the first section shows, contemporary Sakha shamanic practice reflects the apparent tensions within the Sakha nationalist revival. It does so by exploring the contrasting tendencies for activists on the one hand to recover what is seen as the old, genuine shamanic practice; and, on the other, to assimilate foreign spiritual techniques and linguistic forms. But when these two strands of endeavour are examined with reference to the perceptions of person and environment that formed the basis of pre-Soviet Sakha life, it becomes apparent that they in fact complement each other. Both facilitate the intersection of contrasting knots of relationship, predicated on differing ontologies. Sakha people currently live and work within institutions and organisations that are integrated into the Russian state, and the global market. These institutions and organisations are predicated on notions of person and place that have their roots in European modernism. However, older Sakha relationships with a live natural environment have not entirely disappeared.

Section Two contrasts the pre-Soviet Sakha worldview with that held by the people and organisations that brought about Soviet modernisation. The final section shows how the apparently contradictory impulses within Sakha shamanism are in fact rooted in a disjuncture between worldviews. We suggest that the shadowy and yet persistent presence of an environment imbued with spiritual agency differentiates the Sakha shamanic revival from the European traditions that are shaping its central motivation. The Sakha case reveals the importance of attending to place and environment, in the discussion of post-colonialist identity politics.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Authenticity and Experimentation in the Sakha Shamanic Revival

Our Sakha friends and acquaintances have often described an unexpected wave of interest in Sakha shamanism during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This

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2 Much of the ethnographic material presented here was gathered by the authors during a field trip in 2013, funded by the North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk. One author has been conducting fieldwork in Sakha (Yakutia) since 2004. The other has lived and worked in Sakha (Yakutia) all her life. The authors would like to thank the members of the Magic Circle, a discussion group at Cambridge University's Scott Polar Research Institute led by Piers Vitebsky, for reading and commenting on the piece.

sudden preoccupation with shamanism was encouraged by the simultaneous appearance of a political Sakha nationalist movement, gathering momentum at the end of the 1980s—in common with parallel non-Russian nationalist movements in other parts of the Soviet Union. Nationalist politicians in the non-Russian ‘national Republics’ that remained inside the Russian Federation, such as Sakha (Yakutia), did their best to secure as much autonomy from the federal government in Moscow as they could. As part of this, non-Russian nationalist elites promoted ‘revivals’ of their peoples’ religion and cultural production—whether to legitimise their political claims, or to counteract the Soviet-era repression of certain non-Russian cultural forms.

Many ex-Soviet citizens—both Russian, and non-Russian—regarded and still regard accusations of Soviet-era repression as unfair, and inaccurate. Their objections arise from a sense that the Soviet administration invested vast resources into endowing backward indigenous populations with their own modern, industrialised Soviet Socialist Republics, complete with universal education systems. According to this perspective, the indigenous peoples of the former Tsarist Empire were swept from their dark, unsanitary huts, to become equal participants in the Soviet ‘friendship of peoples,’ with the cultural and intellectual resources to forge their own careers within a modern, technologically advanced Soviet state (see, for example, Martin 2000; Slezkine 1994; Vitebsky 2005). However, those with nationalist sympathies might point out that this massive attempt to re-form a highly diverse population incorporated a high cost. Besides the people who were destroyed—the shamans, lamas, mullahs, priests, and ‘bourgeois nationalists’—a large spectrum of belief, value and practice was suppressed and denigrated, while ethnic difference continued to influence individual lives and prospects (Argounova-Low, 2012). Many Soviet-era policies aimed to improve non-Russian circumstances and societies; but, like the administrators of west European colonialist states across the world, Bolshevik policy-makers were certain that they knew how to improve non-Russian communities much better than the non-Russians themselves (Vitebsky, 2005). The former Soviet Union is arguably a specific case of post-Enlightenment European colonialism, shaped by the legacy of the Tsarist Empire, and the quirks of Marxist-Leninist ideology and its institutionalisation.

Russia’s colonialist heritage lives on in the form of strained relationships between the federal government in Moscow, and the non-Russian federal subjects. The Putin and Medvedev administrations have made a concerted attempt to establish the federal government’s supremacy. In addition, the integration of Sakha (Yakutia) into global capitalist markets has exposed Sakha communities to the pressures experienced by indigenous populations across the world. More and more Sakha people aspire to live in Yakutsk, the Republic’s capi-

tal, since village life and agriculture are seen to afford few opportunities. This urbanisation of the Sakha population, starting at the end of the 1980s, is generating new environments and modes of living, as it links Sakha communities into globalised forms of cultural production and communication technology. Younger, urbanised Sakha generations in particular are diverted by foreign or mainstream Russian technological and cultural products, to the extent that they can feel little affinity with their own cultural tradition, rooted as it is in rural livestock farming, and hunting.

And yet, the Sakha cultural and religious revival is still a force to be reckoned with. The Sakha population is one of the largest indigenous groups in Siberia, and is now larger than Sakha (Yakutia)'s Russian population: according to the 2010 census, 49.9 per cent of the Republic's population call themselves Sakha, while 37.8 are Russian.<sup>3</sup> Following Soviet-era industrialization and the 1990s national revival, Sakha people are integrated into the administration of the Republic, and its extremely important natural resource industries. Powerful actors—whether they are politicians, or local businesspeople—know that they cannot attempt to side-line a popular concern with maintaining and reviving the Sakha cultural heritage. This holds true, even if this concern counteracts the federal government's recent efforts to promote loyalty towards a united Russia, dominated by ethnic Russians. Several leading Sakha politicians and businessmen do not conceal their own dedication to preserving Sakha culture, even if they can tone it down when necessary. The boundary between Sakha nationalist and pragmatic government official is difficult to define, and the careers of some eminent politicians, businesspeople and academics combine these personas (Balzer, 2011, 131–162). The Republican government and leading businesses, therefore, collaborate in staging large, prominent celebrations of the Sakha heritage—most notably, the midsummer *Yhyakh* ritual, described below—in order to demonstrate their commitment to the Sakha people, and their culture (Peers, 2010; Romanova and Ignat'yeva, 2012). Shamanic practitioners or activists are inevitably drawn into this hegemonic negotiation of Sakha identity. This negotiation offers them both financial support and the all-important place within the Republic's elite social networks, even as it constricts their public performance and practice. Public events often involve a shamanic ritual, performed by specialists in Sakha national costume.

One obvious consequence of the interrelation between Sakha identity politics and the shamanic revival is the preoccupation with recovering an authen-

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3 [http://www.perepis-2010.ru/results\\_of\\_the\\_census/](http://www.perepis-2010.ru/results_of_the_census/), accessed November 18, 2013, 1.15p.m. GMT.

tic, specifically Sakha belief and practice. This aspiration informs the entire spectrum of Sakha shamanic activity we have witnessed, albeit to different extents. It is the central intention of some activists, or circles. For example, Yakutsk's largest and oldest centre for shamanic practice, Archy Djiete (House of the Spirits, in Sakha), founded in the early 1990s, runs seminars for the organisers of rural *Yhyakh* festivals, providing detailed instructions on how to conduct a 'real' Sakha ritual.

The *Yhyakh* phenomenon is a good illustration of the extent to which a politicised project to revive an authentic Sakha shamanism has infiltrated Sakha (Yakutia)'s mass popular culture. The pre-Soviet *Yhyakh* was an opportunity to offer fermented mare's milk, or *kumys*, to the higher nature spirits and gods in the Sakha shamanic pantheon, in rituals that both praised them for the coming of summer, and asked for prosperity in the future. The festival was banned in some parts of Sakha (Yakutia) during the Soviet period, or was otherwise becoming indistinguishable from the many other Soviet state holidays (Crate, 2006). 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, celebrated throughout the Republic. The *Yhyakh* has become a business opportunity. Entrepreneurs have produced colourful booklets containing different designs for Sakha national costumes, for example.

And yet, alongside this flurry of commercial activity and political communication, the community of festival organisers, academics, and shamanic specialists is anxiously striving to reproduce the *Yhyakh* rituals that appear in the pre-Soviet ethnographic literature on Sakha culture (E.g. Sieroszewski, 1993; Khudyakov, 1969; Jochelson, 1933). In 2012, Yakutsk's *Yhyakh* featured three shamanic practitioners at the main ritual instead of one, because the nineteenth-century ethnographer Ivan Khudyakov noted that an effective *Yhyakh* had to involve more than one shaman (Khudyakov 1969).

Alongside the people who are working to revive and disseminate authentic Sakha shamanism, there is a growing community of shamanic practitioners who seek more to harness and develop their own spiritual powers to heal and instruct. Their activities are dependent on a level of public recognition, as a shamanic practitioner cannot fulfil his vocation towards spiritual healing unless people are asking for his help—while also providing the healer with something to live on, in the form of payment for the healer's services. Because discussions about the Sakha people's heritage are such a prominent part of public life, shamanic healers cannot avoid adopting a stance towards the value and authenticity of their practice. The healers we have encountered enhance their claims towards competence by emphasising their respect for and connection

with the Sakha shamanic tradition; for example, an acquaintance who specialises in healing internal organs was careful to show us that his techniques continued an ancient Sakha practice.

Public relations notwithstanding, every shamanic practitioner encountered thus far has a clear sense of their place in a continuing Sakha shamanic tradition. They are proud of this tradition and seek to promote it, even if their main endeavours are not necessarily directed towards recovering and reviving the past. Since shamanic healing is so closely integrated into the Sakha national revival, shamanic healers inevitably are involved in the controversies it has generated about past shamanic practice. Yet all the shamanic healers interviewed here agreed that our world is exactly the same as it was a hundred years ago; wherever, or however, people might now be living, the extensive pantheon of demons, gods and spirits their ancestors knew is alive and active. The landscape itself is still a living force, inhabited by a host of spirits and ghosts; a key creative power is the sun, or *Ürüng Aiyy Toion*, the white Lord of benevolent Aiyy spirits.

The underlying order of an upper, middle and lower world, inhabited respectively by deities, humans and area spirits, and demons, may be the same as it always was. But what is striking about contemporary Sakha shamanic practice is the creativity with which it assimilates alien cultural or linguistic forms. Scholars of the former Soviet Union (and in particular, Galina Lindquist) have explored the fascination with magic, psychic powers and exotic religion that erupted in Russia during the late 1980s, generating its own popular literature and lexicon, expert practitioners, and research institutes (E.g. Balzer, 2011; Humphrey, 2002; Lindquist, 2006a; Lindquist, 2006b). Phrases, ideas, and practices from this late-Soviet trend keep popping up in Sakha shamanic books, lectures, and interactions, in addition to foreign new-age religious forms, often mediated by Russian authors and activists. Thus, many Sakha healers possess certificates of competence received from ENIOM, a centre in Moscow that both researches psychic potentials, and trains psychic healers (*ekstrasensy*, in Russian). Sakha healers refer constantly to 'energies' (*energetiki*), 'auras' (*aury*) and 'chakras' (*chakry*) when speaking Russian, and sometimes also when speaking Sakha. These words clearly have found their way into the Russian language via international forms of spiritual practice. Some Sakha healers have found their vocations to lie in foreign healing traditions, such as Hawaiian lomilomi massage, or Korean acupuncture.

As several healers have acknowledged, one reason behind their inventiveness is the extent to which Sakha people have changed, even if the spiritual domain remains the same. Healers have noted the varying challenges presented by the need to communicate with people from different backgrounds.

A person who has been brought up in Yakutsk speaks and understands differently from someone who lives in a village, and therefore healers have to learn how to adjust their language accordingly. The change of environment urbanised Sakha populations are experiencing seems to be influencing their capacities to engage with spiritual domains. Effective communication is therefore an extremely important skill within contemporary shamanic healing, as many people have emphasised the impossibility of working effectively with clients who are 'closed' towards establishing a connection with the healer. Thus, healers working in Yakutsk have developed a series of strategies to render their practice amenable to urban tastes and presuppositions. Their tactics include using the imported terminologies mentioned above to refer to what older Sakha generations would have called *abaahylar* (demons), or *ichchiler* (area spirits), so as not to frighten clients.

To an outside observer, the influence of Soviet and post-Soviet education, mass culture and official discourse over the intentions and activities of Sakha shamanic practitioners seems obvious. The desire to revive an indisputably authentic Sakha shamanism itself bears the mark of Soviet-era conceptions of cultural difference, which, as Teodor Shanin puts it, treated ethnic particularity as "socially real and not as a mystified expression of something else;" hence the widespread assumption that a genuine Sakha culture exists, beneath the layers of Soviet-era russification (Shanin, 1989, 412).

Therefore, contemporary Sakha shamanism is conditioned by the apparently contradictory requirements: firstly, to revive the authentic, pre-Soviet tradition; and secondly, to experiment with foreign cultural forms in order to make shamanic healing practicable under the current circumstances. These circumstances incorporate both the often neglected presence and activities of deities, spirits and demons, and powerful temptations to disregard the Sakha heritage in favour of Russian or foreign interests.

Given the abundance of alternative persons, spirits and relationships in Sakha (Yakutia), the twin strands of conservatism and experimentalism could in fact be complementing, rather than contradicting, each other. If this were the case, then to what kind of people and relationships do they refer? How might they be responding to successive Russian and foreign influences over Sakha beliefs and practices? And what role do they have in the contemporary incarnation of Sakha shamanism? The following section juxtaposes the characteristics of the pre-Soviet Sakha worldview, with the implications Soviet modernisation has for its citizens' experiences of person, relationship and action. Finally, the final section demonstrates how the contrasting conservative and experimentalist impulses have emerged out of this encounter.

### 3 Systems and Persons in Sakha Shamanism and Soviet-Era Governance

It is difficult to characterise a consistent pre-Soviet Sakha worldview in any detail, given the relatively patchy historical and ethnographic data, and the huge variation across Sakha (Yakutia)'s territory. However, it is possible to say with confidence that Sakha populations lived in an environment that differed substantially from that experienced by both Tsarist and early Soviet administrators, educationalists, and ethnographers. The latter were constantly being surprised by their Sakha interlocutors, as they describe in their ethnographies. For example, Waclaw Sieroszewski learnt about a particular type of stone, called *sata*, which are alive, have eyes, ears, mouths and noses, and are capable of changing the weather (Sieroszewski, 1993, 645).

As this section shows, early twentieth-century Sakha life was full of entities with their own intentions and strategies, which could also be co-opted into another's project, with the right treatment. The pre- or early Soviet ethnographers describe careful and precise techniques either to dodge ill-intentioned spirits or persons, or to elucidate the motivations and entities that were influencing a particular event.<sup>4</sup> For example, Andrei Popov reported that in the 1920s the Sakha people living in Vilyui region never approached a shaman's left side, since his *abaahy* demons were positioned there; meanwhile, you could cause a shaman to dream about your future by putting a piece of your clothing (preferably an unwashed shirt) under his pillow (Popov, 2008, 48).

The complex interrelation of spirit, person, and intention is well illustrated by a shaman's account of his initiation, recorded by Popov (Popov, 2008, 37–40). This lengthy event began when someone hit the future shaman, Spiridon Gerasimov, in the back, as he was out riding on a reindeer. A feeling of extreme cold shot through his body, and he raised his head and saw three strange ravens. Gerasimov went on to describe how for the next two years mysterious people—sometimes identifiably male or female, disgustingly ugly, or resembling a bear—variously tied him into a baby's cradle, chopped up his body into pieces, plunged him into pots of blood, and instructed him to practice shamanic healing.

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4 Indeed, Piers Vitebsky describes techniques of divination practiced by Eveny reindeer communities in Sakha (Yakutia), which were still being used in the 1980s (Vitebsky, 2005, 265–268). These techniques aimed to elucidate the intentions of Bayanai, the spirit guardian of the forest. Eveny culture differs substantially from Sakha, however Sakha people also recognize and interact with Bayanai.

As Gerasimov's encounter with the unseen hand that knocked him from his reindeer shows, his ordeal does not correspond to the familiar European categorisations of experience, which assume a distinction between mental and physical dimensions.<sup>5</sup> He specifies that his interactions with the spirits occurred during 'visions,' when he went 'out of his mind,' and yet these visions were comprised with violence inflicted on his body, or his own strange behaviour. He would find himself lying bound in the forest, with no idea who had tied him up; or he would wake up and realise that he had been wandering naked through the forest at night, crawling on all fours 'like a bear' until he lost consciousness (Popov, 2008, 39–40).

Gerasimov's own intentions and responses are as changeable as the beings with whom he was interacting. At some points he obeyed the commands he was given, or felt a desire to heal people, while at other moments he refused to practice, thus earning himself another round of agonising torture. His family assumed he had gone mad, and at times were forced either to tie him to a post, or search for him in the forest. Eventually, they understood that the spirits were calling him to become a shaman, and acquired the necessary drum for him, so as to force him to start practising, and thereby accede to the spirits' demands. His family's intervention seems to have ended Gerasimov's struggle; he recovered, and became a shaman.

From the European perspective that presumes events to happen through the activities and decisions of self-sufficient subjects, it is impossible to discern how Gerasimov actually became a shaman: who was it that made the decision, and effected the transformation? The people Gerasimov saw in his visions were certainly instrumental in taking the initiative and acting on it; and yet, Gerasimov's agreement was clearly an important factor. But Gerasimov's own desires and intentions varied widely, and perhaps, in the end, his family made the decision for him.

Likewise, the knowledge that informed these decisions is very difficult to identify, if one adopts the post-Enlightenment European assumption that knowledge is content acquired by the mind (c.f. Ingold, 2000). Gerasimov's family perceived the true nature of their circumstances through experiencing the process of his initiation, as bystanders who nevertheless bore the consequences of his illness. Instead of referring Gerasimov's peculiar symptoms and behaviour to a canon of propositions that could be recorded in the mind or on paper, they reacted to the precise configuration of experience and context that

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5 Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour have made prominent interventions in the discussion of European modernist perspectives, and their characteristics (Ingold, 2000; Latour, 1993). Rane

was eventually to reveal the spirits' intentions. In a similar way, Gerasimov did not systematically learn how to practise shamanic healing, nor could he affect the process of his initiation by any acquired skill or expertise of his own. The spirits took him to pieces and reconstituted him, and then told him he was a shaman and that he was to practice. His account implies that this process is what transformed him into an effective shaman. Gerasimov's initiation therefore was an event predicated on a network of person, entity and relationship that does not correspond to dominant European models, and which thereby also incorporated unfamiliar forms of knowledge, personal transformation, and communication. In particular, the welter of people, spirits, motivations and responses that together brought about Gerasimov's initiation suggests that networks of interrelated entities were prominent in action and experience, rather than the self-contained human persons that dominate Euro-American world-views.

As Popov notes, Gerasimov's initiation follows a basic pattern of dismemberment followed by reconstitution that was common to most Sakha shamanic initiations (Popov, 2008, 36).<sup>6</sup> Healers in many animist or totemic communities across the world have also conventionally undergone transformations through a destruction and then resurrection of their bodies, leaving them with unusual powers (Eliade, 1964). The complex emergence and reconstruction of person and relationship Gerasimov's initiation reveals is also present in Rane Willerslev's account of the interrelations between Yukagir hunters, animals and spirits in the late twentieth century (Willerslev, 2007). (The Yukagir people are another indigenous minority, who live in northern Sakha (Yakutia).) As the continuities between Sakha shamanic practice and that of the wider world imply, twentieth-century analyses of another northern, animist society, the Ojibwa people of south-central Canada, provide accounts of being, person and knowledge that are helpful in characterising the elements of pre-Soviet Sakha life and experience. Mary Black, examining A. Irving Hallowell's account of Ojibwa communities living in the 1920s and 1930s, noted that Ojibwa perception was fundamentally 'antitaxonomic,' i.e., objects were apprehended as inherently unstable and inconsistent, and therefore could never be classified according to a fixed set of features (Hallowell, 1955, 1960; Black, 1977, 101–104, in Ingold, 2000, 97). The real nature of objects and events would come to light over long periods of time, or in the course of further events, just

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Willerslev builds on Ingold's work in *Soul Hunters*, his monograph on Yukagir hunting in Sakha (Yakutia) (Willerslev, 2007).

6 See also Sieroszewski 1993; Khudyakov 1969, for example.

as Gerasimov's relatives perceived he was undergoing a shamanic initiation only after a couple of years had elapsed.

Tim Ingold builds on Black's observation, in his assertion:

For the Ojibwa ... the mind subsists in the very involvement of the person in the world. Rather than approaching the world from a position outside of it, the person in Ojibwa eyes can only exist as a being *in* the world, caught up in an ongoing set of relationships with components of the lived-in environment. And the meanings that are found in the world, instead of being superimposed upon it by the mind, are drawn from the contexts of this personal involvement.

INGOLD, 2000, p. 101

The ethnographic material suggests that pre- and early Soviet Sakha communities could well have experienced their environment and relationships in a similar way, in addition to corresponding forms of person, knowledge and communication.<sup>7</sup> A prominent feature of Gerasimov's initiation is the change in his relationships with beings who were already a longstanding part of his own and his community's environment. A series of procedures enacted on his body effected a new and intimate interaction with both spirits and animals, which itself seems to have re-created Gerasimov as a capable shaman. At one point, someone who "looked like a bear" vomited blood into a container, before Gerasimov was plunged into it; later, he was told, "now you have the expression of an angry bear's face. Now you have the dark, bloody eyes of a moulting bear. Now you have sharp ears!" (Popov, 2008, 38). Remember that Gerasimov described roaming the forest 'like a bear,' shortly before his initiation was complete. Gerasimov became a new person, with new capabilities, in the context of a reconfigured relationship with the spirits and animals in his surroundings.

Pre-Soviet Sakha knowledge and skill, therefore, have more in common with the Ojibwa "poetics of dwelling" Ingold identifies, than with the conventional Euro-American production of science, literature and history (Ingold, 2000, 110). The multitude of instructions the early ethnographers received on how to avoid *abaahylar*, or predict the future, acted as useful pointers in the management or discernment of the flux of person, entity and relationship that constituted life. The specific acts and utterances they proposed arguably had a poetic function, in the sense that they expressed and could alter the relationships that made

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7 Notably, Ojibwa people could also encounter live stones, which occasionally could speak (Hallowell, 1960, 24).

up the Sakha people's lived environment, by means of sensory or aesthetic intervention, or physical action (c.f. Jakobson, 1960). Placing an unwashed shirt under a shaman's pillow, firstly, expresses the shaman's enhanced relationship with powerful spirits, which endows them with unusual powers of vision. Secondly, it reconstitutes the relationship between the shaman and the owner of the shirt, in such a way that the latter can extend their influence over the dreaming shaman, encouraging the shaman to see their circumstances and future at a deeper level.

As this subtle manipulation of relationship implies, the Sakha people living in continuity with their environment and its non-human entities also had to deal with overlapping human and non-human sources of power. Human society did not exist as a centre of power external to the environment, with the capacity either to protect or to extract wealth from it, as is conventionally understood in older industrialised societies. Instead, the agency of human persons was integrated into their relationships with animals, the landscape, and its spirits, as Gerasimov's initiation illustrates.

Over the past four centuries, the power relationships within Sakha communities and their environment have also been integrated into their encounter with successive Russian administrations, which have acted to forge ever-closer links between Sakha communities, the Russian state as a whole, and the wider world. The early Soviet state in particular brought its own variant of European modernism to Sakha (Yakutia), itself predicated upon understandings of person, relationship, environment and knowledge that had their roots in the Western Enlightenment. In common with other European colonial powers, the Soviet state sought what Talal Asad terms, "the continuous physical and moral improvement of an entire governable population through flexible strategies" (Asad, 1993, 12). These strategies took the form of systematised practices that could change "aggregate human conditions" (Asad, 1993, 7), largely through creating bodies of knowledge that enabled the state to assimilate a population into institutions, which in turn had the power to re-form persons and relationships (Scott, 1998). As James Scott has identified, collecting quantitative data on a population using abstracted criteria for measurement serves to make populations 'visible' to a state, redefining their characteristics according to categories that facilitate the design and implementation of state policies over large territories and communities (Asad, 2002; Scott, 1998).

This type of social engineering also revolves around normalising a particular understanding of person, knowledge, action, and relationship (c.f. Asad, 1993, 13). The Soviet state was extremely active in disseminating a specific perception of the 'normal' (*normal'niy*), and therefore acceptable, Soviet man (c.f. Donohoe and Habeck, 2011; Vitebsky, 2005; Volkov, 2000). In keeping with

Marxist-Leninism's materialist emphasis, the Soviet understanding of person privileged the human body in demarcating the boundaries of personhood, life and death. The person was the living human being, and they ceased to exist when their body died. This belief is unlike the notion of human person held by late nineteenth-century Sakha communities, who understood that they had three souls, one of which would remain alive after the person's physical death (Khudyakov, 1969; Popov, 2008; Sieroszewski, 1993). As Sonja Luehrmann has described, Soviet-era propagandists were anxious to eliminate the presence of gods, spirits or ghosts from the lives of Soviet citizens; partly in order to remove insoluble complications from the business of governing the population (Luehrmann, 2011, 5). Therefore, accounts such as Gerasimov's were labelled as superstitious 'myths': they could not possibly refer to any real event, since the spiritual agents they described did not exist.

Human beings were in charge of their individual and collective lives, and any change in their status or capabilities happened as a result of either their own efforts, or that of their human fellows. Correspondingly, human beings lived alongside, and yet distinct from, the natural environment, and could exploit, manage or protect it, according to their needs and inclinations. Indeed, earlier Soviet official discourse placed an emphasis on 'mastering' (*osvoyenie*) the natural environment, and the far north in particular (Vitebsky, 2005).

As Scott has pointed out, official discourse in modernising states is neither internally coherent, nor adequate to describe the lived experience of their populations: redefining a population's characteristics in terms that are amenable to the action of systematised institutions entails a degree of simplification, or distortion (Scott, 1998). Soviet state polemic was full of internal contradictions, as many scholars have discussed (E.g. Yurchak, 2003). Early Soviet atheist propaganda could also accidentally reference the possible existence of supernatural forces, often because its authors still believed in their presence (Luehrmann, 2011). Time has shown that modernist state projects seldom produce the results that they initially intended, even if they may have succeeded in transforming ways of life and environments nonetheless.

Soviet-era designs for the mass improvement of distant Siberian communities, such as the Sakha, were unable completely to overcome the enormous differences in worldview that existed at the start of the Soviet period; even if extensive programmes of resettlement, education, industrialisation, and a re-ordering of Yakutia's internal economy succeeded in changing Sakha society almost beyond recognition. Many Sakha people, and especially the younger generation, did not seem to be very interested in their shamanic heritage at the start of the 1980s. Much more captivating were the pressing needs to acquire the consumer goods or equipment that were then in short supply, or to attain

the education that would enable them to secure an attractive position and career. People then, as now, were attracted by the recreational activities on offer, including a limited array of western pop music (Yurchak, 2003, 207–237). Despite these external influences, Sakha people would still make sacrifices to the spirit of the fire, an important presence in the homes of their forbears. Many villages had their own *ekstrasensy*, people endowed with psychic healing gifts, who sometimes practiced, unobtrusively. Sakha (Yakutia)'s spirits had receded into the background, but they had not vanished.

The capitalist state and economic institutions that have emerged in the wake of Russia's political transformation may not be based on projects as consistent and self-conscious as Soviet Marxist-Leninism. However, they are also proving to be powerful agents of change. It is easy to spot the systems and institutions that are likely to be drawing Sakha people further into experiences and environments that reflect mainstream Russian—and, therefore, Europeanised— notions of person, relationship and knowledge. For example, young people are ever more invested in the struggle to attain the grades and qualifications that will improve their employment prospects. From childhood, they spend most of their time in a state institution that constantly gathers data about them (principally, their school marks) as it trains them in the skills and self-disciplines that will facilitate their entry into the institutions that will eventually employ them.

These skills and self-disciplines presume that a person is a unitary entity, a body with a mind, distinct from her immediate environment, which can increase her capabilities and worth by absorbing content into her mind. Thereby, it's a small wonder that Yakutsk's shamanic healers have to adjust their language to suit contemporary worldviews, even if they themselves can access the powerful web of relationships that brought about Gerasimov's initiation. What, then, might the apparently contradictory motivations to restore and innovate demonstrate about the nature of contemporary Sakha experiences of person and environment? What relationships do these motivations both express and negotiate, and what kind of shamanic project are these relationships generating?

#### 4 Conclusion: Authenticity and Experimentalism: Two Ways to Manage Turuk

One thing both revivalist activists and experimentalist practitioners have in common is a belief in the necessity of a particular state of consciousness for engaging with spiritual realms, called *turuk* in Sakha. This state can be attained when a person goes 'inside themselves,' ideally when they are in the

natural landscape. A state of *turuk* enables a person to listen to what the landscape is telling him, through his heart. Prominent practitioners, activists and artists describe spending periods of time alone in the forest, during which they receive information (*informatsii*, Russian) and visions (*videnii*, Russian) from the landscape, sometimes concerning ancient Sakha practices.

Notably, activists and practitioners contrast the knowledge obtained through *turuk* with the knowledge young people acquire through their schooling; and some also claim that the latter, in combination with computers, mobile phones and pop cultural production, are the hindrance to the younger generations' engagement with their shamanic heritage. Even though revivalist activists in particular tend to have a high level of education themselves, or employ quasi-academic forms of research and knowledge dissemination, within these circles there is an awareness that Russia's European-style education system inculcates habits of perception and communication that prevent Sakha people from listening to the natural landscape. This awareness parallels the shamanic practitioners' consciousness that they need to adapt their language to their more or less urbanised clients.

On closer examination, much of the activity devoted towards reviving Sakha shamanic practice is the promotion of various techniques to bypass the 'European' mental habits and techniques acquired through state education. Even though many Sakha revivalists are also directly involved in the running of Sakha (Yakutia)'s state education system, and hence regard it as a necessary fact of modern life, they perceive that it integrates Sakha people into institutions, relationships, and sources of power that disrupt older Sakha relationships with a live natural environment.

The quest to revive an authentic pre-Soviet shamanic practice in fact creates legitimate spaces and techniques of engagement with the environment and its spirits. Thus, revivalists invoke the authority of pre-Soviet academic ethnography to create a lengthy public *Yhyakh* ritual, during which they invite the audience to stand up, shut their eyes, and open themselves up to the words of the shamanic prayer—i.e., introduce themselves to *turuk*. The conservative impulse to revive genuine Sakha shamanism is to a large extent a response to living between and within two opposing configurations of relationship, person and power—the contemporary Russian state and economy, with its links to the global market, and the localised interrelation between Sakha communities, their environment, and the spirits.

If the revival of "authentic" Sakha shamanism serves to find room for spirit-human relationships within contemporary life, the experimental appropriation of foreign religious forms finds ways of enacting and conducting these relationships, which are adapted to the current circumstances. As the shamanic

practitioners were so keen to emphasise, the cosmos has not changed as a result of modernisation, and their activities are the continuation of an ancient shamanic practice, as it can occur in the current era. Healers mediate their clients' re-engagement with spiritual entities, through finding accessible ways of expressing the relationships they perceive in each client's case. Explaining to a client that their aura needs to be cleaned, rather than an *abaahy* demon removed, introduces a previously unknown relationship to the client, while enabling them to countenance and thus to begin their engagement with this relationship.

In our experience, healers are also keen to absorb foreign terms and techniques into the growth of their own skills—especially since they are painfully conscious of both the experience and understanding that has been lost through Soviet-era repression, and the capacity of their own education and everyday life to hinder their receptivity and power. Notably, practitioners and clients are interested in cultural forms from east Asia, the indigenous Americas, the Pacific, or from European pre-history, since these ages and locations are perceived to be alien to European Christianity or post-Enlightenment modernity, and thus similar to Sakha traditional culture. Both practitioners and aficionados invoke, for example, chakras, ley lines, or Chinggis Khan, along with what they may have read in pre-Soviet Sakha ethnography, or heard from a respected elderly person, or received during a period of *turuk*.

The statements made during shamanic practice or events vary widely in content and coherence, and are treated more as suggestive hypotheses, rather than as authoritative knowledge (Light, 2012; Peers, 2012). If anything, the use of foreign borrowings can be seen as a contemporary version of the 'poetics of dwelling' pre-Soviet Sakha communities generated. Practitioners can use their understanding of exotic spiritualities to extend their repertoire of strategies to both express and negotiate the complex networks of human and non-human relationship they experience. Since they regard foreign spiritual practice to refer to the same cosmos they perceive, one can infer they believe these networks provide useful techniques and examples, which can make up for what has been lost from the Sakha tradition. For example, a healer can find that Hawaiian lomilomi massage establishes a contact with her client that enables her to perceive the spirits surrounding the client, as well as these spirits' effects. In this way, she can help the client to release negative forces during the massage. Instead of a would-be client placing his or her shirt under a healer's pillow, the massage, accompanied by gentle Hawaiian music and scented oils, constitutes a poetic expression and reformation of the relationship between healer, client and spirits. Through sensory and aesthetic intervention, the healer engineers an intimate relationship with the client, while

reaffirming her own unusually close contact with the spirits. Thus, the sometimes bewildering mix of foreign and Sakha terminology and practice enables a recovery of forms of relationship and knowledge that have existed within the Sakha people's lived environment for centuries; even if this recovery is conditioned by the continuing power of history, state and economy to disrupt these relationships.

Both the impulse to restore the authentic Sakha shamanism, and the experimentation with foreign spiritual forms, are emerging out of the contradicting influences of two sets of relationships within Sakha social reality. These sets of relationships are predicated on older animist perceptions of environment and person on the one hand, and the European-influenced notions of person, state, and institution, on the other. The contrasting threads of revivalist and experimentalist motivation manifest the tensions and opportunities inherent in the co-existence of the two worldviews in contemporary Sakha life. Together, they constitute contemporary Sakha shamanism as a project that does indeed have a very ambiguous authorship, as Asad notes (1993). Shamanism in Sakha (Yakutia) is emphatically a Sakha practice, in which Sakha people are the experts, and yet it reflects the fact that the Sakha people have become sufficiently Russianized to run organisations and institutions that arise from Russia's Europe-dominated heritage.

But perhaps the persistent presence and activity of a live landscape, along with its non-human inhabitants—a presence and activity that remains impossible to articulate in post-Enlightenment, modernist terms—is what makes the phenomenon of Sakha shamanism distinctly non-European, even if one might have difficulty in characterising it as genuinely Sakha. Non-modern experiences of place and environment are inflecting the aspirations and strategies of the Sakha revival, as it works to reproduce and re-form the Sakha people's interrelation with their live environment in its turn. The Sakha case implies that the continuing presence of non-European ontologies has the power to shape post-colonial cultural revival, despite the modernist assumptions that may underlie the revivalist impulse.

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