

Making Space for Indigenous Perspectives: Reflections on Cultural Sovereignty in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

Dzhuliiana Semenova

The Arctic and circumpolar regions throughout the world are home to many ethnic groups with diverse cultural practices and long histories that have been wounded by imperialistic invasions for centuries. Still situated within complicated politics of place, Indigenous peoples have found their own unique ways of connecting to one another under the changing circumstances. One of such places is the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) – a self-governed region of Russia inhabited by Native peoples of Far Eastern Siberia. After gaining sovereignty (1990) and electing the first Sakha president (1991), the issue of reviving self-consciousness and self-identification of the peoples became acute and a great number of initiatives have been created to support these ideas through education, culture, language, law, economy, research and art. However, consequences of globalization along with state decisions on support of primarily economic well-being of the region may lead to commodification of culture and contribute to complication of the processes of supporting socio-cultural agency. Nevertheless, there are several initiatives that ground themselves in Indigenous self-determination, have critical viewpoints regarding relevance of Western paradigms in local contexts, and attempt to avoid cultural oppression. What role does cultural identity play in shaping ethical relationships? How can cultural participation support decolonization of place? And what can we learn from these civic initiatives to move towards a viable future in the Arctic and circumpolar regions?

Introduction

The present article introduces practices of sovereignty that focus on rebuilding, protecting, preserving, revitalizing and supporting Indigenous cultures. As a methodological approach, discourse analysis of sovereignty in the Republic of Sakha was conducted, which allowed us to notice the continuity in the practice of cultural building. Research data is gathered from surveys held among residents of Yakutia, as well as face-to-face interviews with Indigenous scholars and cultural actors. It should be underlined that the concept of cultural sovereignty, which is addressed in the article, is central to the author's doctoral research on developing strategies for inclusive co-creation built on art-based participatory practices in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

Implying many definitions depending on the context, sovereignty is a complex multi-layered concept. In political theory, where it is widely used, the term refers to juridically highlight state-centered authority and is regarded as “the cornerstone of international rhetoric about state independence and freedom of action, and the most common response to initiatives which seek to limit a state’s action in any way is that such initiatives constitute an impermissible limitation on that state’s sovereignty” (Hannum, 1996: 14). In recent studies scholars point out that this form of sovereignty has deep roots in multiplication of colonial ruins and historically has been used to spread logics of exploitative relationships (Bauder & Mueller, 2021). Therefore, in the context of Indigenous peoples this word is not alien. However, during the past century this term has developed a different connotation, straightforwardly relating to the process of gaining subjectivity in a variety of fields from international law (the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007) to processes of self-consciousness and self-determination.

Indigenous sovereignty emphasizes the assertion of the rights and will of peoples. Within ever changing boundaries of so-called reality this perspective implies vital necessities of Indigenous participation and visibility in decision-making, inclusion in the agenda and comprehensive support regarding peoples’ interests and aims. The concept of sovereignty re-defined by Indigenous optics is built on mutual respect between all peoples, providing space for different worldviews, support of cultural practices, revitalization of languages, acknowledgment of inherent relationships with the earth, protection of lands, waters and all upon them.

Bauder and Mueller (2021: 10, 11) accentuate the practical impossibility of reconciling these two perspectives of sovereignty, stating that “Indigenous sovereignty is thus not purely a legal source of political authority, but rather a social and cultural way of defining community” and it “recognizes relationships and interdependencies, rather than granting one actor (i.e., the state) the right to make decisions independently without interference by others.” While thinking about theory and practice of a concrete geographical territory and socio-cultural space – namely the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) – one cannot ignore a dualistic nature of what is now the largest subnational governing body in the Far Eastern Federal District of Russia. Before analyzing how Indigenous worldviews exist in cultural dimensions, highly saturated by interdependencies and effects of neoliberal modernity, there is a need to address seeds of historical legacies behind the collective intention of cultural building. Transcending through the idea of specific time and continuing to evolve, culture has always been an important actor with its own agency. In this regard, the Yakutian land has come a long way of engaging with cultural practices, back from prehistoric petroglyphs to the phenomenon of local cinematography, which in the last decade has attracted increased attention around the world.

Steps towards sovereignty in Yakutsk Oblast in the beginning of the 20th century

In the cultural landscape of a closer historical time, the idea of Indigenous sovereignty was sharply emphasized in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century when like-minded people began to form societies engaged in teaching literacy, translating stories, and collecting artifacts of material and spiritual culture. Unfortunately, most of these endeavors were not met auspiciously by local administration and, therefore, faced certain challenges from authorities (Antonov, 2005). Not without help of the latter, many cultural and educational societal attempts of activists were

disrupted and oppressed: “Syrdyk” (“Light”), “Enthusiasts of the Yakut literature”, “The Society of Enlightenment” among others.

At the same time, dissatisfying cultural, social and political situations created prerequisites for emergence of local intellectuals who often opposed official authorities in order to advocate for social justice. Being titled as “inorodtsy” – meaning “of foreign (alien) origin” from the Russian language – among people there was a growing social discontent weighted by acute questions about identity, land and specific character of administrative policy. It should be noted that the ideological influence and support of political dissidents played an important role in the formation of the Yakut intelligentsia (Fedorov, 2010). Thinkers who challenged established systems introduced ways of participating in social and political processes of the country. They have “spread anti-colonial discourse, ideas of social justice, democracy and enlightenment on the outskirts of the Russian Empire contributing to the crystallization of national elites” (Korobeinikov, 2017: 88). Among these activists were Semion Novgorodov, Gavril Ksenofontov, Aleksey Kulakovskiy, Vasiliy Nikiforov – Kyulyumnyuur, Ivan Popov and others.

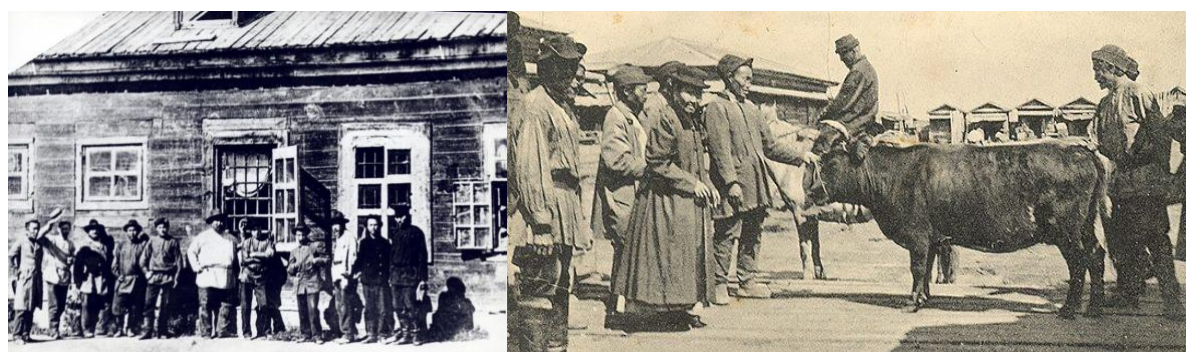


Image 1. “The Union of the Yakuts” by the Unknown photographer. Credit: National Archive of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).
Image 2. Yakutsk, Bazar (ca. 1910-1917). Photograph: Robert Zonnenburg.

On the 4th of January 1906, after the exclusion from the State Duma of the Russian Empire, “The Union of the Yakuts” was established by Vasiliy Nikiforov and representatives from Yakutia’s districts (Bakhrushin, 1927; Klorina, 1992). Formed in order to achieve civil and economic rights and freedoms, the Union sent the following requirements to the consideration of tsarist authorities in St. Petersburg: 1. Recognition of all lands as property of the Yakuts. 2. Introduction of zemstvo self-government in the region. 3. Right to elect a local representative in the State Duma.

According to the National Archive of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (n.d.), the initiative was perceived as “disobedience”: judicial proceedings took four years, as a result sentencing the leaders of the Union to various terms of imprisonment. Nevertheless, succession of events during and after this period sought ways of overcoming social and economic challenges and helped to outline the need for local self-governance. The goals of achievement of cultural progress, introduction to education and enlightenment were put in front. Conquest of these frontiers was to ensure that people would gain social confidence and create necessary conditions for independent solutions to their problems (Stepanova, 2003). The Yakut intelligentsia independently interpreted Siberian regionalism, all-Russian narodism, literature and science – and used these elements to define and express local interests (Korobeinikov, 2017).

It is important to note that Yakutia is home to five small-numbered Indigenous peoples of the North – Evens, Evenks, Dolgans, Chukchis and Yukaghirs, who have created unique cultures during centuries-old adaptations to extreme conditions of the natural habitat. After the Russian

conquest and before the Soviet Yakutia, native groups were in complicated relationships with ever-changing new realities – land was appropriated, trade became the basis of interaction with newcomers. Moreover, they also had complicated relationships between each other. Local expansionists were having wars and battles with neighbors. Some Northern peoples were more open to becoming subjects of the Russian Empire, which also meant gaining protection from neighbors, while others “opposed the intruders, either by abandoning their territories and moving away, or by armed resistance” (Vakhtin, 1992: 10). Historical and contemporary social, cultural and political realities of northern Indigenous peoples require more attention in academic and other fields.

Cultural sovereignty during the Soviet Yakutia

In such conditions from 1910 the youth of Yakutsk actively participated in club formations (“Meteor”, “Prosvet”, “Ogarok”) in order to interact with one another to discuss ideas. In 1913 the study youth participated in organizing a secret club with the task of self-education and development of literature. In 1915 there were “70 members, making it dangerous to hold open meetings, therefore, they were concealed in the form of dance evenings” (Oyunsky, 1930, as cited in Syrovatsky, 1958: 17), during which social and political topics were discussed. In the year of October Socialist Revolution political parties struggled to involve young people in the ideology they represented. The marxist club titled “Young social democrat” was organized in March 1917 and led by political exiles Ye. Yaroslavskiy, G. Ordzhonikidze, and G. Petrovskiy. Among attendees were M. Ammosov, P. Sleptsov-Oyunsky, I. Barakhov, S. Vasiliyev and others, who defended the interests of the working population, standing against the local bourgeoisie and echoes of toyonat – economically and administratively powerful representatives of settlements in central Yakutia.

Later participants of the marxist club played an exceptional role in the development of the Yakut Autonomous Republic. Among them was P. Oyunsky, who took part in the creation of the national written language and became one of the founders of the Yakut literature. Being the first to recreate oral Olonkho in a written form, he collected and published a number of epic poems of cultural and literary significance (Nakhodkina, 2018). His poem “The Red Shaman” was born “as a result of painful creative inspiration, impulse, search for appropriate words, expressions, and images” (Vinokurov, 2018: 318). Introducing a figure of the shaman as a symbol of the revolutionary struggle, Oyunsky crafts a story about the idea of individual and collective awakening: at the end the Red Shaman “sings a hymn to the man who awakened him from the eternal sleep and defeated Death by the power of his Mind” (Okorokova & Permyakova, 2018: 258). Emphasizing the shaman’s belief that happiness is in the hands of a human, the author writes:

Once again I will listen to the call of the future,
Looking closer into the woeful land...
The Middle World is like a hot horse,
Weighed down by soot, blood, sweat.
He drinks water continuously, thirstily,
Shaking all over, snoring and laughing his head off,
Jumping, beating on a wide circle,
He makes his mark with a fiery stream...

But through the bloody smoke I see, I see:
Our dawn – is more distinct, closer and closer!.. (Oyunsky, 1930).

Despite the opposition from the Soviet central authorities, local like-minded thinkers did not give up the idea of the national republic project. Instead, they played active roles as autonomous actors, involving themselves in cultural participation and working with specifically local contexts. In the 1920s they brought up a question about the autonomy of the Soviet Yakutia and on the 27th of April 1922 the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created. This event came along with the beginning of the Soviet nativization policy that developed cultural and educational circumstances of minorities, practically renouncing policies of the previous regime with forced russification and significant restrictions imposed on Indigenous peoples. However, the nativization policy had considerable flaws. Indigenous people took positions in the local communist party and the Soviet administration only by their ethnic background, regardless of their professional skills, “many of them proved unable to fulfill the requirements of the administrative posts” (Vakhtin, 1992: 18).

The Soviet policy on Indigenous peoples passed through significant changes over time. Until the 1930s it was oriented to preserve languages, cultures and traditions, and overall rooted on “the principle of ‘uniqueness’ of Indigenous peoples” (Nikolaeva et al, 2019: 3). Alphabets and literature were published in national languages, contributing to the future existence and viability of languages. In Yakutsk a great number of prominent cultural actors participated in social life through such societies as “Sakha Keskile” (“Future of Yakutia”) and “Sakha Omuk” (“The Sakha people”). These cultural and educational initiatives created conditions for the development of previously unknown spheres, worked with archive materials, studied material and spiritual cultures of the peoples, supported local writers, scholars and artists, contributing to the prosperity of Yakutia’s cultural scene. For instance, in 1928 “Sakha Keskile” initiated the emergence of the first art institution in the area – Art Gallery, nowadays known as the National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia).

After the 1930s, the Soviet policy regarding Indigenous peoples moved towards principles of sovietization and universalization: there was a certain need “to assimilate them within the dominant society and to get rid of the so-called “backwardness” of Indigenous peoples” (Nikolaeva et al, 2019: 3). Under the consequences of Communist rule, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs unreasonably repressed activists, scholars, writers and poets: Maksim Ammosov, Plato Oyunsky, Isidor Barakhov, Nikolai Spiridonov – Tekki Odulok, among others. In these blurry times, Indigenous cultural practices have been narrowed, put on mute and suppressed (Brown, 2015). Due to the new socialist optics, organization and implementation of the Ysyakh national celebration has undergone amendments and adaptations, which “contributed to the separation of the Yakuts from their traditions” (Illarionov et al, 2016: 233). The deep historical relationship that peoples of Yakutia have with the land was disrupted in the forced inner migration that had at least two waves. Firstly, in 1929 the USSR began the forced collectivization that required formations of collective farms in bigger communities. During the process of resettlement, land and animals became property of the state. Secondly, in the 1940s during the involuntary relocations of more than 40 collective farms of the Churapchinsky District for fishing in Yakutia’s Arctic districts. In Central Yakutia during the aforesaid inner migrations, peoples were forced to leave their *alaas* – ancestral homelands of the Sakha people.

In the 1950s the new governmental ethnic policy was introduced stating that the population of the USSR “was supposed to suppress all its ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences and merge into a homogeneous mass of the Soviet people” (Vakhtin, 1992: 17). Between the 1950s and 1980s Indigenous people faced many challenges: sovietization and russification hindered Indigenous ways of being, the number of hours for native languages was reduced, and as the result of these processes self-determining one’s identity became problematic. Additionally, large-scale industrial production with the predominant development of extractive industries has affected Indigenous populations, their territories of traditional livelihood, non-human species and fragile ecosystems. Diamond and gold mining industries, hydroelectric engineering “have led to significant land degradation, water contamination, decrease in biological diversity, relocation of the local and indigenous communities, disturbance in their traditional economic activities, health problems associated with water pollution and degradation of natural environments” (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2020). Heavily exploiting natural resources, industrialization considerably grew the newly-arrived worker population. During inner movements the assimilation of the peoples of Yakutia intensified, which affected the process of losing languages and merged cultural landscapes.

Despite these indelible infringements, during the nearly seven decades of the Soviet Union, several generations of local actors continuously preserved and developed various cultures living on the territory of the Republic, changing the cultural landscape of the place. National institutions of culture and art evolved in regional districts; the Union of Artists has been established, organizing exhibitions and events throughout the wide republic; the Soviet cultural policy of the late 1960s supported dialogical relationships and international exchange with workers, artists and thinkers from other republics and countries; national theaters were developing rapidly, many of them focused on addressing local contexts regarding culture and history. “The cultural revolution in Yakutia as a part of Soviet Union began with overcoming difficulties caused by the former rightless historical situation of the Yakuts, in creating conditions for a broad public education, national writing and press, mass cultural and educational institutions and societies, with the introduction of the national language in the office work in the state-owned institutions of Yakutia on equal rights with the Russian language” (Potapov, 1990: 4).

Nonetheless, the Soviet experience of national policy did not succeed in finding a way to guarantee the harmonious coexistence of peoples within a multinational state. Challenges and contradictions of the Soviet times are still echoing in the present, as Crate states: “Contemporary survival for post-Soviet Russia’s Indigenous communities is complicated both by a Soviet legacy that undermined local ecological knowledge, kinship settlement patterns, land and resource rights, and robust ecosystems” (Crate, 2006: 294). In this brief overview of the prerequisites of sovereignty and its difficulties for coming into being in Soviet Yakutia, one can highlight the need for a more thorough study of historical aspects and their impacts on presents and futures of Indigenous populations.

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) after the collapse of the Soviet Union

A new stage in the history of Yakutia began before the official collapse of the Soviet Union when Boris Yeltsin – the future president of a new-forming country – encouraged self-rule of the ethnic republics, which was prominently put in his speech dated the 6th of August 1990 in the following words: “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow” (Yeltsin, 1990, as cited in Fondahl, Lazebnik

& Poelzer, 2000; Rutland, 2010). On the 27th of September 1990 the Declaration on State Sovereignty of the Yakut-Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed. Actively supported by the entire population of the vast territory, it outlined that citizens of the Republic of all nationalities were recognized as the bearers of sovereignty (Article 1, Declaration on State Sovereignty of the Yakut-Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic, 1990). The Declaration contributed to widening peoples' rights, strengthening statehood, forming new economic relations and reviving the spirituality of the peoples living in the Republic (Nikolaev, Ushnitsky & Borisov, 2000).

We is the first word in the Constitution of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), adopted by the Supreme Council of the Republic on the 4th of April 1992. Everything begins with coexistence: the plural pronoun referred not only to the Sakha holding the name of the “titular nationality”, but also to other nationalities present in the territory, including many Indigenous peoples of the North, namely Even, Evenki, Yukagir, Dolgan and Chukchi, as well as other peoples, who live in Yakutia. The fundamental principles were rooted in “governmental sovereignty, and not national sovereignty for the one people after whom the republic is named” (Balzer, Vinokurova, 1996: 103). In the turning period in state ideology, national policy concerning Indigenous peoples, economic strategy, and cultural modifications, the issues of cultural preservation and further development of independent ethnic groups have become of particular importance.

Together with the just-born form of the Republic, waves of new initiatives and organizations emerged. Among them were public organizations with the purpose of protecting the rights and interests of Northern minorities. The national holiday Ysyakh was revitalized and brought back the elements that existed before the Soviet time based on documentation from 1902 during Waldemar Jochelson's ethnographic expedition for American Museum of Natural History (Jochelson, 1933). National schools were opened, allowing pupils to study in their own languages. Independent publications appeared, among them it is important to highlight such journals, as “Ilin” that allowed different viewpoints of place-specific contexts, was open to global discourses and contributed to the development of free press and free speech. The radio station and the television program “Gevan” began to broadcast regularly, playing a substantial role in preserving the languages of the Indigenous peoples of the North. Ethno-rock festival “Tabyk” was met with great enthusiasm in 1990, when rock music became an expression of the new worldview of the young generation, who found their cultural symbol and hope in an ancient ritual instrument of the Sakha that was used to gather people when a big catastrophe or celebration was approaching. Free from the academic traditions of the previous Soviet decades, the Yakutian art explored new horizons of creation and started using new methods for artistic self-expression.

In addition to different conceptions of sovereignty outlined at the beginning of the article, it is important to highlight the concept of cultural sovereignty developed by Indigenous individuals and scholars throughout the world (Coffey & Tsosie, 2001; Baldy, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2020) and to acknowledge cultural practices of Indigenous communities that make this concept happen practically – such initiatives as Isuma artist collective/independent multimedia platform (Nunavut, Canada), Warlayirti Artists Centre (Balgo, Australia) and others. Today, active cultural participation of peoples in building visual, textual, aural representations of themselves, their homelands and surrounding environments plays a key role in building sensitive relationships. As Melanie Benjamin from the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe states, cultural sovereignty is “our inherent right to use our values, traditions, and spirituality to protect our future. It goes much deeper than legal sovereignty,

because it's a decision to be Anishinaabe, to not just protect a way of life, but to practice living Anishinaabe, every day" (Benjamin, 2015, as cited in Ennis, 2018).

Reflections on cultural sovereignty in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

Aimed at moving towards a viable future, cultural sovereignty acknowledges diverse cultures and supports processes of gaining subjectivity through means of artistic and cultural practices. Based on one's own ethnic and cultural selfhood, cultural sovereignty implies both collective and personal experience. It provides space for mutual understanding between one another and the wider world, stimulates social interaction, supports Indigenous identities, deepens knowledge about peoples, cultures, histories and realities. Most importantly, cultural sovereignty contributes to building ways for Indigenous futures.

Not having been used as a common term in the Republic of Sakha, the idea of cultural sovereignty caused a lively discussion among the residents of Yakutsk. Overall, 76 people of different ages and social backgrounds participated in the survey with the question: "*Do you think Yakutia has cultural sovereignty? If yes, what would be examples of it?*". As a result, 18 people responded positively and gave examples (23.7%), 25 people responded positively, but could not pinpoint examples (32.9%), 12 people stated they would like to think about this question and are not ready to answer (15.8%), 16 people answered negatively (21%), and 5 people refrained from answering (6.6%). The examples given by respondents are included further in this article.

The current cultural situation is analyzed in the Strategic project of Yakutia, which reports "through the ideas of circumpolar civilization, Eurasian integration, and Northern cultures, the peoples of Yakutia are confidently involved in the globalizing process, while maintaining spiritual and moral core, identity, successfully integrating into the world community as an equal participant of the cultural process" (Project of the Strategy of socio-economic development of the Republic of Sakha for the period until 2030 with the definition of the target visions to 2050, 2016: 28). There are many examples of noticeably striving to support cultural identity under the circumstances of global integration. This process goes along with the cultural heritage of peoples becoming phenomena of the world cultural space. Among these are artifacts of spiritual and material cultures of Even, Evenki, Yukagir, Dolgan, Chukchi and Sakha people, national holidays of Indigenous peoples – Shakhajibe, Evinek, Bakaldyn, Heiro, Kilvei, Ysyakh.

Given the fact that in contemporary realities it is difficult to talk about the exclusion of external influence on culture and, therefore, about absolute authenticity, it can be argued that in the context of the Sakha Republic the impact of global tendencies, circumstances and echoes is perceived as an opportunity to actualize the traditional forms of national groups living in Yakutia. One can note that artistic and cultural initiatives are not resisting external components, but rather – quite organically and distinctively – use them for internal development in the context of global processes and "create very expressive synthetic forms of creative expression" (E. Vasilieva, personal communication, June 10, 2021). The peoples of Yakutia are sensitive to the problems and challenges of modern global society, to the phenomena that are shaping the world at the moment. This is manifested in an understanding of personal involvement in the global community, a deep connection with local history and contexts, and in the constant act of rethinking one's national culture.

Nevertheless, certain challenges of neoliberal modernity and globalization cannot be unseen. In particular, commodification processes might have a dualistic impact on the existence of Indigenous cultural practices, changing meanings, intentions, and implications. Acquiring sovereignty requires balancing between continuing Indigenous ways of being and adapting to the modern stage of world development. These reflections can be followed with questions: What is happening to Indigenous peoples' socio-cultural agency and sense of belonging? To what extent will economic impacts and consequences of commercialization affect Indigenous cultures? Are there tools to prevent the process of gradual loss of cultural agency if it ever arises within legitimized capitalist frames? These questions receive limited attention within public and academic discourse in Yakutia, perhaps, due to the fact that commodification is a new reality and adapting to it is put in focus. Nonetheless, Indigenous activists and scholars highlight the need to “create a form of visibility that is separate from the mainstream lens, which, on its turn, usually and unfortunately is derivative of self-exotification” (S. Romanova, personal communication, April 13, 2020). Existing in multiple realities, it becomes complicated to differentiate one intention from another. An attendee of mass scale cultural events held in Yakutia notes that “most of the time main objectives of such festivals unacknowledgedly contribute to cultural appropriation of indigenous cultures and identities” (S. Khokholova, personal communication, June 8, 2021). Inner processes of understanding these phenomena of colonial representations of Indigenous identities are not cloudless.

At this point it is important to highlight that culture is a continuous process, which evolves through time in unison with actions of creators of cultural values – peoples. Same goes with traditional culture, which is often regrettably used in the past tense as a bygone phenomenon. Uliana Vinokurova deeply disagrees with such relation: “For my perception it is a form of neocolonialism, which contributes to the emergence of people who will not be engaged in cultural sovereignty because their tasks are driven by the colonial methodology” (U. Vinokurova, personal communication, June 9, 2021). Svetlana Romanova supports this ontological obstacle – “the sentiment of pending extinction tied to the definition of being considered Indigenous creates a sense of inevitability to the well-being and future of these cultures” (Romanova, 2021: 233). Thus, it is important to create conditions for cultural emancipation and search for tools that could support self-sufficiency of Indigenous peoples in the current and future social, environmental, economic, and political conditions of the world.

Towards cultural sovereignty of Indigenous peoples in the Sakha Republic

In the complex circumstances of multi-layered challenges affected by dominant narratives and ruins of the past, art and culture can be regarded as an active mediator in collective cultural action and foster social change. The paths that peoples of the place began centuries ago in dim-lighted yurtas and balagans, followed by many generations of cultural actors, who had a serious interest in traditional culture and folk creativity, now – through the centuries – is manifested in continuous appeals to histories and identities of peoples, land and nature. Local action in photography, video, music, fine art, as well as practice of cultural institutions, artist-run initiatives, and enthusiast collectives can be seen as steps towards cultural sovereignty of the Sakha Republic.

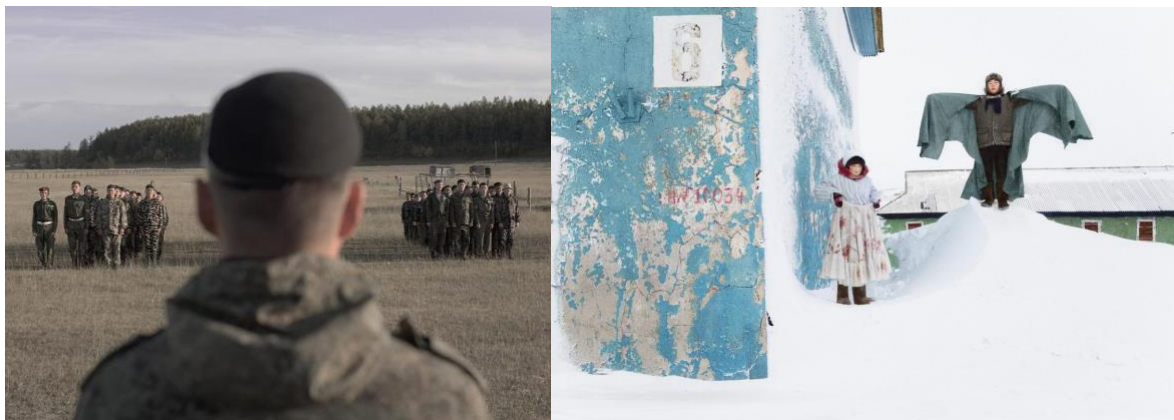


Image 2. Excerpt from 'Boyhood' series. Photograph: Aleksey Pavlov

Image 3. Excerpt from 'Tiksi' series. Photograph: Evgeniia Arbugaeva

The focus on place-specific contexts, integrality and high-contextuality of culture, along with interpretation of the territorial features and its meanings are main aspects of various artistic forms of expressions in Yakutia. Being a creative process from the very beginning and thus not being regulated, visual culture holds grand possibilities for cultural expression and “the greatest measure of sovereignty” (U. Vinokurova, personal communication, June 9, 2021). Close relations with layers of contexts specific to the Sakha Republic can be seen in photography (Aleksey Vasilyev, Ayar Kuo, Evgeniia Arbugaeva, Aleksey Pavlov) and cinematography (Kyun Ogoloro Collective, Svetlana Romanova, Kostas Marsaan, Dmitri Davydov, Lyubov Borisova, Sanaa Cinema) reflecting on Indigenous identities, collective memories, historical legacies, current challenges and realities.



Image 4. Still from the 'Kysyuur' movie directed by Svetlana Romanova, 2020.

Image 5. Still from 'My Murdered' movie directed by Kostas Marsaan, 2016.

In the previous section we have mentioned a sacred Sakha national instrument made from bovine skins stretched between two hitching posts – tabyk. Beaten on days of exceptional cases – big events, holidays or disasters – it made a loud sound that gathered people. Echoes of the cultural impact of the same-named festival that began in the 1990s can be noticed in the emergence of a substantial and heterogeneous music scene. Folk music on national instruments is revived both by individual musicians (Erkin Alekseyev, Khoro Juortu, Alisa Savvinova) and collective ensembles (Kyl Sakha, Seedje, Merlenke, Heiro, Yarar). The Yakut khomus vargan is a part of sound experimentations of Anna Enot, also known as Abiboss, who connects listeners with a wide range of other dimensions through her music in the noise genre. Initiated by Yakutsk City National Gymnasium's teacher Anatoliy Chiryaev, “The Youth of the North” punk community supports

local musicians of various genres (Drrones, Zhenskaya disgarmoniya, Spit) and organizes gigs that gain high local and international audience attention. Crispy Newspaper makes music in the Sakha language with lyrics critically responding to ambiguous events taking place in the homeland. Sobo collective also turns to the mother language, often referring to the local literary and poetic heritage. The Yakut rap scene (Jeada, Urban Rhyme, Muraveinik) lives its own life, which is archived, preserved and supported by Aleksander Ivanov in the project titled “Konyul Sir (*translated as “The Free Land” from the Sakha language*). Philologist Dorkhoon Dokhsun Vorogushin dedicates his music and research practice to bearers of natural knowledge – Indigenous peoples. His Khotugu Khomuhun collective organizes “Signal” series of events to support multicultural free-speech poetry. Currently working on a dissertation in the field of ethno pedagogy, Vorogushin conducts seasonal camps for the Sakha youth to connect with each other in a process of knowledge gaining intertwined with reviving cultural practices of ancestors.

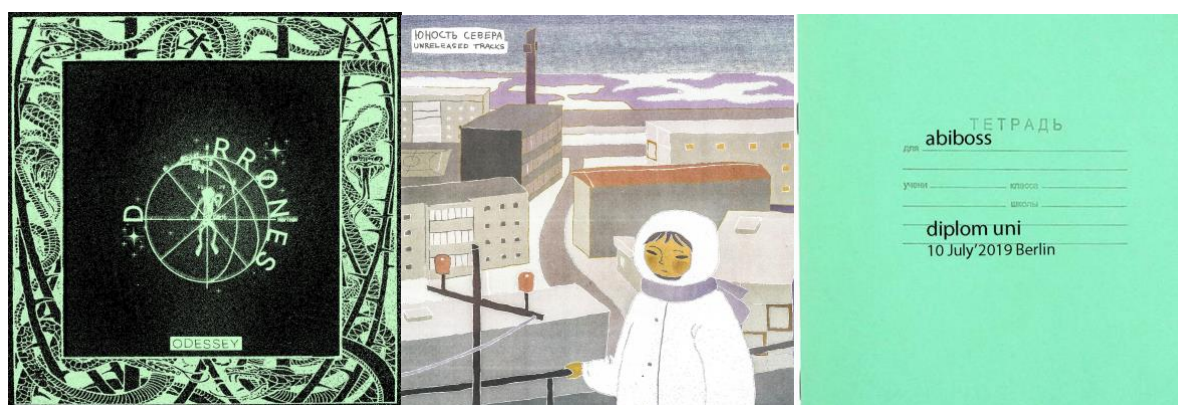


Image 6. Cover of "Odyssey" EP by Drrones, 2020. Artwork by: Egor Uvarov.

Image 7. Cover for "Unreleased tracks" by the Youth of North, 2020. Artwork by: Alexander Innokentiev.

Image 8. Cover of "Diplom uni" by Abiboss, 2019. Artwork by: Anya Enot.

From the 1950s, throughout the Soviet Union national schools of art started developing, introducing experiences of artistic expression of other localities to the cultural map of the country and the world. In the art of Yakutia, artists had been imbuing fundamental elements of Indigenous cultures and stretching threads of spirituality into modernity by actively turning to recreation of the enduring aesthetic and values for moral compasses that have long formed the basis of folk festivals, games, and rituals. Artists search for their own ways to continue the tradition of interpretation of the folk legends, lyric poetry, the Olonkho epic tale imaginaries in painting, graphic art, sculpture, decorative and applied arts. Authors address themes of collective memory and history (Eduard Vasiliev, Arthur Vasiliev, Marianna Lukina), Indigenous identities and daily life in the Arctic (Yuri Spiridonov, Nikolay Kurilov, Afanasiy Munkhalov), metaphorical language and symbolism (Isai Kapitonov, Semion Prokopyev, Mikhail Starostin), and mythology (Tuyaara Shaposhnikova, Sardaana Ivanova, Galina Okoyemova).

Not familiar to local communities and most definitely unknown to the international scene, in Yakutsk of the 1990s there was the Flogiston collective. Female artists – Marina Khandy, Olga Skorikova, Evdokiia Romanova, Olga Rakhleeva, Irina Mekumyanova, Sargylaana Ivanova and supporters – were updating understanding of art by introducing new genres and forms. Making happenings, performance, assemblages and immersive installations, the group was focusing on finding new ways of social interaction: “The young artists showed a collective desire to break out

of the stereotypes of conventional artistic creation and do something new, focusing on the origins of national cultures of the northern region and a shimmering sense of belonging to the place” (Innokentiev et al, 2021). Summarized, their intentions and aims – in relation to then imperishable academic art, as well as to one another – can be described as *sensitive coexistence*. This approach runs like a red thread throughout the history of Yakutia, and perhaps this direction helps to move towards a viable future, not only regarding the Republic, but also in relation to the Arctic and circumpolar regions, and wider – to the world. Additionally, the collective was looking forward to strengthening ties with other localities and organized exhibitions representing Arctic art from different regions: Finland, Greenland, the United States, Canada and Russia.

In the context of cultural sovereignty, emerging artists should be mentioned as continuers and experimenters, who work both in reproducing and adapting local cultural codes for the new globalized world context. Graphic works of Maria Mishenko transmit stories about her homeplace, the Arctic settlement of Russkoye Ustye, known primarily as a place of residence of Russkoustints – a separate cultural and ethnographic group of Russians. The painter Ekaterina Surzhaninova reflects on the multiculturalism of Indigenous identities and historical memory of Nizhnekolymskoe District. To give space to many voices of the northern landscape, the artist and educator Fedos Zarovnyaev depicts folk tales heard from the elderly, stories from village newspapers and childhood memories. Alexander Innokentiev, also known as Kyhynngy Ojúr, expands on visual experiments through animation and continues artistic exploration of his previous colleagues by developing the Yakut graphic art school phenomena. Together with Anna Byastinova, the duo archives and popularizes book graphics of Yakutia. Often using natural materials, the Archetype Collective of artists and designers conducts art-based research on themes of national culture, Indigenous knowledge and ecological human existence.

Over the past decade, folk crafts have begun to attract more attention from the local population, and the Government of Yakutia supports the activities of artistic, cultural and educational institutions to include folk crafts in the public agenda. Independent agents of culture, collectives, initiatives and non-governmental organizations make process-oriented and often inclusive projects to make space for a dialogue of different worldviews, to learn how to co-exist with one another, nature, non-human citizens and to imagine a viable future through building democratic society with the freedom of speech, the freedom of thought, and the freedom to be.

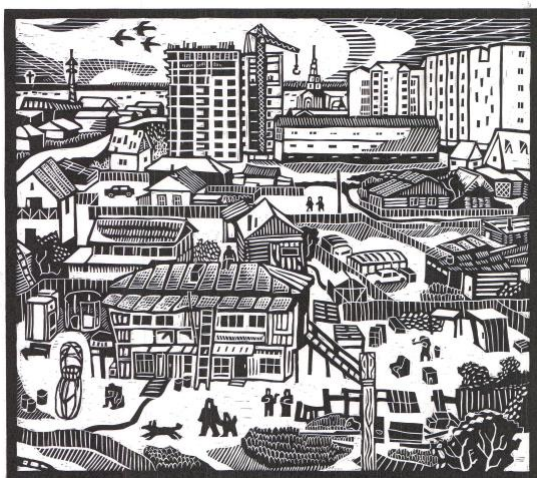


Image 8. *“A View on Disappearing Zalog”* by Alexander Innokentiev – Kyhynny Ojúr, 2020.

Image 9. *“Late Autumn”* by Nikolay Kurilov, 1985. Credit: National Art Museum of Yakutia

The art scene of the Sakha Republic would have been hard to imagine without the support of cultural institutions. The Arctic State Institute of Arts and Culture, the branch of the Krasnoyarsk Institute of Arts, was initiated to revive, preserve and continue the cultural heritage of the Indigenous peoples of the North. Contributing to the development of contemporary art, the institute holds the Arctic Triennale and its laboratory of Integrated Geocultural Studies of the Arctic organizes the Arctic Biennale. Since 1928, the National Art Museum of Yakutia has been a center for preserving, restoring, presenting and actualizing works by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors, becoming one of the largest museums in the North-East of Russia that crystallizes experiences of many generations of artists, sculptors and folk masters. The museum-initiated projects of cultural and social significance include: “Material and spiritual cultures of the peoples of Yakutia in world museums”, “Rarities of Yakutia” and the International Yakut Biennale of Contemporary Art. The Urgel Art gallery, run now by Yury Spiridonov, shows personal and group exhibitions related to themes of the North. Recently opening a public studio and gallery space (2020), the Yakutian branch of the Union of Artists continues to organize exhibitions and curate projects in the field of art and culture.

Gathering reflections on the idea of cultural sovereignty, three national theaters come to mind as shapers of theater experience. The Gulun theater of small-numbered Indigenous peoples of Yakutia develops and supports culture, literature and languages of Northern peoples by staging performances in Evenk, Even, Yukaghir and Sakha languages. The Olonkho theater consolidates local people around the cultural values of Indigenous peoples of Yakutia. Anastasiia Alekseeva, one of the leading actresses of the Olonkho theater, organizes folk tale evenings together with “Culture of Yakutia” media platform. For several years research-based student group “Cultural Anthropology” had also been supporting discussion on intersection of history, culture and anthropology. All these actors manifest themselves as impulses based on an intuitive, powerful need for creative exchange in the narrow artistic circles of artists, thinkers, architects, film directors, actors, musicians and writers. There are also self-organized initiatives based on horizontal approaches and ideas of inclusion that democratize the very meaning and being of artistic action. Art Box is a long-term initiative by architect and artist Anku Gasich, who organizes pop-up exhibitions in public spaces, abandoned buildings, and city parks. Everyone is welcome to take part in this hybrid annual event, motto of which is put into the statement as “We never restrict artists from self-expression.” Another self-organized initiative, Art laboratory, invites local people to participate in seasonal practice-based programs. Run by cultural workers, the project twirls a discourse around contemporary art and critical theory in a close link with Indigenous ontologies and Yakutsk-specific contexts. With the interest and participation of all the mentioned actors and initiatives, culture continues to evolve in many ways. Actualizing local identities, cultures, and histories, and bringing them to the surface in the place that grounds itself in the permafrost, practices of cultural sovereignty emerge in ideas of supporting, connecting, and sharing.

Conclusion

Every culture strives to live and develop harmoniously like the flow of water in a free river. Cultures of Indigenous peoples of Yakutia have met sufficient challenges and dualistic impacts of

different times, firstly – the Russian Empire, and secondly – the Soviet Union. The potential of cultural freedom was not wasted even after the Yakut national intelligentsia was destroyed in the 1930s. The collapse of the USSR birthed times of a passionate push: local impulses got a chance and an energy boost in order to revitalize. Continuing paths of ancestors and previous generations, contemporaries of the Sakha Republic share a strong belief that *sensitive coexistence* always comes first and the pronoun is always *we*. Supporting self-determination of all nationalities and finding ways of respectful and sensitive co-being has always been, and still is, the priority.

Indigenous peoples often face multiple barriers for participation in political processes and decision making. Nevertheless, it is hard to take away the cultural freedom of peoples, since the center of cultural freedom is in the peoples themselves. In this regard, artistic and cultural action opens up possibilities to build ecological relationships with the world and challenge existing inequities. Although the term *cultural sovereignty* is not widespread within Yakutia, the concept itself exists in practice more than in public discourse. Cultural sovereignty supports cultural self-determination of Indigenous peoples and builds a solid ground for a culturally sustainable future for the coming generations. This small introduction to cultural landscape of Yakutia ends with words heard from Uliana Vinokurova, one of the authors of the Constitution of the Sakha Republic:

“Every person consists of concentric circles. Speaking in psychological terms, there is such a word as the self – a free sovereign being, fundamental to the human personality. Depending on the process of socialization and precisely on factors affecting the person, there can be several concentric circles and eventually this can grow to a full recognition of the accepted attitudes, clearly expressed requirements of the community in which the person lives. This is a kind of measure of the independence of a person, who manifests himself or herself through self-consciousness” (U. Vinokurova, personal communication, June 9, 2021).

References

- Alekseev, E. E. (1998). *Istoriya natsionalnogo voprosa v Respublike Sakha (Yakutia) (fevral 1917-1941)*. [History of the national question in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (February 1917-1941)]. Yakutsk: Institute for Humanitarian Research and North Indigenous Peoples Problems of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences.
- Antonov, E. P., et al (2005). Natsionalno-kulturnaya politika i praktika ee realizatsii v Sibirskom regione v pervoi treti XX veka. [National-cultural policy and practice of its implementation in the Siberian region in the first third of the 20th century]. Novosibirsk: National Research Tomsk State University, pp. 89-131.
- Bakhrushin S. V. (1927). *Istoricheskie sudbi Yakutii*. [Historical destinies of Yakutia]. Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.
- Baldy, C. R. (2013). Why we gather: traditional gathering in native Northwest California and the future of bio-cultural sovereignty. *Ecological Processes*, 2(1), pp. 1-10.
- Balzer, M. M., Vinokurova, U. A. (1996). Nationalism, interethnic relations and federalism: the case of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48(1), pp. 101-120.

- Bauder, H., Mueller, R. (2021). Westphalian Vs. Indigenous Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance. *Geopolitics*, pp. 1-18.
- Brown, A. K. (2015, April). Narrative Objects: The Sakha Summer Festival and Cultural Revitalization: Work in progress presentation. In *Nature and Culture in Museums*, Museum Ethnographers Group Conference.
- Coffey, W., Tsosie, R. (2001). Rethinking the tribal sovereignty doctrine: Cultural sovereignty and the collective future of Indian nations. *Stan. L. & Pol'y Rev.*, 12, 191.
- Constitution of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (1992). Source: <https://www.sakha.gov.ru/o-respublike-saha--kutiya-/konstitutsiya> (Date of access: 12.06.2021).
- Crate, S. (2006). Investigating Local Definitions of Sustainability in the Arctic: Insights from Post-Soviet Sakha Villages. *Arctic*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 294-310. Source: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40512816> (Date of access: 5.06.2021).
- Declaration on State Sovereignty of the Yakut-Sakha Soviet Socialist Republic. (1990).
- Ennis, D. (2018). "It is Time to Take Back Our Cultural Sovereignty". Source: <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/its-time-to-take-back-our-cultural-sovereignty#:~:text=Cultural%20Sovereignty%20is%20our%20inherent,practice%20living%20Anishinaabe%2C%20every%20day...> (Date of access: 13.06.2021).
- Fedorov, V. I. (2010). Yakutia v nachale 20 veka v kontekste natsionalo-demokraticeskogo dvizheniya naroda sakha [Yakutia in the beginning of the 20th century in the context of national-democratic movement of the Sakha people]. *Oriental Studies*, (2), pp. 30-33.
- Fondahl, G., Lazebnik, O., & Poelzer, G. (2000). Aboriginal territorial rights and the sovereignty of the Sakha Republic. *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics*, 41 (6), pp. 401-417.
- Hannum, H. (1996). *Autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination*. University of Pennsylvania press.
- Illarionov, V. V., Sleptsov, P. A., & Illarionova, T. V. (2016). Yakut national holiday – the Ysyakh: Tradition and modernity. In the 3rd International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM, pp. 233-236.
- Innokentiev, A., Semenova D. (2021). *Флогистон: зарождение неформального искусства в Якутии 90-ых*. [Flogiston: the emergence of non-formal art in Yakutia of the 1990s.]. Saint-Petersburg: Kometa-28.
- Jochelson, W. (1933). The Yakut (Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History). New York City, 33(part II), 225.
- Kliorina, I. S. (1992). The epic of "The Union of the Yakuts"(December 1905 – July 1908). *Ilin Journal of History and Cultural Studies*.
- Korobeinikov, A. (2017). The Yakut autonomy: post-imperial political projects of the Yakut intelligentsia in 1905–1922. *Ab Imperio*, 2017(3), pp. 77-118.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (Ed.). (2020). *Sovereign subjects: Indigenous sovereignty matters*. Routledge.

- Nakhodkina, A. A. (2018). The image of the north in the Yakut heroic epic Olonkho. Source: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/the-image-of-the-north-in-the-yakut-heroic-epic-olonkho> (Date of access: 12.06.2021).
- Nikolaev A. P., Ushnitsky V. V., Borisov A. A. (2000). *Respublika Sakha (Yakutia): put' k suverenitetu. [The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia): journey towards sovereignty]*. Yakutsk: Institute for Humanitarian Research and North Indigenous Peoples Problems of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences.
- Nikolaeva, A. D., Neustroev, N. D., Neustroeva, A. N., Bugaeva, A. P., Shergina, T. A., & Kozhurova, A. A. (2019). Regional model of indigenous education: the case of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). *International Transaction Journal of Engineering, Management, & Applied Sciences & Technologies*, 10(19).
- National Archive of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The Union of the Yakuts. Source: http://archivesakha.ru/?page_id=5858 (Date of access: 10.06.2021).
- Okorokova, V. B., & Permyakova, T. N. (2018). Contextual Problems of Interpretation of PA Oyunsky's Personality as a Writer-Philosopher. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 7(3), pp. 253-262.
- Oyunsky, P. A. (1930). *The Red Shaman* (translated by A. Boyarov & P. Chernyh-Yakutskiy). Yakutsk, Yakutsk Book Publishing.
- Potapov, I. (1990). *Iskusstvo hudozhnikov Sovetskoi Yakutii. [The Art of Artists of the Soviet Yakutia]*. Yakutsk: Kn. izd-vo.
- Project of the Strategy of socio-economic development of the Republic of Sakha for the period until 2030 with the definition of the target visions to 2050 (2016). Source: <https://storage.strategy24.ru/files/news/201901/eaaf054cedb511cf86df83136ed26268.pdf> (Date of access: 12.06.2021).
- Romanova, S. (2021). Towards the creation of a self-directed visual culture. *Razvitie territorii Arktiki i Dalnego Vostoka: potentsial, problemy, perspektivy. [Development of territories of the Arctic and the Far East: potential, problems and perspectives]*. Kazan: Buk.
- Rutland, P. (2010). The presence of absence: Ethnicity policy in Russia. *Institutions, ideas and leadership in Russian politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. pp. 116-136.
- Stepanova, S. V. & Makarov G.G. (2003). Soyuz inorodtsev-yakutov: bor'ba za samoupravleniye. [The Union of the Yakuts: struggle for self-governance]. Yakutsk.
- Syrovatsky, A. D. (Ed.) (1958). *Vpered, zare na vstrechu: (Vospominaniya) [Forward, towards the dawn: (Memoirs)]*. Yakutsk: Kn. izd-vo.
- United Nations. (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. New York. Source: <https://undocs.org/A/RES/61/295> (Date of access: 10.06.2021).
- Vakhtin, N. (1992). Native peoples of the Russian far north. *Minority Rights Group report*, 5/92, p. 42.
- Vinokurov, V. V. (2018). Philosophical Views in Works of Platon Oyunsky. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 7(3), pp. 318-327.

World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. (2020). Current issues of the Sakha (Yakuts). Source: <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/sakha/> (Date of access: 29.10.2021).

Xianzhong, L. (2014). An analysis of the pros and cons of the localization policy of the Soviet Union in the 1920's. Oikumena. *Regional studies*. 1 (28), pp. 41-49. Source: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/plyusy-i-minusy-politiki-korenizatsii-sssr-v-1920-e-gody> (Date of access: 10.06.2021).