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**A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ETHNOGENESIS:
THE CASE OF THE SAKHA REPUBLIC (YAKUTIA)**

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**A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ETHNOGENESIS:
THE CASE OF THE SAKHA REPUBLIC (YAKUTIA)**

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the wonderful people of Sakha, whose ingenuity, adaptive skills, good humor, and tenacity made them stronger in face of many diverse challenges and whose ethnogenesis exemplifies a unique story of survival and thriving

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Ethnogenesis is the event and process by which new cultural and ethnic groups originate and evolve through time. Previous research on ethnogenesis, whether by geographers or anthropologists, has been mainly focused on discovering universal principles of this process.

My dissertation is devoted to the proposition that much can be learned about ethnogenesis by approaching it in a particularistic way, employing such traditional cultural geographic principles and concepts as *homeland*, *diffusion*, *incremental change*, *cultural landscape*, *preadaptation*, and, very importantly, *field research*. These I applied to one particular group, the Turkic-speaking Sakha (Yakut) people of northeast Siberia, who live far from other Turkic peoples. The

beginning of this people has been shrouded in myth and mystery, and though some scholarly research on the origin of the Sakha has been conducted by Russian and Soviet scholars, it has been fragmented and inconclusive at best.

By using a particularistic approach; by using the tools, techniques, and concepts of cultural geography; and by focusing on a single ethnic group, I was able to resolve the question of how the Sakha (Yakut) nation came to be and survived through time. The discovery of the ancient hearth of the Sakha (Yakuts); their pre-historic migration route to a new homeland; adjustment to a new environment of the boreal taiga, while preserving their ancient Neolithic way of life of cattle and horse herders; their adaptation to Russian and Soviet colonization without losing a distinct ethnic identity; and ethnic revival in the post-Soviet times – all these major stages of the Sakha (Yakut) ethnogenesis -- are presented in my dissertation through the idiographic methodology of cultural geography. These are the major achievements of my work.

My overriding conclusion is that accident, chance, and individual decisions – in a word, unpredictability – plays a dominant role in ethnogenesis. Universal principles, while helpful, do not possess complete explanatory power. Each ethnic group is formed under the influence of a unique combination of factors and must be studied separately.

Political Status.....	41
Literature on Yakuts.....	44
Accounts of Yakuts and Their Land by Educated Travelers.....	44
Ethnographers.....	47
Archeologists and Anthropologists	50
Historians and Geographers	53
CHAPTER 3: ANCIENT BEGINNING AND PRE-HISTORIC MIGRATION	57
Proto-Altaiic Groups	57
Old Homeland near Lake Baikal.....	61
The Great Migration.....	65
Origin Myths/ Folklore Evidence.....	68
The Lena River Route and Central Valley	72
CHAPTER 4: BOREAL GRASSLANDS AND ADJUSTMENT TO A NEW	
HABITAT	80
Ice-Dam Riparian Prairies.....	82
Alases: Thermokarst Lakes and Meadows.....	86
Climate of Central Yakutia	90
Type of Relief and Characteristics of Permafrost.....	91
Major Stages of Alas Formation	94
Importance of Alas Vegetation for Livelihood of the Yakuts.....	97

Preadaptation and Adjustment to a New Habitat	100
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CHAPTER 5: ETHNIC BOUNDARIES AND TERRITORIES: A NEW PEOPLE

OF AN ECOTONE	110
Indigenous Peoples of Yakutia: Evenki, Evens, Yukagirs, and Chukchi	110
Ethnic Mixing.....	122
Cultural Exchanges	126
Yakut Shamanism as Influenced by Evenki Shamanism	129
Incremental Cultural Change	141

CHAPTER 6: BUILDING A HOMELAND: YAKUT RESPONSE TO THE

RUSSIAN CONQUEST (1632-1921)	143
Early Russian Colonization of Yakutia	144
Cossacks Establish a Tax Collecting System in Yakutia	146
Social and Economic Organization of the Yakuts at the Time of Russian Arrival	151
First Russian Farming Villages	155
Russian Farming Settlements	157
Effects of Russification under Czarist Government: Cultural Exchanges and Ethnic Mixing.....	162
Russian Agricultural Technology and Construction Style	164
Impact of Russian Christianity	174

Two Major Factors of Yakut Ethnogenesis: Demographic Growth and Expansion of Habitat	177
Demographic Change	177
Expansion of Yakut Habitat: New Boundaries of a Homeland	178
The Second Stage of Russian Colonization in Yakutia: Major Economic and Societal Changes during the 18-19 th centuries	183
Economic Changes	183
Mining in Yakutia	183
Raising Cattle and Horses	185
Changes in the System of Land Property Relationships	188
Societal Changes	188

CHAPTER 7: THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON YAKUT ETHNIC

IDENTITY: SOVIET RULE (1922-1991)	192
Establishment of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic	192
Sovietization and Modernization	194
Growth of Industrial Sector and Urban Development	201
Mining Industries	202
Production of Electrical Energy	206
Transportation	207
Urbanization: Ethnic Implications	209
Russianization and Russification	214
Political Development	219
Yakut Ethnic Identity as Shaped by Sovietization	221

CHAPTER 8: SOVEREIGNTY AD ETHNONATIONALISM: THE EVOLUTION OF A SAKHA POST-SOVIET IDENTITY	224
Devolution and Political Indigenization.....	224
De-Russianization and De-Russification	227
De-Russification.....	230
Traditional Cultural Landscape as a Means for Enforcing Ethnic Identity	239
Economic Changes	245
Neotraditionalism.....	252
Environmental and Health Issues.....	254
Ethnoregionalism and Politics of Federation	257
Ongoing Ethnogenesis in the Post-Soviet Era.....	260
 CHAPTER 9: A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ETHNOGENESIS	 262
Formation of Ethnic Identity	264
Using the Tools and Concepts Geographers Possess	267
A Geographical Particularistic Theory of Ethnogenesis.....	269
 GLOSSARY	 273
BIBLIOGRAPHY	275
VITA	306

LIST OF TABLES

Table 7.1: Ethnic composition of the Yakut ASSR residing in major industrial centers in 198	211
Table 7.2: Ethnic composition of population residing in rural regions of central Yakut ASSR in 1989	218

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Map, Russia's ethnic republics	2
Figure 2.1: Map, Distribution of the Turkic Peoples in the former USSR	31
Figure 2.2: Sketch, a traditional Turkic hay sledge.....	32
Figure 2.3: Map, the contiguous area of Sakha homeland	42
Figure 2.4: The new coat of arms of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia).....	43
Figure 2.5: The Kurikani petroglyphs	52
Figure 3.1: Map, the Rich Valley in Ust'-Ordynsky Buryat Autonomous Okrug.....	59
Figure 3.2: Photograph, the 19 th century <i>balagan</i> structure.....	62
Figure 3.3: Drawing of a <i>balagan</i> structure	64
Figure 3.4: Photograph of the young Lena River.....	73
Figure 3.5: Photograph of the Lena Pillars	76
Figure 3.6: Drawing of a reconstructed early Yakut settlement in Central Yakutia, in the Erkyani Valley	78
Figure 3.7: The probable proto-Yakut runic writing.....	79
Figure 4.1: Map, Terrain regions of Yakutia	81
Figure 4.2: Map, the Three Valleys of central Yakutia.....	83
Figure 4.3: Photograph of <i>alas</i>	88
Figure 4.4: Photograph of a chain of <i>alases</i>	89
Figure 4.5: Graph, Major Stages of <i>Alas</i> Formation.....	95
Figure 4.6: Photograph of a grassy <i>alas</i>	99
Figure 4.7: Photograph of the Rich Valley	102

Figure 4.8: Climograph, Comparison of temperatures and precipitation at the Rich Valley and the Three Valleys.....	104
Figure 4.9: Modern <i>balagan</i> structure.....	106
Figure 4.10: Photograph, a traditional hay sledge.....	108
Figure 5.1: Map, Distribution of ethnic groups in the 17 th century Yakutia.....	112
Figure 5.2: Graph, Three Stages of Yakut initial ethnogenesis	120
Figure 5.3: Drawing, a Yakut rich woman of the 19 th century.....	124
Figure 5.4: Drawing, an Evenki shaman.....	140
Figure 6.1: Photograph, the 17 th century tower of Yakutsk ostrog.....	149
Figure 6.2: Photograph, the 17 th century Russian village in central Yakutia	159
Figure 6.3: Drawing, the 17 th century Russian settlement on the Lena River bank	160
Figure 6.4: Map, Russian settlements in Yakutia by the 1900s	161
Figure 6.5: Photograph, a Russian style log house	166
Figure 6.6: Photograph, a Russian Orthodox style grave house	167
Figure 6.7: Photograph, the 19 th century Yakut burial site	168
Figure 6.8: Photograph, a Russian style scythe.....	169
Figure 6.9: Photograph, a large <i>alas</i> meadow.....	181
Figure 6.10: Map, the Yakut traditional homeland.....	184
Figure 6.11: Graph, Change in Cattle and Horse Numbers During the 19 th century in Yakutia.....	187
Figure 7.1: Map, Regions of central Yakutia with predominant Sakha	

Chapter 1: Introduction

Goal of the Dissertation

The literature in cultural-historical geography and related social science disciplines is comprised of studies of distinctive ethno-cultural groups, cataloging their changing ways-of-life, and often proposing explanations of their origin. This process of cultural birth and evolution is often referred to as *ethnogenesis*, term popularized by the Russian cultural geographer, Leo Gumilev (1990).

Ethnogenesis – the process of rising, branching, diverging and ongoing change of peoples’ identities – can be studied from various academic perspectives, though ethnic anthropology has so far been the most active discipline to deal with the subject. Despite Gumilev’s work, cultural-historical geographers have been hesitant to enter the discourse. This is unfortunate because the spatio-ecological, field-based perspective of cultural geography, and its integrative, holistic approach to research problems, offer great potential for a thorough, scientific understanding of ethnogenesis.

With this in mind, this dissertation has several goals: (1) to identify the range of causal factors, both environmental and cultural, that contribute to ethnogenesis; (2) to explore these factors using a case study of ethnogenesis, involving the Sakha (Yakut) people of northeastern Siberia (Figure 1.1); and

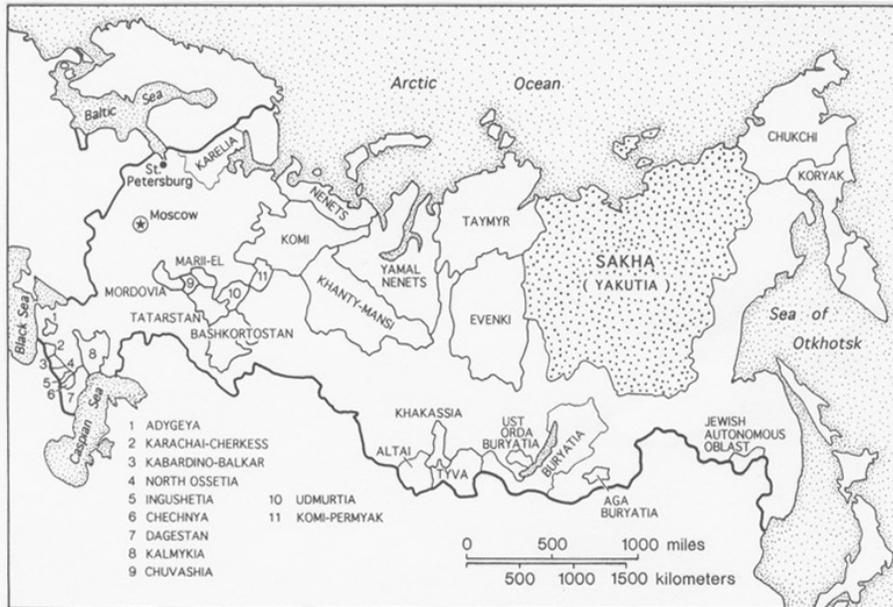


Figure 1.1: Russia today, with its ethnic republics. Sakha is the largest such republic areally. (Sources: Shaw 1995; Espenshade et al 1995, 166-167, 170-171; Harris 1993, 550; Bater 1996).

(3) to formulate a geographical theory of ethnogenesis that can be applicable to the study of diverse ethnic groups.

My own interest in ethnogenesis started almost two decades ago as I began to ponder the origins of the Sakha people, of whom I am one. As I grew up in Yakutia, I gradually learned that no one knew the ancient history of the Sakha (Yakuts), as their origin was lost in the darkness of the unwritten past. At most, archeologists, such as Aleksei P. Okladnikov (1970, 293) hinted that the western shore of Lake Baikal was possibly the ancestral homeland of these Turkic-speaking people. However, no serious scholarly attempts have been made by either Russian or Yakut scholars to uncover either the true story, or the circumstances of the Yakut ethnogenesis. No geographer has approached the subject. It was only when I found cultural geography, and embraced its precepts, that I began to feel qualified to investigate the topic on my own. My research combined three formal trips to the Republic of Sakha (in 1996, 1997, and 2000); work in the archives of Moscow State Library as well as in several libraries in Yakutia and also the Russian collection of the Harvard University Library; field research to the Baikal area during the summer of 2000; and extensive reading of the ethnographic, anthropological, and geographical literature on ethnogenesis, ethnicity, ethnic identity, and Yakut folklore. This dissertation is thus the result of comprehensive research that made use of the integrative nature of cultural

geography that allows us to view complex phenomena from different, often complementary angles (Wagner and Mikesell 1962; Foote, et al. 1994).

Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups

Studies of ethnogenesis cannot be approached systematically without considering the concept of *ethnicity* and, hence, the meaning of *ethnic groups*. These two terms are often used casually without clear definitions, thereby generating more heat than light (Isajiw 1974). To avoid this problem, I discuss the evolution of these two concepts in the social sciences. I conclude this discussion with a concise definition of ethnicity that will be then used throughout this dissertation.

‘Ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ are the terms that produce much ambiguity and diverse interpretation. These concepts are not interchangeable, however, and have a somewhat different genealogy. The term ‘ethnic’ has a long history and goes back to the Greek word *ethnos* to denote nation, or people. From this general definition sprang the ethnological understanding of the term “ethnic”:
“designating any of the basic divisions or groups of mankind, as distinguished by customs, characteristics, language, etc.” (Webster 1968, 499). This very broad definition became quite specific in ethnography, the field of study concerned with the description of particular cultures, especially those of traditional societies. The ethnologic approach to ethnicity seems to be rather close to the geographic

approach as it deals with comparative studies of all cultures, their distribution, characteristics, and folkways. These two traditional branches of anthropology, ethnology and ethnography, have widely and variously used the term 'ethnic'. Practitioners from that discipline have gathered and analyzed diverse data about numerous groups of people. But, it seems that every study used a different definition of 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' depending on the subject matter under investigation. Generally speaking, ethnic studies fall under four broad categories: ethnicity can be understood as (1) identity, as (2) a strategy in resource competition, as (3) a cultural character, or as (4) a class. The term 'ethnicity' entered the discourse of social sciences rather recently and derives from the earlier use of the concept 'ethnic' (Bennet 1975; Epstein 1978, 92-93).

Odd as it may seem, scholars who study ethnic relations do not always define the term ethnicity. In 1974 Wsevolod Isajiw analyzed 65 sociological and anthropological works dealing with ethnicity and found out that only 13 of the authors gave some definition of the term. Moreover, most of the definitions were of a descriptive nature, which made them suitable only for the study of a particular group. Raoul Naroll (1964, 291), for example, described an ethnic group as "domestic speakers of a common distinct language and who belong either to the same state, or the same contact group". This definition works nicely for studies of tribal societies, but does not apply to modern urban dwellers. An alternative is to define ethnicity very broadly, as any group of people who identify

themselves or are identified by others as Italians, Russians, Indians, etc. This is what most authors do when they avoid including any precise definition of ethnicity (Isajiw 1974, 111). Interestingly, twenty years later Isajiw (1994,10) returned to the problem of defining ethnicity and came to the conclusion that the number of approaches and interpretations of this complex notion did not diminish (1994, 10). However, he concluded this time that all the approaches to ethnicity could be reduced to three major categories: (1) ethnicity treated as an epiphenomenon; (2) ethnicity as a situational phenomenon; and (3) ethnicity as a subjective, purely perceptual phenomenon.

What Isajiw calls an epiphenomenal approach to ethnicity is also known as a Marxist approach. In this approach, ethnicity is understood as a product of uneven economic development, and ethnic groups as products of unequal distribution of wealth. The term epiphenomenal comes from the Marxist assumption that all culture is epiphenomenal to a class structure. In other words, if all the countries and societies became equal in their well-being, ethnicity would disappear (Isajiw 1994, 10; Edelstein 1974, 49-51; Holloman and Arutyunov 1978, 11-13, 421-423; Pokshishevskiy 1987, 591-593; Avksentiev and Avksentiev 1993, 13-15).

The Marxist approach defines tribes, nationalities, and nations as historical types of ethnicity based on the specific historical socioeconomic formations based on modes of production. Thus from the economic-determinist Marxist

perspective, ethnogenetic studies apply to all ethnic groups, tribes, peoples, or nations. Tribes are viewed as a product of production system in which only elementary exchange relations exist. The more economically complex, but precapitalist societies do not produce nations, but smaller ethnic groups. A nation is viewed as a result of capitalist pattern of production. In the Soviet literature one often encounters a discussion of new type of ethnic group – ‘socialist nation’ as the cultural construct of a socialist mode of economy and social relations. In the Marxist theory a concept of an ethnic community always includes a territorial basis or habitat (Arutyunov 1978).

The situational approach to ethnicity is based on rational choice theory that implies that ethnicity may be relevant in some situations, but not others. Daniel Bell (1975) emphasizes the political advantage of ethnic membership. According to Chee-beng Tan and his studies in Sarawak, Malaysia (1997), small communities of a different ethnic origin, organize themselves into a larger association in order to have more political clout. The new ethnic group, the Dayak, is an artificial creation of the past few years, when a certain political situation prompted this development. Michael Banton (1983) views a choice of ethnicity as an individualistic act. In his interpretation, people ascribe themselves to a certain ethnic group in order to become a part of a larger social structure. On an individual level, one witnesses such cases everyday. On the theoretical level, however, one has to ask, if an individual’s pursuit of pragmatical interest is

enough for acquiring a certain ethnic membership. Is it sufficient to declare oneself a member of a certain community, or there should be also an acceptance of this individual by the rest of the group.

The subjective approach sees ethnicity as a “process by which individuals either identify themselves as being different from others or belonging to a different group or are identified as different by others, or both identify themselves and are identified as different by others” (Isajiw 1974, 115-116). The most “subjective” definition was proposed by Max Weber (1978, 385) who stated that the basis for ethnic identification is a subjective belief in common ancestry. With the psychological implications of subjective definitions of ethnicity two questions arise. Do ethnic groups actually exist? Or, are they just another social-cultural construct? Mahmood and Armstrong (1992, 12-14) argued that both anthropologists and members of ethnic groups are unable to identify necessary and sufficient criteria for categorizing ethnicity. From the cognitive perspective categories are constructed in a number of diverse ways. Vladimir Babakov (1993, 22-23) agreed with this point of view, stating that ethnic groups are mental constructs that are used to systematize the concrete reality. In reality we have a certain cultural diversity, a cultural and social continuum that seeks certain structural organization. So, it is up to different authors how to present the combination of those cultural elements. In other words, ethnic boundaries, as defined by Fredrick Barth (1969), do not really exist. Isajiw argued that ethnicity

should not be assumed as a category, but should be understood through actual and concrete characteristics of given ethnic groups. After having analyzed such attributes of ethnic groups as common national or geographic origin, common culture and customs, common religion, common race, common language, and common values, he came up with a definition of his own. For him, ethnicity refers to “an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group” (Isajiw 1974, 122).

A subtype of subjectivist approach to the study of ethnicity is represented by so-called *constructionism*. Its basic assumption is that ethnicity is a process of negotiating and constructing one’s ethnic identity in everyday living, in the process of raising children, indoctrinating them with certain values and habits (Bentley 1987, 24-55). The constructionist idea that ethnicity is a process has appealed to many scholars who study this phenomenon (Isajiw 1994, 14).

Dru Gladney (1990, 5) in his investigation of ethnogenesis of the Uigur, a Turkic Muslim minority of Western China, concluded that ethnicity cannot be reduced just to one type of action, be it interest-based, or situational, or of primordial nature. He suggested that ethnicity is rather a result of the interplay of two different facets: the notion of common ancestry and cultural belonging, and modern socio-political circumstances. In other words, ethnic identity is formed by both subjective agents of psychological-cultural character and present-day

objective conditions of an external nature. Should we conclude then, that modern ethnicity, just like the process creating it - ethnogenesis - is itself a twofold process, influenced by diverse forces both of a subjective and objective nature? Is it necessarily at once traditional and modern? As always, the theory may fail. That is true of one ethnic group may not be true of another.

Some scholars have suggested that concrete social and historical conditions in different societies lead to differences in the interpretation of ethnicity. This idea is usually framed in a North American versus European approach.

The North American approach traditionally has been quite distinct. In the United States and Canada the bulk of the ethnic studies have dealt with immigrant groups in the 19th and 20th centuries (Isajiw 1974, 113-115; Zelinsky 2001). Ethnic groups are usually understood as subgroups or ethnic minorities in a larger society, based on three major characteristics: race, religion, and national origin (or combination of these three). The most recent volume on ethnogenesis in the Americas concentrates on ethnogenetic processes after 1492, excluding ethnic processes of the native population of the Americas in pre-European times (Hill 1996). Another characteristic of Canadian and American ethnic studies is that they focus on so-called ethnic generations, particularly, third generation immigrants. Herbert Gans (1979) proposed that ethnicity in an American society has changed from what it had been in the 19th century United States. For highly

urbanized Americans or Canadians it exists more on a symbolic level rather than a practical necessity level, when identifying with a certain ethnic group could be a matter of economic or psychological value, if not survival (Edwards and Doucette 1987, 55-57). The most recent political and ethnic processes in Canada illustrate that this point of view is not quite valid. The new territory of Nunavut was delimited on a purely ethnic basis, as was the movement for Quebec separatism.

North American ethnic studies have, however, undergone an important transformation. In the past two decades the so-called 'new ethnicity' movement has been gaining momentum (Hicherson 1996; Harritt 1997). According to this approach, 'ethnic groups' are seen as the most essential forms of social life that are capable of reproducing, renewing and transforming themselves (Herb 1999, 5). In other words, division into ethnic groups is the most natural and common organization of the human society. Thus new understanding of ethnicity allowed Eugene Roosens in 1989 to state that ethnic diversity does not decrease at present, as predicted by certain social theories, including Marxism, but, on the contrary, nowadays ethnic groups are increasingly asserting themselves. Admittedly, the globalization of markets and pervasive progression of popular culture is eroding many old cultural and ethnic boundaries and identities. But, in their place, he argues, new cultural and ethnic identities are developing. This interpretation of ethnogenetic processes as ever-going is the continuation of Barth's (1969) classical definition of ethnicity as "cultural differences" and the realization that

ethnic boundaries have to be constantly reinterpreted and delimited (Reminick 1983, xii, 4-4; Roosens 1989, 9-10; Barth 1969; Albers 1996).

The European tradition in social sciences conceives ethnic groups in terms of political and territorial boundaries. It also prefers the terms “nations”, “nationalities” and “national minorities” rather than ethnic groups (Karlov 1995, 162-170; Henry 1976; McKee 1985).

The French anthropologists Philippe Poutignat and Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart (1995) testified that the term ‘ethnicity’ was introduced into the French academic discourse only in 1981 when the need was felt to include ethnic aspects into sociological studies of immigration, racism, nationalism, or urban violence. These new realities of modern European cities did not quite accommodate the older, politically or territorially based definitions of ethnicity. So the French went back to the existing literature and particularly to Barth’s work on ethnic boundaries (not spatial boundaries but the limits of social confines). In 1969 Barth made an attempt to define ethnicity not on a descriptive or normative basis but using the notion of ethnic boundaries that are a matter of membership and exclusion. For him, “the critical focus of investigation ... becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses”. For him then, there are no ‘objective’ differences that determine the ethnic groups but rather it is those differences that the members of the ethnic group conceive themselves as significant. An important contribution by Barth that helped the

French scholars is the notion that ethnic groups are not necessarily based on the occupation of exclusive territories. It is also significant that ethnic boundaries are not permanent but have to be validated and articulated constantly (Barth 1969, 14-15; Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart 1995, 21; Epstein 1978, 96-97). Barth's definition of ethnicity is particularly appropriate for studying ethnic processes that involve maintenance of ethnic identity and assimilation. This concept is especially useful for the proposed research as I address the issue of Yakuts interaction, first, with alien peoples in the new homeland, and secondly their interaction with the Russians who subjugated the Yakuts in the 1630s. My hypothesis is that the Yakut survival is partially attributable their settling in the 'ecological niche' not strongly contested by other ethnic groups, including the indigenous peoples, such as Evenks, Evens, and Yukagirs (Barth 1969, 14-15).

What distinguishes geography from other social sciences in terms of ethnic studies is its combination of ecological and spatial approaches. Geography borrowed from the ecological perspective from anthropology. In anthropology the ecological approach is basically applied to the adaptation of an ethnic group to its environment or interaction of several ethnic groups with each other. Barth describes at least four basic situations when ethnic groups neighbor each other. (1) They may occupy separate niches in their environment and do not compete for resources. (2) They may occupy separate niches and compete for resources. (3) They may be in reciprocal relations of mutually beneficial exchange and

interdependence. (4) Two or more groups occupy the same niche and actively compete for the resources. This final situation is most common and the most unstable of the four. In it, at least two scenarios are possible: either one group displaces the others, or one group assimilates others, often forming a new entity (Barth 1969, 19-20).

Gumilev comes close to Barth's interpretation of ethnicity as he links ethnicity to the occupation of certain ecological areas as well, as he stresses the importance of ecotones for ethnic processes. But his approach to ethnicity contains two seemingly contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, he links the process of formation of ethnic identity to certain environmental factors, and in a broader context, to the influences of cosmic energy. On the other hand, he defines ethnicity mainly as 'self-identification' that develops on the basis of the polarity of "we" and "the others" (1993, 108-112). Such definition of ethnicity puts him in the camp of subjectivists. At the same time, his particular emphasis on relationships between ethnic groups and their environments often made him a target for the criticism, as some scholars labeled him as an environmental determinist. I suggest that the complex nature of ethnicity itself forces researchers to come up with sometimes contradicting definitions of it. The strong appeal of Gumilev's work on ethnicity for geographers can be explained by the fact that he viewed ethnicity not only from a spatial perspective, but also from a point of view

of various mechanisms of adaptation, especially occurring in ecotones (1990; 1993, 542).

Other geographers also view ethnicity spatially, a perspective unique to our discipline. One of the basic notions in ethnic geography is that of *homeland*. The concept of homeland implies that most of the ethnic groups have a strong territorial attachment. The underlying idea behind this is that attachment to a region can provide a basis for ethnic identity. Alvar Carlson's (1990) book on the Spanish-American Homeland provides an excellent example of this type of work. *Homeland* can be considered an analogue of traditional geographical concept of *region*. These homelands are created through the processes of geographical diffusion, another basic geographical concept. This aspect of formation of ethnicity was well illustrated in Robert Ostergren's 1988 book about Swedish Trans-Atlantic migration.

In my case study of the Yakut people I combine several approaches to ethnicity and ethnic group. I take Barth's and Gumilev's ideas of ethnic boundaries, ethnic interactions in ecological niches and the role of ecotones as scenes of the ethnogenesis. I link these to more traditional geographical concepts of homeland (region or culture area), diffusion and adaptation. From a constructionist approach, I borrow the notion that ethnicity is a process whereby ethnic identity of groups is constantly shifting, changing and reformulating itself under both subjective and objective influences. This aspect of ethnicity is

emphasized especially in chapter eight in which Yakut ethnonationalism is discussed.

Theories of Ethnogenesis

The Russian school of anthropology pioneered research in ethnogenetic processes. In his book (written in 1938 and published in English in 1964) on the peoples of Central Asia, L. V. Oshanin defined ethnogenesis as a branch of anthropology, which ‘comprises the historical process of the formation of present-day tribes, nationalities and nations from ... human races’. He, as most anthropologists of his day, dealt with division of the human kind into races. As a result, his interpretation of ethnogenesis involves, in part, an analysis of skeleton remains of ancient people and physical traits of living people. Oshanin thought that by comparing and matching the current racial composition of the population with paleoanthropological data of the region, one can establish the history of the settlement of a given region and formation of ethnic groups in that setting (Oshanin 1964, ix-x).

The concept of *ethnogenesis* was introduced into American anthropology in 1971 by William Sturtevant in his article “Creek into Seminole”. Sturtevant relied heavily on ethnographic methods of analysis. Since that time cultural anthropologists have used the term *ethnogenesis* to “describe the historical emergence of a people who define themselves in relation to sociocultural and

linguistic heritage” (Hill 1996, 1). Their main concern is with the analysis of culture. In most recent interpretations, some scholars understand the concept of ethnogenesis as adaptation of oppressed minority groups to a succession of conflicts and challenges. It is important to remember that ethnic groups in the American tradition are viewed as *minority* groups, while in Russian the term can be applied to large ethnic units such as nations. To accommodate this focus on minority ethnic groups, some American cultural anthropologists offer an interpretation of ethnogenesis as “people’s struggle to exist within a general history” (Hill 1996, 2; Anderson 1999). But what about ‘big’ nations, groups larger than ethnic minorities? The interpretation of ethnic groups only as minorities that developed ethnic identification through the resistance to diverse oppressing forces does not explain the general nature of ethnogenetic processes (Sturtevant 1971; Arutyunov and Bromley 1978, 12, 16-19).

In addition to his contribution to the studies of ethnicity, Gumilev contributed to the general theory of ethnogenesis. The essence of his approach to ethnogenetic processes can be summed up as follows: new ethnic or cultural groups emerge as a result of a complicated combination of causal factors, especially social, ecological, and biological, and these processes, as a rule, start in ecotones. In a process of ethnogenesis, ethnic groups go through the stages of birth, growth, maturity, decline, and disappearance. However, this process can be interrupted at any of these stages due to the play of diverse forces. Therefore, the

processes of formation of new ethnic groups are basically accidental. Gumilev is interested with the totality of ethnic processes, which he calls 'ethnosphere'. It is relevant for the proposed research that he focuses on the relationships of ethnic groups to their environments and mechanisms of adaptation (1990; 1993, 542).

The dissertation contributes to theories of ethnogenesis by focusing on the significance of such essentially geographical factors as (1) migration and preadaptation (Ostergren 1988); (2) the role of incremental landscape changes (Doolittle 1984); (3) significance of the cultural landscape and homeland (Sörlin 1999). The dissertation combines these with the concepts of modernization, Sovietization, sovereignty, and neotraditionalism from allied disciplines.

The aspiration of my research is to find some basic, general regularities, as well as unique particularities, in the process of ethnogenesis by focusing on one specific ethnic group the Yakuts of northeastern Siberia (Figure 1.1).

Migration and Pre-adaptation

One of the basic geographical concepts is that of diffusion. Studies on human diffusion are numerous and provide diverse tools for geographic investigation (Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh 2002). In this dissertation a certain type of diffusion, *migration*, is considered with a special attention, because it can

be a powerful agent of ethnogenesis. The very process of moving from one place to another prompts profound changes. Sometimes a migration eventually leads to assimilation of the group in a new place by a larger group, with a result that the group in question ceases to exist. That happened to many immigrant groups from Western Europe who settled in the United States of America. Another very significant aspect of migration is that it usually involves only a fraction of a population that cannot possibly reflect all the diversity of culture. As a result, changes after migration are inevitable, as they develop in the direction of simplification of the original culture (Harris 1977). At the same time, migrating people learn new skills and adjustments in a new place. If the changes are profound, migration can help create a new *ethnos*. In this particular case, a forced migration of proto-Yakuts over a great distance away from their homeland into the unknown subarctic lands, presents an important factor for the initial stage of their ethnogenesis.

The notion that most, or perhaps all, cultural traits are produced in the process of human adapting to the habitat, came into geography rather early as environmental determinism (Semple 1911). A more refined, less deterministic approach entered geography from anthropology through the works of the Berkeley School (Wagner and Mikesell 1962). Julian Steward (1955) was the anthropologist most influential in discussion of adaptation. Other elements of the theory came still later by the way of works of anthropologist Patrick Kirch (1980)

and geographer Karl Butzer (1982, 282-283). In short, adaptation, in one form or another has been part of geography for over a century. One of the more informative outlines on adaptation's role in geographic studies can be found in a short article by William Denevan (1983, 401).

Preadaptation is closely related to both concepts of adaptation and migration, as analysis of preadaptation involves studying the impact of migration on a people (Newton 1974, 146-147). By migrating, groups seek out habitats similar to ones they previously occupied (Jordan 1989, 495). Sometimes migrating groups accidentally end up in familiar habitats, as a result of forced migrations. Africans in the Caribbean and Finns in the Delaware Valley provide such examples (Jordan and Kaups 1989, 31-35). But in most cases the choice of a familiar habitat is planned and deliberate. The Ukrainians in Canada's "aspen belt" offer a good example (Lehr 1975).

Preadaptation, conceptually, states that the more familiar and similar the new habitat, the higher the level of preadaptation and settlement success. A comparison of old and new habitats and a consideration of preadaptation is one essential approach to studying the fate of a migrating group of people. In the case of Yakut ancient migration, such an approach is indispensable, as they were forced to leave a familiar habitat in a warmer climate, move to the northern latitudes and challenged to survive in an unknown environment.

Incremental Changes

Ethnogenesis, like any cultural process, consists of different types of changes, which can be dichotomized. One type, of a relatively rare occurrence, is a sudden, abrupt, radical, and revolutionary change. The other type of change happens far more frequently, on a regular basis, and is characterized as slow, evolutionary, not so evident, and of a smaller scale. These we can best refer to as *incremental* changes. In geography the study of incremental change was introduced by William E. Doolittle in his works on the agricultural landscapes of Sonora, Mexico (Doolittle 1984).

Although Doolittle used the concept of incremental changes in his study of agricultural systems, it is highly relevant to the study of ethnogenesis. Doolittle demonstrated, on the basis of extensive, long-term, field research that complex irrigation systems can evolve through centuries of small, often unpremeditated changes wrought by individual persons (1984). When applied to ethnogenesis, the concept of incremental change lends both time depth and the evolutionary aspect of the ethnogenetic process, somewhat in the manner of linguistic or genetic drift. This perspective provides a counterpart to Gumilev's burst of activity/ stability revolutionary model (1968, 590). Doolittle's work ought to have been important to the geographic study of culture - ethnic geographic origins.

Homeland

The concept of *homeland* is one of the most fundamentally geographically important to the study of ethnicity. Most generally, homeland is understood as an ethnic territory of significant size with well-defined boundaries where a large ethnic group is concentrated (Nostrand and Estaville 2001; Carlson 1990).

Homeland inhabitants display a strong sense of belonging to the place and have an intense place based ethnic identity. Gumilev pointed out that homelands tend to strengthen ethnic identity. “When a people have occupied a homeland for a long time, they develop modes of life, behavior, tastes, and relationships that they regard as *correct* ones” (1990, 567). In fact, the absence or presence of a homeland can influence the ultimate fate of a certain group. Loss of traditional lands through displacement, warfare, or ethnic cleansing historically more often than not had led to the disappearance of peoples, or a weakening of their ethnic identity. As has been demonstrated in Canada, the absence of clearly defined ethnic homeland territories has been known to cause ethnic identity crises among several aboriginal peoples (Peters 2001, 141-143). David Hooson (1994, 370) pointed out that few works dealing with national identity emphasize the importance of “the territorial factor, or the physical facts and perceptions of the ‘homeland’ which, celebrated in song and poetry, are often ‘primordial’ in the sentiments of the communities who inhabit them”.

In the case of the Yakuts the loss of a Central Asian homeland did not prevent them from establishing a new one, though, this very event may have helped to develop a distinct Yakut ethnic identity, different from those of other Turkic peoples.

Modernization

Modernization comes as an inevitable end product of the industrialization of a society. The industrialized nations in their expansion of trade markets and search for new resources encroach on other peoples worldwide who are still in the stages of lesser economic development, be they hunters and gatherers, nomadic cattle raisers or pastoralists functioning in a traditional feudal society. To these peoples modernization means access to new technology, scientific advancements, and broader connection to the rest of the world. But, at the same time, it also means an imposition of an entirely new system of social relations and values, life style and ideology. Modernization brought to the ethnic minorities of Russia by the czarist government first, and later, in a full swing, by the Soviets, had the most profound consequences (Slezkine 1994, Mote 1998). Authors who describe the effects of Soviet modernization on the ethnic groups of Siberia unanimously agree that, if there were some economic benefits of modernization, examples of the

destruction of cultural and ethical values were much more common, and in some cases irreversible (Golovnev and Osherenko 1999; Balzer 1999).

Despite numerous stories of smaller peoples being destroyed, demoralized, and/or acculturated, we witnessed throughout the history some remarkable stories of cultural survival among the ethnic groups that had been subjected to modernization. As Milton Freeman and others (2000) testify concerning the Arctic peoples, different cultures allowed various degree of adjustment to modernity. It happened in the case of the Cree Indians of James Bay of Canada, the Aleuts of the Pribilof Islands, and others. The Yakuts of northeast Siberia stand out as a group that has been able to embrace the technological advantages of modernization and mingle their traditional ways around it. For the Yakuts modernization is an important component of their ongoing ethnogenesis.

Ethnonationalism and the ‘Sovereignty Project’

Ethnonationalism is a uniquely modern phenomenon that reflects the heightened ethnic self-consciousness that we are witnessing today in many parts of the world, including Sakha (Fondahl 1996, 8-10; Cruikshank and Argounova 2000, 96-98; Balzer 1999). Certain cases of unusually strong nationalistic feelings did not subside with the overpowering development of a nation-state during the late 19th and 20th centuries, but on the contrary, became quite common

among diverse ethnic groups, especially minority groups that feel they had been persecuted or underrepresented politically, culturally, and economically. This has the effect of “igniting and fanning flames of nationalism” (Hooson 1994, 370). Ethnonationalism has become one of the central subjects for discussion among political scientists, geographers, and historians (Knight 1982; Anderson 1983; Hooson 1994, 134-140; 233-248). William Connor (1993), who reputedly invented the term ‘ethnonationalism’, predicted before the fall of communism that nationalism would outlive Marxist-Leninist states in Eastern Europe, which was vindicated by the collapse of the whole “socialist camp” of countries. Thousands of web sites that discuss different aspects of ethnonationalism all over the world have been established.

The ultimate goal of ethnonationalists is usually to obtain ‘sovereignty’ within an existing modern state. Movements based on perception of unique ethnic affiliation, different from that of a majority group, or any other coexisting minority groups in the same country, have become numerous. No continent presents an exception. Even in Western Europe, where the tradition of a nation-state had established itself earliest during the modern times, the devolutionary processes are as pronounced as they are in Canada, East Asia, or Africa (Hooson 1994). The former Soviet Union is a geopolitical scene where the devolutionary processes are at their strongest. In the early 1990s, the country experienced what the Soviet political analysts promptly labeled a ‘parade of sovereignties’ – when

first the Baltic and then Caucasian republics gained independence from the Soviet Union. At that point Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus' declared their separateness from the Central Asian Muslim republics on the basis of their "Slavic commonalities, including language, Eastern Orthodox religion, and common history".

This domino-like process also occurred within the borders of the Russian Federation, when the large ethnic minorities like Tatars, Bashkirs, and Yakuts demanded more economic and political rights. They declared their autonomous republics 'sovereign'. Scholars who have analyzed these devolutionary processes agree that the moving force behind 'sovereignty' projects was ethnonationalism (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 101-120; Graney 1999, 611-632; Herb and Kaplan 1999, 101-102, 114-117). Moreover, ethnic spatial patterns in electoral behavior in Russia are so pronounced today that political scholars have begun to talk about *ethnoregionalism*, that has the capacity to influence national elections (Gordon Smith 1996; McAuley 1997, 48-49; Marsh and Warhola 2001, 221-224).

Neotraditionalism

As a result of devolutionary processes and economic crises in the new Russia, many aspects of political and social life of people changed dramatically.

But the most profound changes occurred in the economic conditions of people. The right or necessity to revive traditional culture came to the minorities with a high price tag. The central government withdrew most of the financial subsidies to the marginal lands, especially the northern fringes that now were declared economically non-viable. Russian ethnographers Aleksandr Pika and Boris Prokhorov spent several years in the Russian North, observing the changes in infrastructure, transportation, education system, and health care. They came up with the notion of *neotraditionalism* (1994), a process when a people who have adjusted previously to modernization, but never mastered it on their own, had to revert in some measure to their traditional, pre-modern livelihoods. Instead of hunting wild reindeer using snowmobiles or wolves using helicopters, they would now have to use the traps and fishnets that they used during the pre-Soviet times. Neotraditionalism affects not only the economic aspects of a community. Its effects are profound in culture and ethnic identity, too.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is structured according to a classification of the major factors that contribute to the formation and development of diverse ethnic groups. Chapter two provides general description of Yakut (Sakha) people causal factors of ethnogenesis in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter three discusses the ancient beginning of the Yakuts near Lake Baikal, neighboring groups, and prehistoric migration to Central Valley in the midcurrents of the Lena River. The diverse origin myths and folkloric evidence are used in this chapter as a supplementary source of knowledge of ancient Yakuts.

Chapter four deals with the biophysical habitats of the Yakut people, both “old” and “new”, and discusses the issue of their adjustment to the new environment.

Chapter five focuses on interaction with new peoples, accompanied by exchange of cultural practices and environmental knowledge. The importance of *ethnic boundaries* and incremental change are discussed here.

In Chapter six I propose that one of the central and inherently geographical concept of geography – a *homeland* – can be identified as an important factor of ethnogenesis. The existence of Yakut homeland at the time of the Russian colonization of Siberia allowed the Sakha people to maintain their ethnic identity.

Chapter seven discusses the impact of modernization and Sovietization on Yakut ethnogenesis. Many works (e.g., Balzer 1999) have focused on the domination of Communist policies of Russification (cultural and linguistic assimilation by the Russians) and Russianization (systematic settlement of ethnic

Russians in other peoples' territories. Yakuts are a rare example that demonstrates a native people's resilience in the face of overwhelming odds.

The concept of national identity and its importance for successful ethnogenesis of a people is further discussed in more detail in chapter eight. The development of national identity on a level of statehood is a remarkable achievement of Sakha (Yakuts) that makes them stand out among many ethnic minorities in modern Russia. Yakuts today are the most significant group in Siberia, politically, demographically, and culturally. In this part of the dissertation I analyze the interplay of causes, conditions, and circumstances that allowed for Yakuts, a group with obscure and humble origin to become a leading Siberian nation, with their own government and sovereign homeland. I also point out the importance of preservation of the traditional cultural landscape for the rise of ethnonationalism.

In chapter nine I pull together my findings. This is my attempt to formulate a widely applicable geographical theory of ethnogenesis.

Chapter 2: The Yakuts: A General Description and Their Portrayal in the Literature

An Ancient and Anomalous Cattle and Horse Breeding People

It seems so improbable. The Yakuts, a Turkic-speaking people firmly seated in a homeland along the lower middle Lena River of northeastern Siberia, live in a subarctic habitat removed by 2,700 kilometers from their nearest Turkic linguistic kin (Figure 2.1). It was not just their language that survived the migration to the north, but most remarkably, they were able to continue the horse and cattle herding tradition that they had practiced on the Central Asian steppes (Potapov 1962). This made them the northernmost such people in the world (Jochelson 1934; Kirby 1971, 174-175). The Yakuts have retained many habits and rites similar to those of peoples in the Eurasian steppes. They drink *kumyss*, a fermented milk drink, shared by all Turkic peoples. They race horses during summer festivals, just like their kin in Tyva or Kirghistan (Levin and Potapov 1964, 134-135). They have also preserved some ancient elements of material culture, pointing to their more southern origin. One of such elements is a land sledge used for hauling hay that Ellsworth Huntington (1907) observed among semi-nomadic Kirghiz of Central Asia (follows p. 129). Even today one can see virtually identical hay sledges in use in remote Yakutian villages (Figure 2.2).

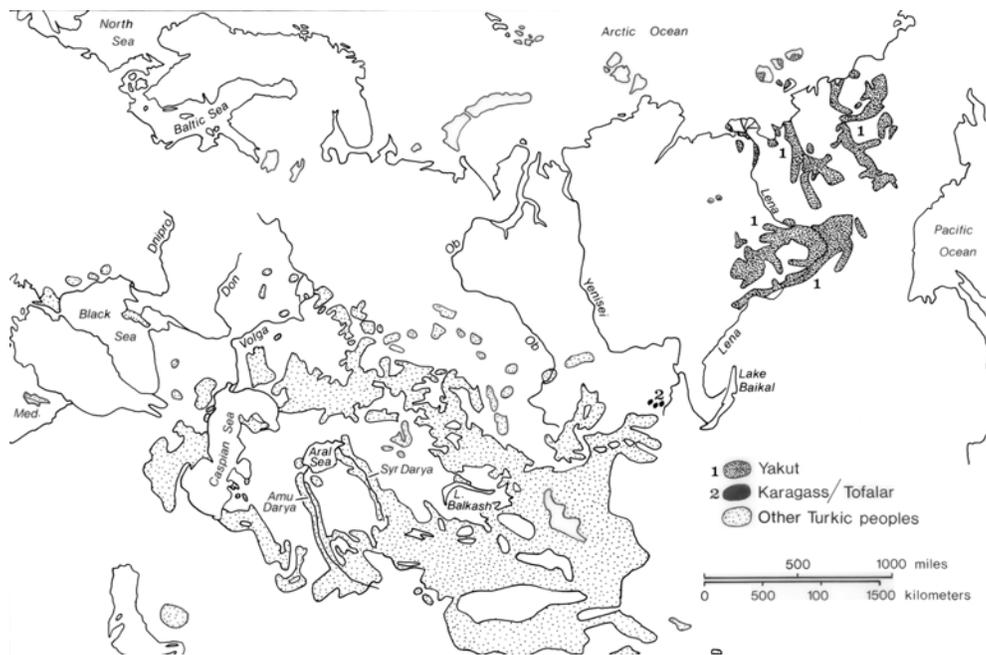


Figure 2.1: Distribution of the Turkic peoples in the former Soviet Union.

Source: Wurm 1954, follows p. 21.

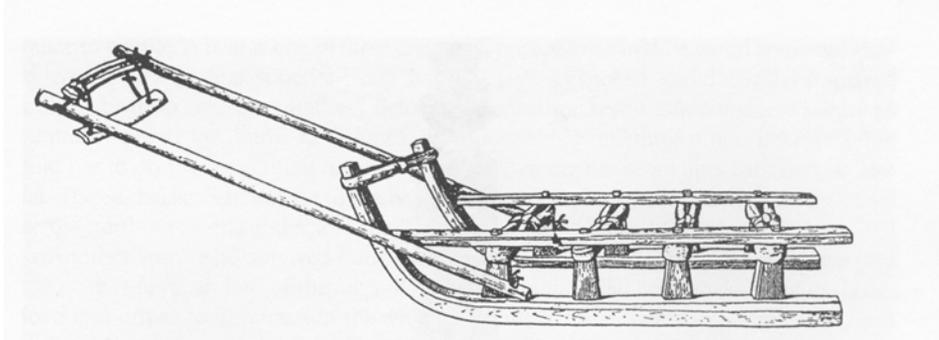


Figure 2.2: A traditional hay sledge used by the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. It can still be found in use in remote Sakha villages.

Source: Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 59.

At the same time, they are clearly a separate cultural group, the product of an ethnogenesis that occurred largely during historic times, mainly during the past six to seven centuries. In their remote northern homeland, they became a vigorous and unique people (Harris 1993, 544-545).

Language

Derived centuries ago from the steppes of Central Asia, the Sakha people retain a language so unaltered in some ways that, for example, their word for “lake” – *kyoël* – is identical to that in all other Turkic languages (Sleptsov 1972, 199). As geographer Halford Mackinder recognized long ago, “the Turkish language of Constantinople can to this day be understood by the Arctic tribe at the mouth of the Lena River” (1919, 120).

Most scholars believe that the basis for the modern Yakut language was derived from a dialect recorded in the Orkhon writings in the area west of Lake Baikal. This was later heavily influenced by diverse Mongol and Tungus-Manchurian dialects, which, combined with an isolation from other Turkic languages, resulted in the Yakut language that is also in some ways different from the other Turkic languages (Sleptsov 1972, 5). For example, other Turkic languages in the course of their development have shortened the ancient long vowels. The Turkish authorities carried out a spelling reform that got rid of all

such vowels, so only in remote rural regions of Turkey can one find dialects that have retained long vowels. In the Yakut language they abound and create a unique prosody, making it sound more like a Finnish language than a modern Turkic tongue. At the same time the vocabulary that makes up the core of the Yakut language and its grammatical structure are very similar to other Turkic dialects, allowing at least partial mutual understanding (Doulson 1971).

The scientific study of the Yakut language began seriously in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1851 O. N. Bëtling published a “Yakut-German dictionary” that contained approximately 5,000 words and extensive comments on their meaning and usage in oral speech (Sleptsov 1972, 571). Academician E.K. Pekarsky spent fifty years studying the Yakut language. As a result of his titanic effort, a series of issues of Yakut-Russian vocabulary units was published between 1907 and 1930. It was later republished in three volumes (1959). His dictionary recorded mainly the oral usage of the Yakut language.

The first Yakut writing was created on the basis of the Russian alphabet at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as Russian Orthodox missionaries made it a point to translate the church books into the native Siberian languages. For some time, the early Yakut literature of the late nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century was written in Latin alphabet.

During the Soviet period, as result of the policy of *Russification*, many Yakuts lost active knowledge of their mother tongue, as the Communist

government attempted to assimilate ethnic minorities both culturally and linguistically. One of the effective devices to assimilate minorities linguistically was the so-called Alphabet Revolution of 1926-32. During this period the Yakut writing based on the Latin alphabet was converted into Cyrillic. The nationalist Yakut organization “Sakha Omuk”, (translated as Sakha Nation) that had been organized at the beginning of the twentieth century and had as its goal promotion of the Yakut language and cultural identity, was disbanded by the Soviet authorities and its leaders were severely persecuted. At the same time, the autonomous republic that was formed in 1922 allowed the use of the Yakut language: (1) in instruction in grade schools, (2) in facilities allowing creation of literary works in the native tongues, including theater performances, and (3) in a few journals and newspapers in Yakut.

Yet, Russification was well underway as its impact was fortified by another phenomenon of the Soviet reality – *Russianization*. The term Russianization is most commonly used to describe a government-sponsored settling of large numbers of ethnic Russians in other peoples’ homelands, usually in order to develop and exploit natural resources (Mote 1998, 109, 124). Yakutia’s diverse and abundant mineral resources, especially gold and diamonds, attracted the attention of Soviet leaders (Tichotsky 2000, 90-93, 102-104). The immigration of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians changed the proportion of the titular group in Yakutia. In 1926 Yakuts comprised 82 percent of the total

population of the republic. By 1959 they had become a minority in their homeland accounting for only 46 percent of the region's population. In 1989 the percentage of the Yakuts within the republic dropped to only 33.4 percent (Khazanov 1995, 178; Mote 1998, 124). Russification and Russianization both influenced the rate of Yakuts' retaining the active use of their native tongue. The Russian language became dominant as more and more Russians were arriving. Yakut speech gradually began to be confined to households and rural areas. The younger generation was especially affected, as parents had to choose a Russian school over a Yakut one, if they wanted their children to get a college education. As a result, by 1989 most young Yakut urbanites had only rudimentary knowledge of their mother tongue. In 1959 some 98.2 percent of Yakuts named Yakut as their mother tongue. In 1989 that figure had declined to 95.1 percent. By contrast, only very few Russian people – 1,311 - listed Yakut as their native language (Gnatyuk 1996, 38-39).

Since early 1990s the tide has turned. Two factors are responsible for the revival of the Yakut language. First, once the central Russian government abolished all the subsidies for its Siberian industries, the ethnic Russians began leaving the republic. Second, the new Yakut leadership started *Derussification*, policy, which included school reform, emphasizing the Yakut language and history. Moreover, some Yakuts began promoting their Turkishness and established a Turkish college for boys in Yakutsk, where young men from

Istanbul and Ankara teach in English and Turkish. Parents, a new generation of Yakut intelligentsia, evidently feel that knowing English is more important for their children' future than learning Russian. In short, the prominence of the Yakut language has begun to increase and today is used in many newspapers, belles-lettres, school instruction, national theater, radio, and television.

Traditional Religious Beliefs and Cosmology

The Yakuts have traditionally practiced *shamanism*, a variety of a larger tradition of animism. Shamanism presupposes that a surrounding world is inhabited by various spirits, both benevolent and evil, and that people have to negotiate with the spirits in order to assure certain favors, such as good luck in hunting, healing of a sick member of a community, or the birth of a healthy baby. A shaman serves as a mediator between human beings and spirits.

Accomplished scholar of shamanism, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (1993, 1995, 1997), who spent decades in northeast Siberia conducting research on shamanic traditions among Evenks, Yakuts, and Evens (Lamuts), provides interesting data on migration of these Siberian natives based on the interaction and exchange of ideas reflected in beliefs and practices of these ethnic groups. She suggested, for example, that when Turkic ancestors of the Yakuts, traveling north from an area near Lake Baikal, encountered and intermarried with

Tungusic, Yukagir, and Chukchi groups, they found their shamans to be especially frightening and powerful. For that reason they borrowed many rules and rituals from these reindeer herders, hunters, and fishers (Balzer 1998, 311).

In the 1630s the colonizing Russian Cossacks were accompanied by Russian Orthodox missionaries, who “intended to carry the Gospel across Siberia to the end of the universe” (Slezkine 1994, 42). The old traditional world of shamanistic spirits and deities collided with the powerful force of Eastern Orthodoxy driven by ecumenical aspirations. Some Yakuts converted, at least superficially, but most remained faithful to their heathen beliefs. The destruction of shamans came with Soviet power, when the shamans were declared enemies of the state (Slezkine 1994, 226-228). In modern Yakutia, despite the efforts of Yakut intelligentsia to revive shamanism, very few Yakuts actually practice this religion. Most Yakuts are secularized or attracted to a variety of recently arrived Protestant denominations, from Pentecostals to Jehovah’s Witnesses (Krindatch 1996, 30, 57).

Demography

The Yakuts currently represent the most sizable ethnic group in Siberia, and their republic is the largest federal unit in Russia (*Territory* 2001, 99-100). According to the year 2000 estimates made available by the Vice-Chairman of the

Yakut State Statistics Committee, the number of Yakuts stands at approximately 400, 000 (Rudykh 2000, Torgovkina 2000, 6).

The censuses available since the middle of the seventeenth century show that the number of Yakuts grew gradually but substantially over the past three centuries. The only exception is the period between 1926 and 1959 when the number declined due, as some Siberian scholars suggest, to the unusually harsh pressures of the Communist collectivization, especially because of large losses of livestock (Wixman 1984, 220; Tichotsky 2000, 82). When the Russian officials counted their Siberian subjects in the 1750, Yakuts numbered approximately 35,000 adult males – the czarist government was mainly interested in the number of men who were obliged to pay *yasak*, or fur tribute (von Baer 1845, 91; Parnikova 1971, 69). If we extrapolate from this figure and assume that each man came with at least three other people, then the actual number of Yakuts could have exceeded 100,000. By the end of the 18th century Yakut males totaled 50,064 (Parnikova 1971, 80), with a possible total population of 150,000.

A century later, in 1897 the number of Yakuts reached 225,400, out of a total population of 269,900 in Yakutia and by the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 it increased slightly to 226,900 (out of total of 264,100) (*Osnovnye* 2000, 6; Sokolov 1925, 25; Bruk and Kabuzan 1989, 148; Diakonov 1962, 21). After World War II many ethnic Russians and Ukrainians came to Yakutia to work in gold, coal, iron, and diamond mines. Between 1926 and 1959

the total population of the republic increased by 87 percent, from 287,300 in 1929 to 488,600 in 1959 (Diakonov 1962, 21-22). The actual number of Yakuts, however, declined during this very period from 241,000 in 1926 to 233,000 in 1959 (*Rossiyskiy Statisticheskiy* 1997, 72; Harris 1993, 545).

According to the 1989 census, the total population of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic reached its peak at 1,094,100, after which it started to decline. In 2000 approximately 988,600 people inhabited Yakutia (Torgovkina 2000, 5). As most of the emigrants have been ethnic Slavs, the percentage of Yakuts in the total population of the republic has increased to more than 40 percent (Heleniak 1999, 180-181, Bater 1996, 116-118; *Itogi* 1994, 53).

During the Soviet period, urbanization affected the distribution of the Yakut population quite dramatically. At present 64.1 percent of the republic's population live in towns and cities (Torgovkina 2000, 5). This is quite remarkable considering that in 1926, 95 percent of the population was rural (*Osnovnye* 2000, 6). The ethnic makeup of urban and rural population shows a remarkable imbalance: ninety-eight percent of rural population of the republic is Yakut, while Russian speakers are concentrated in cities and towns (Harris 1993, 571-572).

In conclusion, the Yakuts have greatly increased in numbers since the Russian conquest, but also became a minority in their own land. Since the 1990s the ratio of Russian and Yakut inhabitants in the republic has been changing. The

next decade might witness Yakuts once again making up the majority in their homeland (Figure 2.3).

Political Status

One of the major factors of the Yakut life during the past decade has been the change of the political status of the republic. In 1990 Yakuts adopted a declaration of state sovereignty, according to which the Sakha Republic became a sovereign, democratic state within the Russian Federation, ruled by its own government. Since 1991 Yakuts have had their own democratically elected parliament, *Il Tyumen*, and president. The legislative power resides in two chambers of the Legislative Assembly of Sakha. The Republic of Sakha-Yakutia, as it is called since 1990, has its own flag, showing a white sun against a light blue background, and an official state emblem featuring the image of an ancient horse rider (Figure 2.4). The change of the name of the republic to Sakha has important implications. Ethnic Yakuts view the name *Yakutia* as forced on them by the Russian colonialism, while they call themselves and their land *Sakha*. It remains to be seen how truly 'sovereign' the Sakha Republic will remain in the future, as the Kremlin tries to strengthen its influence in the outlying regions. On May 13, 2000 Russian president Putin declared that the Russian Federation should be more integrated, and divided all of the country into seven large regions. He

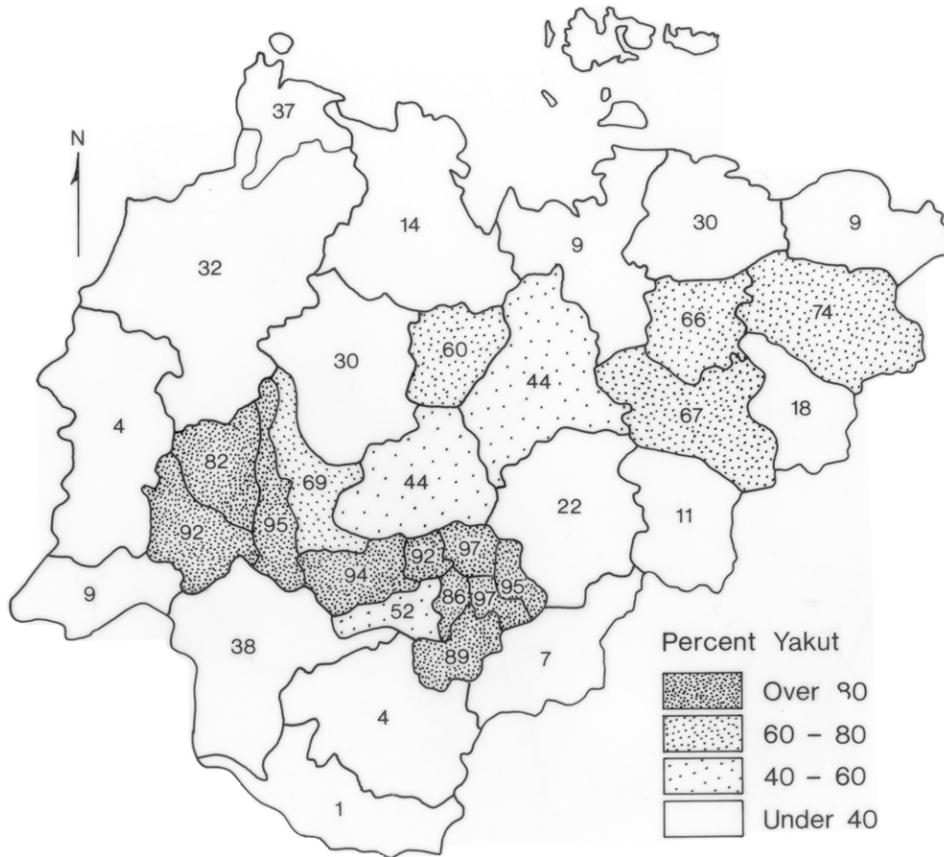


Figure 2.3: The present day heartland of the Sakha people, where they make up the overwhelming majority of the population.

Source: Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 6.



Figure 2.4: The new coat of arms of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia).

also appointed former army and KGB generals to govern these new administrative divisions, indicating that the leaders of ethnic and other regions should answer to these central government officials.

Literature on Yakuts

The remarkable story of the Yakuts over a period of centuries has attracted diverse scholarly attention, including educated travelers, ethnographers, political scientists, anthropologists, and archeologists, among others. It is my purpose next to review the sources that contributed most to our knowledge of the Yakuts, their past and present. In the remainder of this chapter I consider the writings of scholarly travelers from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Then I turn to the leading scholarly works on the Yakuts written in the last century and a half. These include ethnographers, archeologists, anthropologists, historians and geographers.

Accounts of Yakuts and their Land by Educated Travelers

One of the earliest references to Yakuts was made by Semyon Remezov in 1697. Assigned by the czarist government to survey and inventory Siberian territories, he created the first comprehensive atlas of Siberia (1958). The toponyms on his maps often give a good indication of the distribution of various

ethnic groups, including Yakuts. Remezov was followed by a succession of educated travelers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who, in their accounts of journeys through Siberia, described Yakuts and their way of life in varying degrees of detail. Martin Sauer, a secretary to the geographical expedition to the northeast of Russia in 1785-1794, summoned by Catherine II, refers to Yakuts as a people who kept memories of their ancestors and past migration very much alive (Flaherty 1992, 92). Often some references to Yakuts were fleeting or not unusually informative (Ides 1706; Dobell 1830). Others provided much more abundant data, scattered over a wide range of time. Gerhard Maydell (1893-96), for example, gave an interesting insight into the relationship between Russian Cossacks and Yakuts: “Beketov (a chief Cossack) realized that Yakuts could not be handled as he had the Evenks – they were a people you could do business with” (457). This shows that from the very first, the Russian colonizers knew that the Yakuts were, unlike many small-numbered peoples of Siberia, a strong and proud people.

Philip von Strahlenberg (1738), a Swede in the service of the Russian court, left a highly informed description around the 1720s. He described their animist beliefs, rituals, social relations, language and diet. He also referred to “Jakuhti” as one of the most numerous “*Pagan Nations in Siberia*” who were ruled by the Russian government (380-384).

Two decades later Johann Gmelin (1751-52), a German, provided the first extensive description of the Yakut culture, including shamanism. The second volume of his three-volume work contains numerous comments on Yakut folklore, religion, and cosmology. He described the behavior of a certain Yakut shaman as “deranged, acting like madman” (356). His entire attitude towards shamanist rituals was contemptuous, seen as “comedy”. He was repulsed by “idols and false deities” (475), but despite that he made valuable observations about the shaman he encountered. He lamented the lack of bread among the Yakuts, but understood the role climate plays in hindering successful grain production in the Yakutsk area. Such circumstance was evidently quite disturbing for this thoroughly European person. He highly praised Yakut skills at cabinetmaking and other woodwork (471-475). In short, he found these taiga people strange, exotic, but in some ways very accomplished. All in all, his is one of the more informative accounts of the eighteenth century.

Ferdinand Müller (1882) wrote a similarly detailed account of the Yakuts that is particularly valuable because it came more than a century later than those of Gmelin and Strahlenberg. Müller, among other things, provided a fascinating glimpse into the life of city of Yakutsk (242-250). His opinion of agricultural abilities of Yakuts of that time was less than favorable, and he attributed their lack of enthusiasm for crop farming in part to an “Asiatic mindset, which compels them to reject imitating the Russians, but instead to follow their own inclinations”

(253). He remarked that like many Turkish tribes the Yakuts excelled in ironwork and silver jewelry making, woodcarving and mammoth fossil ivory carving (257-258).

One can hardly overstate the value of these firsthand traveler observations, covering much of the time span of the Yakut presence in their homeland. Their accounts were supplemented by a series of superb early professional ethnologies.

Ethnographers

Theodor von Middendorff left an unparalleled multi-volume ethnography of the Yakuts, written in the middle of the nineteenth century and published by the Russian Academy of Sciences over three decades (1847-1875). Scarcely any aspect of the Yakut culture or habitat escaped his notice. It is with this work, written in German, that the truly scientific study of Yakuts began. Middendorff spent two years in Yakutia compiling his data. He was the first to analyze the physical traits of the Yakuts and speculate that there had been much mixing with Mongols and Evenks, and commented on how Yakuts' Turkic racial features had been strongly modified through mixing (Vol. IV, part 2, 1545-1546). He supplemented his ethnographic observations with an analysis of the Yakut language. The entire part 1 of volume III, totaling 397 pages, is devoted to the Yakut language. In his opinion, linguistic evidence confirmed the Yakut mixing with Buryats and Evenks. However, he stresses the "initiative and assimilative

power of the Yakuts” (Vol. IV, Part 2, 1561). According to Middendorff, Yakuts “easily Yakuticize” both Russians and Evenks (Vol. IV, Part 2, 1547). Middendorff’s ethnography of “this gifted people” remains a standard reference work today (Vol. IV, part 2, 1561).

Richard Karlovich Maak provided the first ethnography in the Russian language. A political exile in the Viliuy region of Yakutia, he dedicated his research to the Yakuts of that area. This was published in three volumes between 1883 and 1887. The significance of this book is such that it recently achieved republication (1994). His work, based largely on firsthand observations, touches on virtually every aspect of Yakut life along the Viliuy River, the major left tributary of the Lena. The special value of Maak’s book is that it focuses on a particular region within the Yakut homeland. Never before was such a detailed and sensitive portrait of Yakut rural life depicted. Maak was also the first explorer of the geological structure of the Vilyui plateau and determined the borders of the Central Vilyui lowlands.

Vatslav Seroshevsky, who spent 12 years in Yakutia, also as a political exile (1880-1892), wrote the definitive ethnographic study of its time. It was first published in 1896 in St. Petersburg, and like Maak’s book is so important that it was recently republished (1993). Chapters of his 700-plus-page book discuss topics as varied as origins, physical characteristics, clothes, diet, dwellings, family and tribal structure, marriage and love, traditional crafts, oral folklore traditions,

and beliefs. Seroshevsky learned the Yakut language. He called it “the French of Northeastern Siberia”, meaning it was widely spoken by many peoples of the taiga, including Yakutized Evenks, Evens, and Yukaghirs. This acquired linguistic ability later allowed him unprecedented insights into the Yakut culture, as he was able to interview a large number of native speakers. Moreover, his comprehensive study nicely complements Middendorff’s work, coming a half-century later.

A prominent ethnographer of the early part of the twentieth century Waldemar Jochelson approached the study of the Yakut culture from an unusual angle. He initially studies the making of *kumyss*, and the vessels used in its ceremonial consumption (1906). Working together with his wife over a period of many years (Jochelson-Brody 1906), Jochelson enlarged his field of interest to compile another comprehensive ethnography of the Yakuts (1934). He paid particular attention to material culture and the role it could play in deciphering the obscure past of the Yakuts. He was quite familiar with the findings of Siberian archeologists, including E.B. Petri who worked principally in the Trans-Baikal area, and based on that knowledge, speculated about the prehistoric migration of the Yakuts. His hypothesis is that the Yakuts “must have been the horse and cattle breeding tribe which formerly lived around Lake Baikal and in the region of the upper course of the Lena” (1934, 63).

Gavriil V. Ksenofontov was the first Yakut ethnographer and historian who wrote both in Yakut and Russian. His two-volume book “Urankhai-Sakhalar” remains a classic study of the Yakut epic folklore “Nyurguun Bootur the Swift”. First published in 1937, his work was republished later (1992b). Using available ethnographic data, historical documents and legends from the epic folklore, Ksenofontov attempted to solve “the mystery of this Tatar people lost in the northern taiga” (1992b, 2-3). His study contains numerous examples of evidence pointing to the southern origin of the Yakuts, such as vocabulary, objects of material culture typical of that of more southern peoples of the Eurasian steppes, and the collective memory of the people preserved in the Yakut oral tradition.

Archeologists and anthropologists

Aleksei P. Okladnikov, an internationally renowned archeologist and anthropologist who spent decades unveiling the distribution of the ancient population of Siberia, paid special attention to the area near Lake Baikal. Based on the archeological findings in that area and his excavations on sites in southern Yakutia, he proposed a hypothesis that the ancient Yakuts most likely derived from a prehistoric Turkic-speaking people, the *Kurikani*, or the *Kurumchyn* culture, dated to the seventh to tenth centuries A.D. (Okladnikov 1959, 58; Symmons-Symonolewicz 1972, 135). Among his most significant findings in the

western Baikal area were Kurikani writings in the form of runes and also their pictographs of horsemen holding banners in their hands. It is symbolic that the modern Yakuts use one of these pictographs as their republic's coat of arms (Figure 2.5). Okladnikov speculated about the possible time of out-migration of proto-Yakuts from this area, but he fails to point to a specific district of origin of the Yakut people, simply referring to it, as most scholars have done, as lying in the Lake Baikal region.

Until recently very few archeological excavations uncovered artifacts of prehistoric Yakut material culture. It was, therefore, very important when a Yakut archeologist, Anatoliy I. Gogolev, of The Yakut State University, discovered several burial sites in Sakha identified as belonging to ancient Yakuts from the fourteenth century (1993, 94-95). For now this date remains the first scientific proof of Yakuts living in the territory of modern Yakutia. Whether this date is close to the date of their first arrival to the region remains to be seen. Hopefully, new archeological data will be discovered.

Marjorie Balzer, an American anthropologist, spent decades studying Siberian peoples, with abundant attention to Yakuts. She is particularly interested in Yakut shamanist traditions, gender issues, and the changes in Post-Soviet Yakut society (1993, 1995, 1997, 1998). Together with Yakut scholar, Ulyana I. Vinokurova, Balzer wrote an influential article on nationalism and interethnic

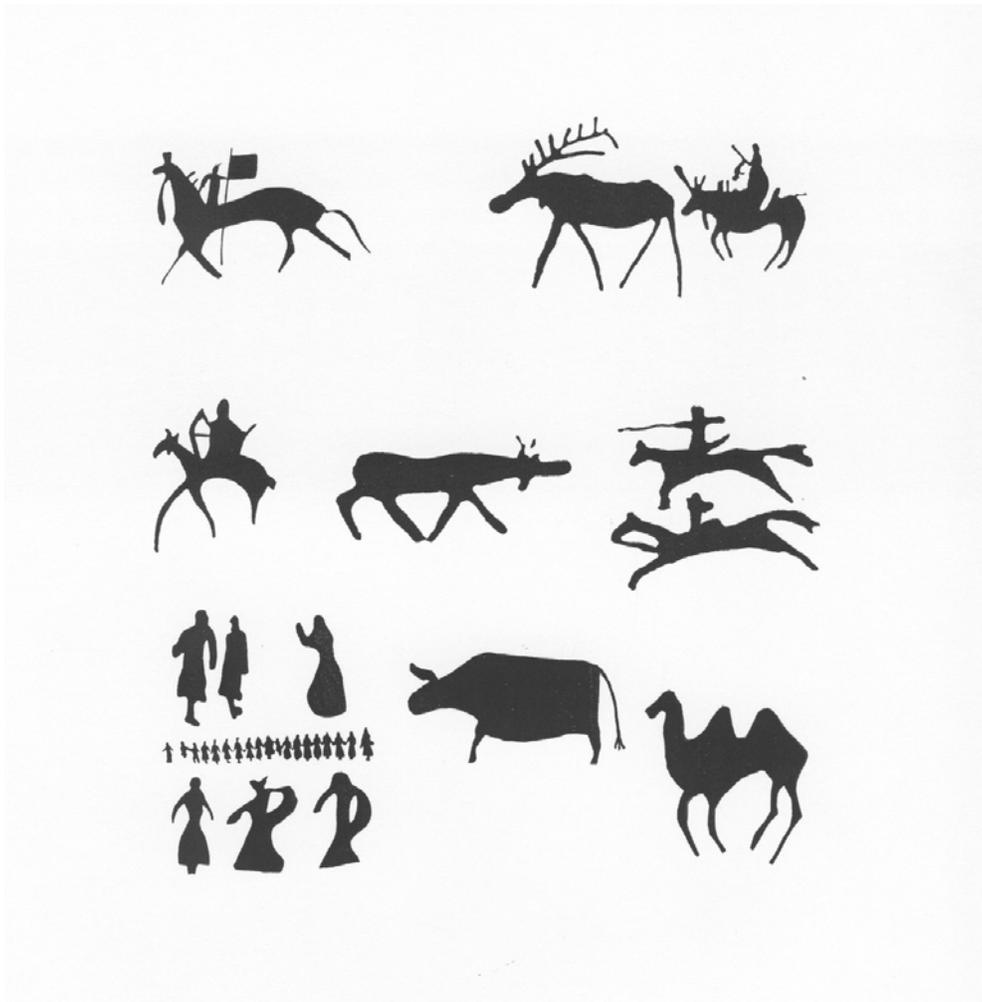


Figure 2.5: The Kurikani petroglyphs found at Shishkina archeological site, near Kachug, west of Lake Baikal on the upper Lena River. The horse rider that inspired the Sakha new coat of arms is situated in the upper left corner.

Source: Pavlov 1994, 6.

relationships in the Republic Sakha (Yakutia) (1996), showing the complex relationship between ethnic Russians, Yakuts, and the small-numbered peoples of the North, Evens, Evenks, and Yukagirs. The republic's smallest minorities recently have begun to express a sentiment that not only Russians, but also Yakuts, being a large titular group with more political and economic power, step down on their indigenous rights.

Historians and geographers

Most of the historic literature on Yakuts was created in the second half of the twentieth century and is mainly dedicated to the analysis of social structure of Yakut society. The three-volume official history of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was a result of scholarly synthesis of several historians (*Istoriya* 1955-63). The most prominent among those was Gavriil P. Basharin, whose books were dedicated to such diverse topics as the history of agrarian relations in Yakutia in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the social system of Yakuts in the seventeenth century and others (1956, 1950). Among the most important works of this type is a monograph by Ivan Argounov (1986), who revised some of the theses of Basharin and presented a more finely tuned picture of the Yakuts of previous centuries.

Andrian A. Borisov, another Yakut historian, analyzed the Yakuts in the seventeenth century. His book is a study of Yakut *uluses* (“subethnic divisions”) that formed the Yakut people in a mosaic-like way (1997, 4-5). In Borisov’s interpretation, the seventeenth century became a turning point in Yakut history. The meeting of two different worlds at this time – the Russian colonizing expansion that brought agriculture, czarist taxes, Christianity, and new political order -- that eventually influenced the ethnic processes in the Lena River region. Also for the first time the Yakuts became a part of the official history of northeast Asia. The underlying agenda of Borisov’s work is an analysis of the formation of Yakut ethnic identity at this crucial point in their history, when they faced subjugation by alien people (Borisov 1995).

Anastasiya S. Parnikova provided an insightful analysis of the distribution of Yakuts during a period of over three centuries, from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century (1971). She presented a convincing picture of Yakut migrations during this period as impacted by Russian settlers (13-30).

Yakut geographers have also contributed to our knowledge of the historical distribution of modern Yakuts. E. N. Fedorova made a thorough analysis of numbers and distribution of Yakut people after the Russian colonization (1998). She links the massive spread of Yakuts during the last three centuries not only to the forced migration caused by the Russian newcomers but

also emphasizes the extensive character of traditional husbandry that made Yakuts look for new pastures for their herds of cattle and horses (142-144).

Geographers F. V. Diakonov (1962) and G. A. Gnatyuk (1996) provide insight into demographic and migratory shifts in Yakutia during the past half of the twentieth century. They present clear patterns of Russian, Yakut, Evenk, and Even settlements in present-day Yakutia.

The combined efforts by Yakut historians and geographers brought about an impressive accumulative system of knowledge on traditional Yakut society. They have collected a great deal of data used to describe a complex structure of that society in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries; to establish the size of the Yakut population at different moments in time; to create maps that show distributions of different subgroups of Yakuts at different times; and to analyze a system of relationships between Yakuts and colonizing Russians.

All this said, one cannot help pointing out a gap in the knowledge of Yakut ethnogenesis, especially from a geographical point of view. As can be seen from the above review, scholars did not use geographic concepts and methods in addressing Yakut ethnogenesis. None of the authors considered the ecological aspects of Yakut ethnogenesis, the impact their migration to a new habitat and necessary adaptive strategies that came out of it. No attempts have been made to consider the role of such geographic factors as traditional landscape, diffusion, preadaptation, incremental change, and the existence of homeland. Moreover, no

effort was made to leave the boundaries of modern Yakutia and in earnest search in the field for the ancient hearth of the Sakha people. One of the crucial theses of my dissertation is that following the assumption that the previous habitat of ancient Yakuts should have been similar to the mid-Lena environs, and that this habitat was located next to the stepping-stone of their migration, namely the area near upper Lena. My field research in summer of 2000 allowed me to identify the exact area where ancient Yakuts lived before they moved to the north. In the next chapter I present both conventional wisdom – the traditional, imprecise view of the origin of the Yakuts – and my own conclusions based upon the habitat and cultural relics of a region west of Lake Baikal.

Chapter 3: Ancient Beginning and Pre-historic Migration

Proto-Altaic groups

The Yakuts, like other Turks, linguistically belong to the Altaic family of languages. According to scholars researching the Neolithic origins of Altaic peoples, the hearth where they first formed as a distinct agro-pastoral people lies in the northern piedmont of the Kopet Dag range in southwestern Turkmenistan, near the border of Iran (Harris and Gosden, in Harris 1996, 370-371). This hearth area, known among archeologists as the *Jeitun* culture, dating back to the sixth millennium BC, was a starting point from which the proto-Altaic people spread through the central Asian steppes.

As they diffused, their animal herding gradually became more important than crops, due to the difficulty of tilling the prairie sod. By the time they reached the easternmost margins of the vast grassland expanses of Eurasia, they apparently met nonagricultural and nonpastoral Mongol peoples. The herd animals brought by the Altaic people offered a new, pastoral, way of subsistence for the Mongolic peoples. Later the horse followed the same path of diffusion (Sauer 1975, 95-96). A fair amount of mixing and cultural exchange between proto-Turk and proto-Mongol peoples must have occurred very early in these

easternmost boundaries of the Eurasian steppes, initiating an interaction that would continue for millennia and ultimately give birth to the Yakut people (Renfrew in Harris 1996, 70, 80-81; Symmons-Symonolewicz 1972, 134).

This exchange between and coexistence of two pastoral peoples occurred widely in the Asian grasslands, including one relatively isolated, finger-like projection of the steppes just west of Lake Baikal. Here, I feel, lies the precise place of origin of the proto-Yakuts. Known locally today as the “Rich Valley” (Kopylova 2000), this finger of steppe just touches the upper Lena River, around the small port of Kachug (Figure 3.1). This is, significantly, the only place where the great steppes of Central Asia reach the Lena and therefore the most natural place for a steppe people to embark on their journey to the north, using the shallow, quiet flowing waters of the long river.

I am the first scholar of Yakut ethnogenesis to engage in a field search for the place of origin. In the year 2000 I traveled the length of the Rich Valley. I was struck by the similarity between its lush grassy expanses, with thinly wooded bordering slopes, and the great riverine valleys of the modern Yakut homeland. The local inhabitants – Buryat Mongols – are so similar to the Yakuts in every way but language that I felt at home, among my own people. This I observed in the village of Nagalyk in the Rich Valley. The local people treated me to the milk dishes bearing the same names as in Yakut. They also performed a traditional

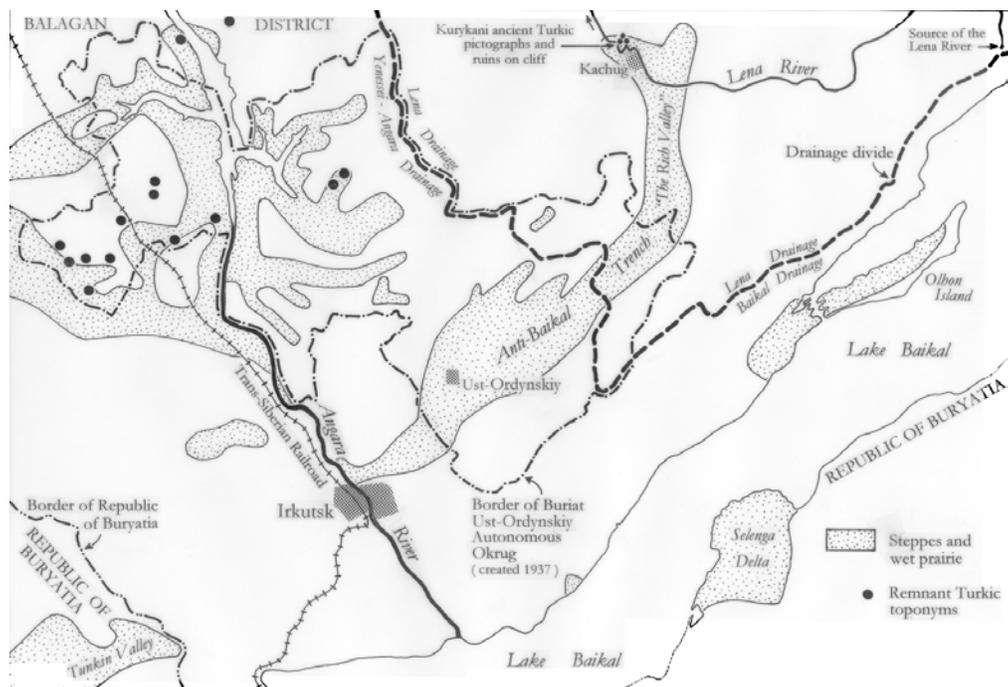


Figure 3.1: The steppes and wet prairies in the Yakut old homeland. Notice especially the steppe finger ‘touching’ the source of the Lena River near the port of Kachug.

Source: redrawn and modified from Grudin, et al. 1997, pp.144-146.

circle dance – *yokhor* – identical to one that survives among Yakuts. These Buryats impressed me as significantly Turkified, as compared to their kinsmen living to the east on the other shore of Lake Baikal, and to the south, in the Tounkin Valley. The major difference between these subgroups of Buryats is that those in the Rich Valley remained shamanists, like the Yakuts, while the southern and eastern Buryats are Lamaist Buddhists. I knew intuitively this was the place where my remote ancestors, locked a losing battle with those same Buryats, took to the river and departed for the far north. As they fled, their rafts passed beneath the Turkic pictograph-covered cliffs of their Kurykan ancestors. These pictographs are found near Kachug, at the edge of the Rich Valley, at the small settlement of Shishkina (Okladnikov 1959, 58; Pavlov 1994, 12) (Figure 2.5).

In the mountainous southwestern corner of the Irkutsk oblast', not far from the Rich Valley, a small Turkic-speaking people – the *Tofalar* (also known as the *Karagas*) – is the last remnant of the ancient presence of Turks in this area (Wurm 1954, follows p. 21; Moseley and Asher 1994, map 58; Slezkine 1994, 1) (Figure 2.1). Their numbers do not exceed five hundred people (Shadaeva 2000). Their very small numbers combined with poor health conditions of the group in general, do not cast very optimistic prognosis for the future of the Tofalar (Slezkine 1994, 268-269; Myers 2002). They could be descendants of the same Turkic people who formed different tribes in the western Lake Baikal area in prehistoric times, but did not move away from the conquering Mongol people and as a result, were

displaced from the ancestral valley into the mountains. Their location in the margins of the region dominated by Buryats and Russians serves as supporting evidence of such a scenario. They are conceivably the Yakuts' closest relatives in addition to the people known as the Sakha of Krasnoyarsk krai, far to the west, and today almost vanished. By the time the Russian Cossacks arrived in Cis-Baikalia, they found only Mongolian-speaking Buryats in the area of the Rich Valley – all the Turkic groups had vanished (Tokarev 1962, 103).

Old Homeland near Lake Baikal

When I traveled through the Rich Valley I also searched for the remnants of material artifacts that could be traced to the proto-Yakuts. First, in the Museum of Regional Studies in Irkutsk I saw an old photograph of a wooden structure in the oblast' that looked like a Yakut traditional house and bore the identical name – *balagan* (Figure 3.2). These were constructed of palisaded logs and rectangular in plan. At each corner stood thick vertical timbers, set into the earth and connected at their tops with horizontal crossbeams. Medial posts added more strength to the whole structure. The walls consisted of poles or boards also set into the ground and resting at the top against the crossbeams. All four walls slanted inward in a distinctive, sloping manner. A single, thick ridgebeam



Figure 3.2: The 19th century photograph of a *balagan* from the Balagan District, located on the territory of present day Ust'-Ordynsky Buryat Autonomous Okrug.

Source: a copy from the The Regional Studies Museum, town of Ust'-Ordynsky, Ust'-Ordynsky Buryat Autonomous Okrug.

doubled if a sufficiently strong timber could be found – ran from one side of the house to the other. Upon this ridgebeam rested poles or boards, birchbark, and a layer of earth mixed with clay and cow dung, forming a gently arched, convex roof (Stenin 1897, 344-47) (Figure 3.3). Significantly, there is a steppe district named Balagan, which lies adjacent to the Rich Valley, just to the northwest, where the museum photograph was taken. The Buryats at the central town of Ust'-Orda told me that this balagan type of house is not of Buryat origin, but instead Turkic (Shadaeva 2000). Putting together these four pieces of evidence – the presence of a house type identical to that of the Yakuts, bearing the very same name they use for it, the presence of a district named *Balagan* adjacent to the Rich Valley, and Buryat identification of this type of dwelling as Turkic – I felt convinced that I stood in the region of my people's origin.

Certain other items of material culture indicated a close interaction between ancient Yakuts and Rich Valley Buryats. These include a *talky* – a wooden device with wide teeth for softening fur pelts. This tool I knew from a native village in Yakutia, and I was startled to see it in the local museum in Ust'-Ordynsky. A wooden device for churning butter was strikingly similar, too. Finally, I found the physical appearance of the Rich Valley Buryats remarkably similar to Yakuts, indicating a degree of ancient intermarriage. They lack the overtly Asiatic facial features of true Mongol people. Anthropologists point out

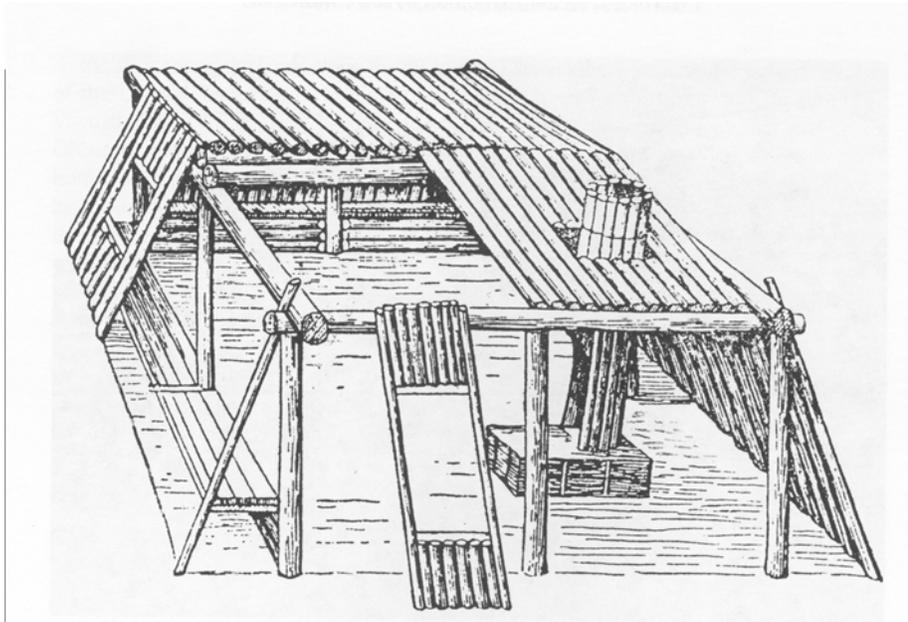


Figure 3.3: The traditional structure of a balagan house.

Source: Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 44.

that of all the representatives of the Central Asian Mongoloid type, the Yakuts in their physical appearance most resemble the Northern Buryats (Tokarev 1962, 107; Symmons-Symonolewicz, 1972, 135-136).

Clearly, these Buryat people occupy today the lands that had been the ancestral hearth of ancient Yakuts. Like Yakuts, the Buryats of the Rich Valley breed cattle and horses. The habitat of the region is ideal for this type of economy. It is the warmest part of the Irkutsk oblast', with fertile soils and gently rolling open grasslands. Most of the steppes were plowed for grain cultivation during Stalin's Collectivization. The best agricultural land lies in the *Irkutsk-Balagan* wooded steppe area. These grasslands were untouched until the 1930s and had been used for cattle herding for centuries (Grudinin et al., 1997, 167-168).

The Great Migration

Archeological work in Yakutia combined with the historical evidence of Mongol expansion in Eurasia point to the most probable period of departure of the ancient Yakuts from the Cis-Baikal area as the thirteenth century. Gogolev (1993) found Yakut artifacts in Central Yakutia dated to the fourteenth century A.D. The diffusion of Mongols to the area west of Baikal area through conquests by the Genghis Khan Empire in the thirteenth century and subsequent

acculturation of the local population replaced a previously thriving Turkic-speaking population dominant in this area (Tokarev 1962, 103, 106). Sometime in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries a migration of proto-Yakuts out of the Rich valley finger steppe must have taken place. At the same time studies of Buryat ethnogenesis point to the first decades of the thirteenth century as the beginning of Mongolization of proto-Buryats, who were most probably of the same genetic stock as proto-Yakuts, both peoples descending from Turkic-speaking Kurykans.

In V. O. Dolghikh's article on the history of the Buryat people he presents a map that shows the distribution of Buryat clans at the beginning of the seventeenth century (1962, 78-79). Significantly, at that time all the territory of the Rich Valley is settled by several, closely related Buryat clans of Khengelder, Bur, Chenorut, Abyzay, Olzon and Bayenday that formed one large group called Ekherit. These are the people who must have displaced the proto-Yakuts, pushing them first to the northernmost parts of finger steppes and later making them leave altogether. They themselves had been, presumably, pushed in that direction by the expanding Mongol empire. It is interesting that by the time of first contact between Russians and the Cis-Baikal Buryats, the latter did not identify themselves as Mongol, though they spoke a Mongol dialect, and besides herding large-horned cattle and horses practiced tillage (Tokarev 1962, 108). This Turkic Neolithic crop knowledge, lost by Yakuts during their long trek to the north, was

evidently maintained by the Mongolized Kurykani, whose descendants include the modern Rich Valley Buryats.

What also follows from the striking similarities in material culture, physical appearance, livelihood, rituals, and religious beliefs between western Buryats and Yakuts is also the assumption that they fought over the same habitat, and in that struggle over grassland resources, the losers had to move away. In Fredrick Berth's terms it had been a classical scenario when two neighboring groups in search for the same resources create a situation of displacement (1969, 14-16). The small size of the Rich Valley, contested by more powerful and numerous intruders left only one exit for escape – the river route. Yakuts trapped in the northern end of the Rich Valley, finally had to pull up stakes and embark on a long journey to the unknown destination. At the same time, I must say, that this escape could not have been completely unprepared or uninvestigated. The Yakuts must have heard from the local forest Evenks, these great taiga nomadic hunters of Siberia, about grasslands far to the north. Moreover, they had to have built rafts and boats to prepare for the trip. The evidence lies in the result: cattle and horses, probably as calves and colts, were successfully transported to the valleys in the middle Lena area. If they also brought lambs and kids, those perished in the new northern home.

Origin Myths / Folklore Evidence

A very rich source of information about the ancient homeland and migration to a new home lies in Yakut mythology and folklore. The Yakut folk epic, a collection of stories about battles and ancient warriors, cosmological explanations and love legends, known collectively as “Olonkho”, contains descriptions of a lost home quite different in location, climate, and habitat from those of Yakutia. These songs ecstatically depict a green, warm land that is fertile and rich (Vinokurova 1994, 21). The southern origin of Turkic-speaking Yakuts of middle Lena has, as a result, been the prevalent theory among scholars.

The first ethnographers who worked in Yakutia, both Russian and German, started their accounts about Yakuts by compiling these legends about the origins of the Yakut people. The literature of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries contains several different versions. According to Johan Gmelin’s (1751-52, vol.2) accounts, Yakut folklore says that their forefathers dwelt on the uppermost reaches of the Lena River. The Buryats drove them away and they had to flee down the river – men, women, children and livestock. Some, although, remained behind and fought the Buryats. When also defeated, they had to leave so suddenly that they could not use boats, but simply clung to the logs floating in the river. Then they joined those who had gone before. They seized the region around present Yakutsk, but also an area south of Yakutsk, near modern city of Lensk. From this last area they were driven away by Patomic Evenks, as those lands were

their prime hunting grounds (344-346). In his retelling of the Yakut legends of migration, Gmelin did not give us a name of the leader or a clan itself.

Another German who accompanied one of the expeditions to the northeast of the Russian empire in the years of 1785-1794, Martin Sauer recorded that among Yakuts the most popular legends was about Chief Omogoi Bey, who brought his people to the new lands and who was later challenged by another man Aley, who professed to be a powerful shaman. In the end two rivals came to a compromise: Aley married one of Omogoi's daughter, thus assuring peace in the land (1802, 110).

Vatslav Seroshevsky who became fluent in the Yakut language during his long exile was able to relate much more details of the origin folklore. He talked to many people who eagerly related the legend with more or less detail or completeness. In the version recorded in his book, a man called Onokhoi, possibly the same as Omogoi, fled with his clan from the southern neighbors using the Great River and did not stop until they found a vast open valley. After some time a rival appeared – Elley, clearly the earlier-mentioned Aley. After Elley married the plain, but more diligent, of two Onokhoi's daughters, he moved away from Onokhoi to live on his own and became more successful than his father-in-law. Onokhoi's people abandoned him and joined Elley, praising his generosity and fairness. The Yakuts Seroshevsky talked to believed that the most prosperous and populous *uluses* – traditional regions occupied by clans – had sprung from Elley.

Khangalas, Borogon, Tatta, Menge and all the rest of the lands on the eastern bank of Lena for that very reason, were believed to have more talented people and craftsmen (Seroshevsky 1993, 174-181).

Seroshevsky also analyzed Yakut vocabulary concerning the names of southern animals and plants. In his opinion, the southern origin of Yakuts could be proven by the fact, for example, that they call a poplar “tiryakh”, similar to Persians, Uzbeks, Kalmyks, Tuvans and other southern peoples, separated from Yakuts by a wide zone populated by linguistically different ethnic groups. In Yakut legends, a Turkic word for a camel – *tebyan* – appears often to describe an animal ridden by Yakut enemies. They have also kept Turkic names for a lion and a snake that were never found in Yakutia (182-185). Seroshevsky also made a case that Yakuts prefer open grassy spaces, just like a people of the steppes would: “They do not favor water or forest. ‘He lives in a forest like a bear or a thief’, they say with contempt ... Nor do they respect fishing even in places where fish is the only vital source of food. To call someone a stinking fisher is the worst of insults” (187).

Waldemar Jochelson (1934) recorded another legend about Omogoi, who lived among the Buryats and was clever, willful, but bad-tempered. It was he who initiated the migration of his people to a new place, taking their cattle with them. When they descended the Great River (the Lena) and found a big valley, Omogoi and his people decided it was a suitable place to live. In that valley there

was a lake called *Saisary*, on the banks of which they built their first houses. This version contains also a story of Elliei, here presented as Omogoi's younger brother, who was at first left behind in old home, but joined Omogoi and his family later. Elliei married Omogoi's adopted younger daughter and added to the population and wealth of the Saisary settlement (45-46).

Gavriil Ksenofontov, a historian of Yakut nationality, wrote that Yakuts themselves explain the ancient migration and leaving the southern lands by family disputes. He argues that it is the first Russian settlers who added the Buryats to the story as the hostile southern neighbors (1992, vol.1, 30-31).

Recently, in the wake of newly strengthened Yakut national identity, some Yakut writers turned to the theme of the settling of the ancient Yakuts in the new homeland that became the hearth of the nation. One of them, Dalan, drawing from *Olonkho*, describes in a poetic way the impression that proto-Yakuts could have had when they first saw the new riverine grassland home: "After having scouted the shores of the Great Grandmother Lena back and forth, they finally found three beautiful valleys and exclaimed: no egg laid here will go rotten, no descendants of ours born on these fertile lands will perish. Jubilant and proud, our ancestors built their first summer houses of birch bark and then bigger winter log yurts with eight corners, raised many barns for their livestock and began to live happily, begot numerous children, thrived and got richer" (1994, 7). The idea that the ancestors

had been predestined to find a new homeland is strongly expressed in fictionalized accounts like this one.

The Lena River Route and Central Valley

The great Lena runs its course from the mountains just west of Lake Baikal to the Laptevykh Sea for 4,400 kilometers and is the twelfth longest river in the world. As I descended the Lena in July of 2000, I was able to observe its character. From Kachug, the presumed departure point of the ancient Yakuts, to Ust'-Kut, the Lena River is very narrow and wanders through a series of meanders incised in the southern reaches of the Great Siberian Plateau (Figure 3.4). This stretch of the river, with its steep forested slopes, could not offer any possible settlement sites for the herding people. Nowadays it can be navigated only by small hydrofoils.

At Ust'-Kut, the southernmost port where large-scale navigation becomes possible on the Lena, one begins to see less broad meanders beneath the unglaciated caprock of the plateau surface. That is where the bridge lowest on the course of the river stands. To the north of Ust'-Kut the riverbanks gradually become higher and rockier, with a few Russian villages strung along (Pavlov 1994, 41-43). Not until the latitude of 58 degrees north does one encounter broad



Figure 3.4: The young Lena, between Kachug and the port of Ust'-Kut. The proto-Yakuts passed this way. Notice the heavy forest cover which on this stretch of the river offers nothing for the herding Yakuts.

Source: a photograph by the author, 2000.

riverine pastures and river islands with dwarf willows. Below Kirensk, a town still in the Irkutsk oblast', there are some more treeless riverine flats. Why did not the ancient Yakuts stop here instead of continuing on their way to the north?

Conceivably, these pastures developed in the period after the Yakut migration through natural or human-induced transformation.

Soon after the river enters the Sakha Republic at Peleduy, the Lena grows much larger as it has now already collected the waters of Vitim River. Though it is still incised in the plateau, the river course straightens here. After Peleduy, the river follows the northern margins of the Patom Plateau in a great, broad arc. In the middle of this arc Lena receives the waters of Bolshoi Patom that swells its size even more. The breadth of the river reaches several hundred meters and the traveler can no longer doubt that they are on one of the greatest rivers of the world. What must the ancient Yakuts have thought, floating in their small craft, of this river now grown so great?

Abandoning at last the margins of the Patom Plateau, Lena resumes its northeastward course. Shortly above the modern town of Olyokminsk the river broadens tremendously into a virtual sea with large sandy islands in the midst. Then the river again once again becomes incised in a plateau – the Aldan - with wooded slopes.

Then comes the most remarkable feature along the entire Lena course - the Lena Pillars, a formation of countless sandstone stacks on the right bank that

makes an impressive 40-kilometer palisade just to the south of the final destination of the ancient Yakuts. These pillars, when lit by the sunrays from the northwest direction in the summertime, change their color dramatically with a different angle of the sun. The whole range of gold and reddish hues turn this natural wonder into an awesome spectacle (Figure 3.5). The proto-Yakuts approaching central Valley must have been awestruck by these pillars and, given their shamanist belief that the nature is full of spirits and omens, very easily could have seen this a sign from their gods that they had indeed arrived in a land of promise.

Their expectations were greatly justified, as a few dozens kilometers further down the river lies an enormous left-bank central valley formed by three coalesced grassland riverine lowlands, *Enseli*, *Tuymaada*, and *Erkeni*. A journey of 2,500 kilometers had at last reached its fruitful closure. In this part of the Lena the soft sandy banks allow vast spring flooding resulting from ice dams characteristic to all Siberian rivers flowing to the north. After the floodwaters retreat in mid June, the whole Central Valley is one lush green carpet of grasses. There could not have been a better place for a people with cattle and horse herds to settle. The valley is surrounded by wooded hills that offered a safe place to put their houses and barns. This area, and especially, the largest and middle of three constituent valleys – Tuymaada - is considered by modern Yakuts the hearth of their homeland (see Figure 4.2).

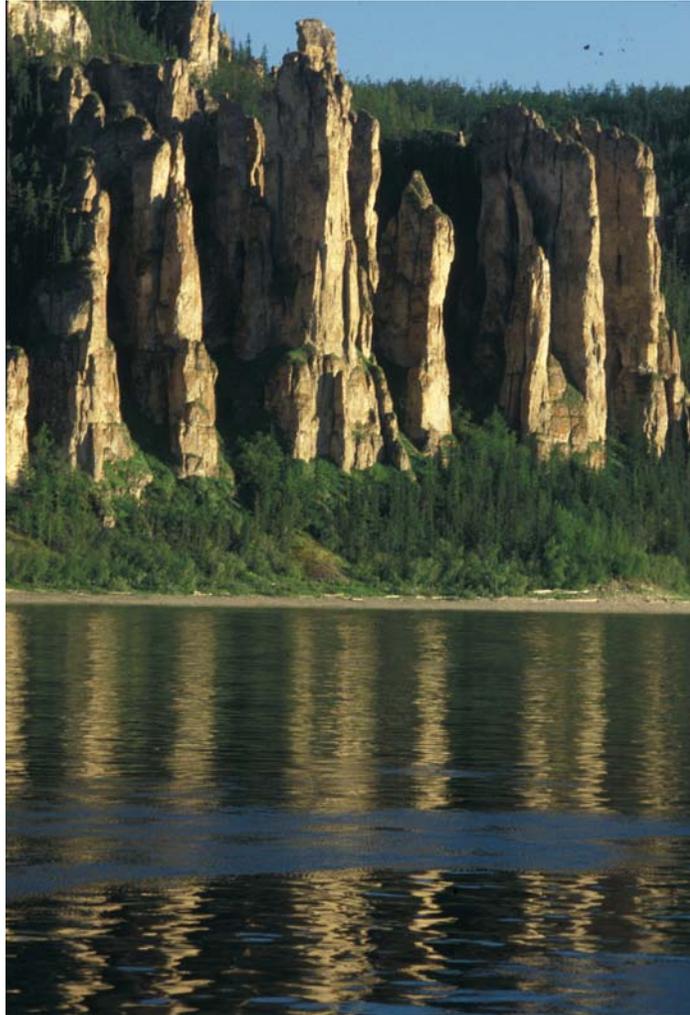


Figure 3.5: The Lena Pillars, just upstream of the Three Valleys that the ancient Yakuts saw on the way north.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1997.

Recently one of the mounds on the elevated right bank of the Lena, south of the city of Yakutsk, in the Erkyani Valley, was archeologically excavated, exposing an ancient Yakut homestead. The reconstructed sketch of this site gives an image of an early Yakut settlement (Figure 3.6).

Few other people of the world can offer so powerful and remarkable an ethnogenetic migration. A Polynesian saga of settling the Pacific is legendary, but one can argue that they were in their element when crossing the endless ocean. For the steppe people, with little navigation skill, to embark on a trip of several thousand kilometers, was a double achievement. They had to overcome not only the fear of the unknown, but also an anxiety of leaving a familiar steppe habitat. The journey had required weeks if not months. Hay needed to be cut and shelters erected on high points. The boreal winter started much earlier and could have ended this remarkable Turkic advancement to the north. Evidently it did not happen. Instead, more people followed the pioneering Yakuts. For that purpose we assume the first comers left the short scripture in now lost old Turkic runic writing on the cliffs near the confluence of River Sinyaya into the Lena River, near the Lena Pillars (Figure 3.7).

Next we need to see how the ancient Yakuts were able to settle and survive in this new habitat and colder, much harsher climate. In order to understand the possible processes that took place I put the concept of preadaptation in the center of the fourth chapter.



Figure 3.6: A sketch of an early Yakut settlement in the Erkyani Valley, based on the archeological site.

Source: drawing provided by The Sakha Ministry of Land Reform, 1997.



Figure 3.7: The only evidence that the proto-Yakuts might have had a written tradition in the old Turkic runic style, at the confluence of the Lena River and Sinyaya, near the Lena Pillars.

Source: Gogolev 1993, 24.

Chapter 4: The Boreal Grasslands and Adjustment to a New

Habitat

In order to understand both the attraction of the Yakutian grasslands to the Central Asian cattle and horse herders, fleeing down the Lena, and the magnitude of their adjustment to this new habitat, we need to have a clear idea of the biophysical environment of Central Yakutia, including both the site of the first settlement in the three valleys, and later interfluvial sites. The central lowlands of Yakutia are flat and lie mainly at about 125 to 235 meters in elevation. Permafrost underlies the area and plays a major role in the formation of physical landscapes. This periglacial environment, formed as a result of the lack of glaciation during the last ice age, is constantly reproducing itself through the thawing of ice-rich permafrost and the ensuing consolidation (Williams and Smith 1989, 141).

Improbably, perhaps even incredibly, the Yakuts found abundant luxuriant grasslands as they entered the Central Yakutian Lowlands (Figure 4.1). These grasslands consisted of two major types: ice-dam riverine prairies, also known as overflow prairies, and *alases*, grassy depressions of thermokarst origin strewn through the boreal taiga forest. These two types of grasslands proved essential to



Figure 4.1: Terrain regions of Yakutia. Source: modified from Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 10.

Yakut colonization of the new habitat, and ultimately to their survival, facilitating their ethnogenesis. They were grassland people, and had the Yakuts not found the prairies, they most probably would not have survived as cattle and horse herders, and ultimately would not have created their new subarctic homeland. For that reason, due understanding of the boreal grasslands, is needed.

Ice-dam Riparian Prairies

Ice-dam riverine prairies are almost uniquely a Siberian phenomenon. In North America only the Mackenzie River is similar, as it, too, flows north into the Arctic Ocean. Like other northern Siberian rivers, the Lena River rises far to the south and begins thawing much earlier near its sources than near its mouth. As result, ice-dams form, and the overflow carves broad treeless floodplain valleys (Figure 4.2).

The three big alluvial valleys where ancient Yakuts settled first had been formed through a series of processes. First, they have been eroded laterally by the changing course of the Lena River, whose abandoned channels are clearly seen from the air. Second, their grassy character has been sustained through the repeated process of stream overflow due to ice damming, mainly affecting the left or western bank of the river. These valleys lie at an elevation ranging between 80 and 100 meters above sea level, and are surrounded by the slightly more elevated

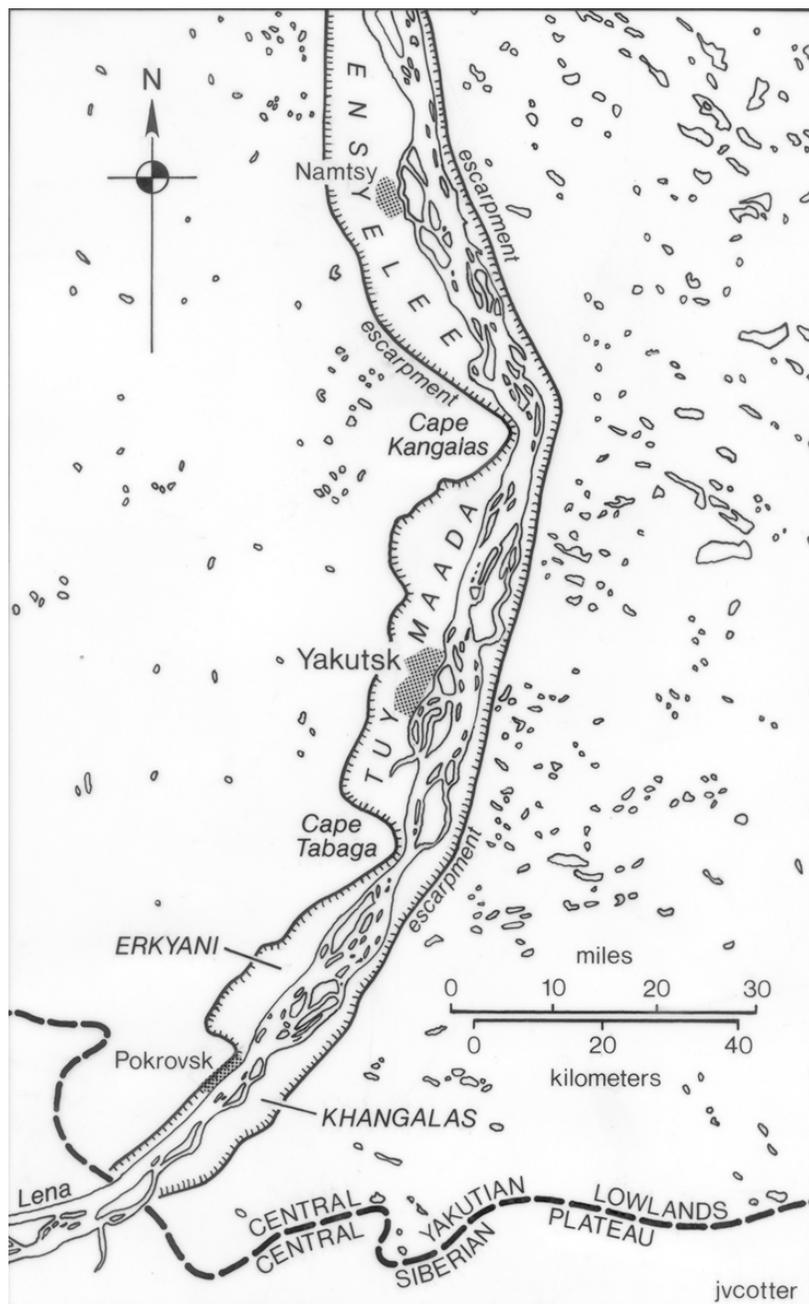


Figure 4.2: The Three Valleys in the middle current of the Lena River, where the oldest Yakut archeological site was found.
 Source: redrawn and modified from *Defense Mapping* 1970, sheet D7-D7B.

surfaces. West of the valleys, this plain lies at altitude from 210 to 235 meters above sea level, while the right bank is lower and ranges between 125 and 160 meters. The three floodplain valleys are separated by projections of the higher-lying surface, which in two places reaches the banks of the Lena (Nazarova 1991).

The first and the smallest of the three valleys as one travels from the south is called *Erkyani*. It is here that the oldest archeological vestiges of the ancient Yakuts were found (Figure 3.6). The valley stretches along the river for 37 kilometers and is seven kilometers broad at its widest point. The second vale, *Tuymaada*, is much larger and houses the city of Yakutsk. It stretches 63 kilometers from south to north and is up to 11 kilometers wide. This width, combined with the broad expanse of the river surface, creates an impression of a vast open space. From the high-rise apartment block where I once lived, the view to the bluffs to the east and west is indeed sweeping. Tuymaada pinches out on the south at the heights of Myachey-Sihe (“Myachey’s Spine”) at Cape Tabaga, while on the northern end, the projection called Cape Kangalas terminates the valley. The northernmost valley, *Ensyeelee*, is the largest of the three. It stretches for almost 110 kilometers along the Lena and reaches a width of 14 kilometers. Despite its impressive size, Ensyeelee is the least densely populated of the valleys. Its largest settlement, Namtsy, is scarcely more than a village. Clearly, its more

northern location places this valley at the limits of cattle and horse herding. Snow melts later there, and its native grasses emerge later and wither earlier (*Atlas* 1989, 25). The release of the cattle from the barns occurs several weeks later than elsewhere. As a result, more hay must be produced. Also, much of Enseyelee does not experience ice-dam flooding and is, as a consequence, forested. All of this meant a need of more land per family in Enseyelee, thinning the population density (Nazarova 1991).

The far greater part of the expanse of the three valleys is classified vegetationally as “alluvial meadow steppe”, with some areas of “alluvial marsh”. Most common are tall grasses, especially *Poa pratensis* and *Equisetum pratense*, mixed with hard-stemmed reeds identified as *Carex duriuscula*. Although alluvial sands underlie some of these riverine prairie lands, the more common soils are meadow chernozems (*Atlas* 1989, 29, 33, 37, 39-43). Most of the sands and marshes occur in the Erkyani Valley.

Parts of the inner margins of Enseyelee and Tuymaada valleys stand slightly elevated as alluvial terraces and are spared the ice-dam flooding. This allows groves of pine trees on sandy soils, and stretches of larch-bilberry taiga to gain footholds in the valleys (*Atlas* 1989, 40-43). Generally, though, the taiga begins on the bluffs that mark the inner border of the valleys, especially in Erkyani. Similarly wooded bluffs line the eastern margin of the Rich Valley, the ancient home of the Yakuts. The visual similarity between these two valleys is

really quite striking, and the attraction of Erkyani to the migrating Yakuts must have been powerful.

Although the three great left-bank valleys loom large in Yakut folklore and oral history, there was in fact a fourth, much smaller riverine prairie that from the very beginning attracted settlement. Called *Khangalas*, it lies on the right bank of the Lena and would have been the first to meet the eyes of the Yakuts as they came down the river (Figure 4.2). Khangalass lies at the very foot of the plateaus of Central Siberia, announcing arrival in the great Central Yakutian Lowlands.

Alases: Thermokarst Lakes and Meadows

The surface of the Central Yakutian Lowlands, standing above the riverine valleys, exhibits a very different character. Although largely forested, a substantial part of the area consists of lakes and meadows of thermokarst origin. A thermokarst lake is “a water body that occupies a closed depression (also known as *alas*), created by subsidence following the decay of ground ice” (Ritter et al. 1995, 376-378). The term *thermokarst*, though used to describe such terrain, is misleading. Though it contains the stem “karst”, no process of solution of the ground occurs, as in the karst process proper. Instead it denotes a geomorphological process involving the melting of the upper ice layer contained in the ground and subsequent formation of depressions (Czudek and Demek 1970,

103). The low-lying plains of central Yakutia are dotted by almost countless thermokarst lakes and alases of varying sizes (Figures 4.3, 4.4). In order to explain the significance of the thermokarst landscape for the livelihood of the Yakut cattle and horse herders, we need to understand the geomorphologic conditions and processes in central Yakutia.

This region of the world is a *periglacial* environment. This term itself is used to describe cold-climate, non-glacial processes, primarily taking place on the land. Glacial and periglacial are non-overlapping, but complementary characteristics of cold environments (Washburn 1973, 1-2). *Periglacial* is understood more widely as not only the conditions and processes, but also as the resultant landforms in cold, nonglacial environments (Ballantyne and Harris 1994, 3). The degree of activity of periglacial processes varies with several conditions, especially climate and relief. Local factors, however, such as terrain, soil, bedrock, type and density of vegetation, and the volume and structure of ice in the ground are also of importance. As far as a type of terrain is concerned, T. Czudek and J. Demek (1970, 103), the most esteemed specialists on the central Yakutian thermokarst environment, hold that periglacial landforms are most prominent in



Figure 4.3. Alas between Yakutsk and Suntar in the Central Yakutian Lowland.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1996.



Figure 4.4: A chain of alases in central Yakutia.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1996.

lowlands of “subnival region of permafrost”. The three main factors and conditions that influence formation of the thermokarst landscape of central Yakutia are climate, permafrost, and terrain. All three, in turn, affect vegetation and people.

Climate of Central Yakutia

Among the most important factors that influence the climate of Yakutia in general is its northern position in the large Eurasian landmass, bordering on the Arctic Ocean. More than one-third of Yakutia lies within the Arctic Circle. The republic is characterized by a cold, extreme continental microthermal climate, with the annual temperature range reaching 100° C. Central Yakutia has an annual average air temperature of –10° to –12 °C, and precipitation of 250-300 mm. In the period of Old Glaciation, this part of Yakutia was not glaciated, due to the aridity of the region, and as a result thick permafrost zone formed. The major factor influencing the atmospheric condition in this area is the strong and stable winter Siberian anticyclone (Suslov 1961, 27; Bosikov 1991, 20-22).

An important factor for the cryogenic landscape formation of central Yakutian Lowland region are the relatively high summer temperatures. The average July temperature here is 14° to 16° C, and some days the air temperature rises as high as 32° to 35° C. The soils can warm up to 40° to 50° C. Summers are

also characterized by increased moisture. These two conditions combined serve as significant agents in the thawing of ground ice, in the active layer and in the long run, if local disturbances occur, can start a thermokarst process (Konstantinov 1983, 32).

Type of Relief and Characteristics of Permafrost

As was indicated earlier, central Yakutia is largely a low-lying plain with elevations rarely exceeding 230-250 meters above sea level. At the same time the depth of permanently frozen ground in this area reaches as much as 500 meters. Permafrost is a crucial factor in the thermokarst processes. S.W. Muller proposed the term *permafrost* in 1947 to describe ground, all or part of which remains below freezing for a long time (Williams and Smith 1989, 1-2; Embleton and King 1975, 26). Some authors object to the use of the term, as it implies the permanent frozen condition of the ground, while changes in climate and surface conditions can warm and thaw the layers of permafrost. They prefer the term “perennially frozen ground” or “pergelisol” (Hopkins 1949, 121). Most scientists use the word permafrost even though they know that nothing is really permanent (Washburn 1973, 18; Wallace 1948, 171; Koutaniemi 1985, 425; Burn 1992b, 346).

It must be noted here that most authors who study periglacial geomorphology do not include glaciers within permafrost, though by the

definition they are a part of the permafrost condition. According to some estimates, in the northern hemisphere permafrost (with glaciers) underlies 26 percent of the world land surface. It also underlies the Arctic Ocean, but its distribution there is not well understood (Washburn 1973, 19). For the purposes of this study, the definition of permafrost as ground that has a temperature below 0° C for at least two consecutive years (Ballantyne and Harris 1994, 31) is accepted.

In his book *Periglacial Processes and Environments* (1973), A. L. Washburn summarized research on permafrost and gave a detailed characterization of its origin, distribution, basic types, depth, continuity, thermal regime, environmental implications, and other aspects. Without going into much detail, I introduce basic features of permafrost that are important for the understanding of the thermokarst process. First, permafrost is divided into continuous and discontinuous, according to the manner of its occurrence (Grave 1983, 191; Koutaniemi 1985, 425). But both zones are characterized by the same feature, an active layer, an upper layer of ground that undergoes thawing and freezing every year. The depth of the active layer varies with the latitude and climatic conditions from 0.6 to 3.0 meters (Hopkins 1949, 122). It is in this upper layer that the thermokarst process starts.

Second, the ice in the ground comes in different forms. The ice particles vary in size, from micro particles invisible to the naked eye to 2.5 cm. Some may be mixed with soil, some not. Some areas of frozen ground are modified by

certain forms of segregated ice, including ice lenses, ice wedges, and ice veins. The exposure of these ice forms is necessary to trigger the thermokarst process. The thermal and chemical effects of water thaw the ice veins even in severe Arctic conditions where the temperature of the permafrost ranges from -9° C to -11° C (Washburn 1973, Czudek and Demek 1970, 104; Péwé 1973, 80; Black 1969, 151).

Another structural feature common to both continuous and discontinuous types of permafrost is *talik*, or an unfrozen soil layer. Talik is considered to be either an indicator of former climatic changes, or to represent aquifers associated with artesian pressures (Williams and Smith 1989, 31; Ritter et al. 1995, 377; Washburn 1973, 29; Embleton and King 1975, 26-27). In Central Yakutia large continuous and encircled taliks underlie parts of the major rivers and most thermokarst lakes (Pavlov and Are 1983, 285; Fedorov et al. 1983, 95; Bosikov 1991, 27-28).

The ice wedges and ice veins occupy between 30 and 60 percent of the surface area in the Central Yakutian lowlands. It is in these locations with considerable ground ice and polygonal network of ice veins that the thermokarst landforms are most prominent. The active layer does not exceed 1.5 – 2.0 meters in this area (Lydolph 1990, 81; Fedorov 1996, 99; Fedorov et al 1983, 92-93; Fedorov 1983, 10-11; Sivtsev 1963, 7-10).

Major Stages of Alas Formation

The most common form in which thermokarst manifests itself in Central Yakutia is a circular or oval depression termed in the Yakutian language an *alas* (Ivanov 1983, 97). A young alas usually contains a central thermokarst lake that is created by subsidence following the melt of ground ice (Figure 4.3). These lakes lack external drainage (Koutaniemi 1985, 428; Ritter et al. 1995, 376; *Yakutia* 1965, 196).

In a classical study of alas formation, Czudek and Demek (1970) showed how thermokarst destroys the initial surface in this region and creates a new type of relief that is lower than the initial non-disturbed terrain. They demonstrated that the distribution of ground ice plays an important role in thermokarst development and pointed out two major modes of such process: *back-wearing*, that usually occurs on more dissected relief, and *down-wearing*, which is a main factor of modifying a landscape on the flat relief in watershed regions. They attribute evolution of alases to the second type.

Formation of the thermokarst depression and lake is a gradual process and includes the following several stages (Figure 4.5). During the first stage, the ice wedges are exposed due to some *in situ* disturbances: fire or destruction of cover vegetation. They begin to thaw, and the subsidence of the ground occurs. When this occurs in taiga, trees circling the enlarging depression begin to lean and are described as “drunken trees”. Once the process starts, water becomes a major

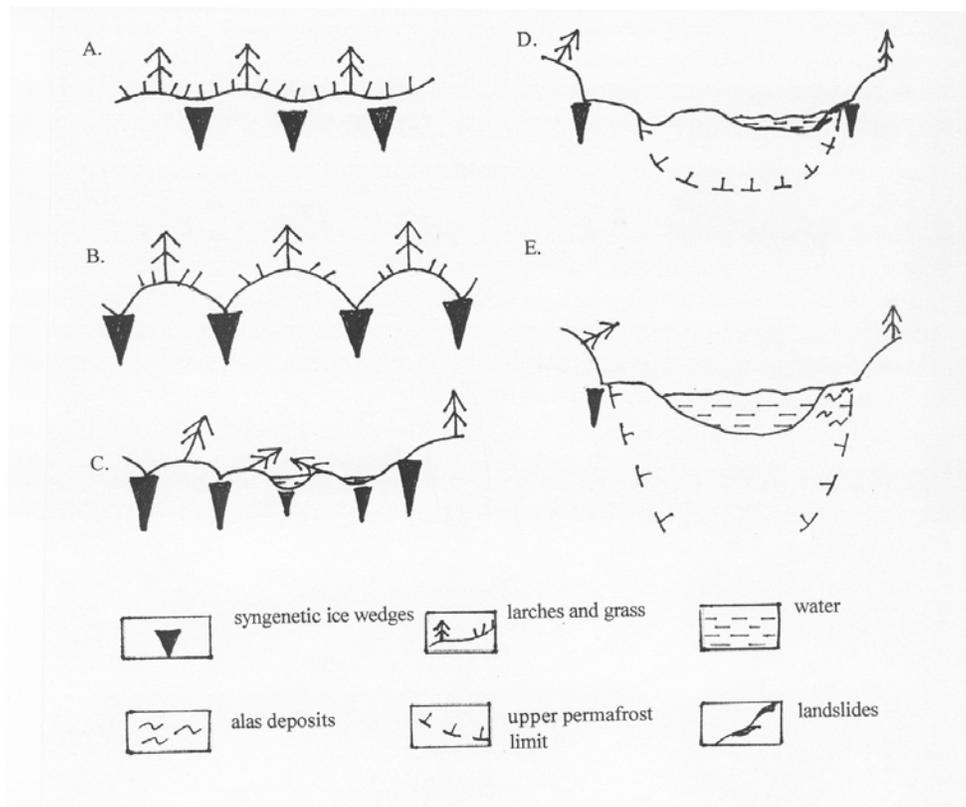


Figure 4.5. Degradation of permafrost and the evolution of alas (Source: simplified from T. Czudek and J. Demek, 1970, 111).

factor in formation of the lake, as it promotes the transmission of heat to the soil more effectively than air (Burn 1992a, 81). Lakes become deeper because of subsidence. A lake is confined by the depth of the active layer plus the depth of the *talik*, the unfrozen ground that does not contain ice (Burn 1992a, 82).

Water promotes lateral expansion of the depression as well. Sometimes several small lakes in a depression become interconnected and form a larger lake. Such a process characterizes the initial stages of thermokarst lake formation. It must be mentioned here that the water in thermokarst lakes only initially comes from the ground ice. After the lake is formed, however, the main source of water is atmospheric precipitation, mainly rain. In dry years smaller lakes can completely dry out. As a result, a depression becomes a grassy land suitable both for arable and pasture use, as the soils formed in place of former lakes may be of chernozem quality (Bosikov 1991, 18-19; *Atlas* 1989, 32-33).

The shapes of thermokarst depressions and their lake depend partly on the character of soils. If the soils are clayish, the depression and lake have steeper and higher sides, where as in sandy soils the edges are lower, less steep, and have a tendency to be marshy (Wolfe 1953, 141, Koutaniemu 1985, 430; *Yakutia* 1965, 196). Alas sizes vary considerably from 300-500 square meters to 3 square kilometers, and sometimes even up to 20-30 square kilometers (Figure 4.4). The depth of the lakes on average is 3-4 meters, rarely reaching 40 meters (Pavlov and Are 1983, 282). As Figure 4.2 shows, central Yakutia is covered with

thermocarst alases, making a unique landscape, in which the boreal forest is dotted with myriad small grassy meadows.

Disturbances that trigger thermocarst processes can be natural factors of large scale, mainly climatic changes, such as increase in temperatures or humidity, or an increase in continentality, leading to warmer summers. They can also be at a local scale, involving vegetation cover destruction following forest fires ignited by lightning, or a presence of standing water *in situ*. It is important to point out that over decades or centuries of living in certain alas regions, people could have altered the terrain by purposeful activity, either in order to enlarge the area of grasslands, or inadvertently, by household routine activities or by simply keeping herds of animals that trample the ground. This they would have done incrementally (Doolittle 1984). The anthropogenic and zoogenic types of permafrost disturbance have been recognized since the very first investigations of thermocarst (Hopkins 1949, 122; Czudek and Demek 1970, 103; Williams and Smith 1989, 143, Bosikov 1991, 112).

Importance of Alas Vegetation For Livelihood of the Yakuts

Alases provide a resource that can be hardly overestimated for pastoralists – grass. Thermocarst lakes are commonly surrounded by concentric belts of herbaceous vegetation. Nearest to the lake, the innermost circle is boggy and

covered with reeds and sedges. Odd little mounds called *thufur*, created by the repeated freezing and thawing of water trapped in tiny depressions, dot the edges of the bog. The second concentric belt has grasses mixed with wetland plants, and beyond it the true grassland begins, dominated by fescue, feathergrass, wild barley, sorrel, and koeleria. On the outer periphery of the alases, in the highest-lying and driest zone, grasses grow less luxuriantly and are challenged by wormwood (*Atlas* 1989, 42-43). The grasses are of sufficiently high quality to provide hay and pastures for cattle and horses (Figure 4.6).

In traditional times an alas served as a hamlet site and home range for a nuclear Sakha family, sustaining up to 20 cows and a dozen of horses. According to some estimates, from 40 to 60 percent of all hay produced in Yakutia today come from alases (Mironova 1983, 18-21, Bosikov 1991, 25-27; *Atlas* 1989, 67).

Another advantage of alas terrain is that the rearranged soil horizons contain few ice wedges that might create unstable ground. Such places, accordingly, are preferred locales for constructing houses (Fedorov et al. 1983, 92-93). Lakes are also an important source of fish and breeding grounds for fowl. Not all thermokarst lakes, however, were suitable for settling, as some of them have a high degree of mineralization in the water (Kosmachev 1985, 433).

Formation of thermokarst lakes comes in cycles that span decades or even centuries. The latest period in the increased formation of thermokarst lakes in



Figure 4.6: Grasses in the large alas with a central lake, in Suntar ulus.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1996.

Central Yakutia, according to N. P. Bosikov (1991, 17-18), lasted from the 1820s until the beginning of the 20th century. In the middle of the past century many lakes dried out, forming meadows and pasturelands. In the 1980s a new wave of thermokarst activity and lake formation has been registered (Fedorov 1996, 107).

The 20th century also brought an unprecedented human impact on the environment of Yakutia. Scientists working in different parts of the world agree that it is disturbances in specific locations that usually trigger the thermokarst process, not global climate change. Thus V. V. Vinogradova argues that during global warming in the 1980s, all parts of Russia manifested the amelioration of the climatic severity, except Yakutia and Chukotka (1996). C. R. Burn believes that thermokarst lakes may be useful as surface expressions of response of permafrost to climatic warming, but precise locations of lakes are due to site-specific factors (Burn 1992b, 83). The establishment of climate-thermokarst relations remains to be determined (Williams and Smith 1989, 80).

Preadaptation and Adjustment to a New Habitat

The ancestors of modern Yakuts succeeded in colonizing the riverine prairies and alases of the central Yakutian Lowlands in no small part because they were an ancient people of the steppes. Their cattle and horses could survive in the boreal grasslands. In the long, epic journey down the Lena, no other lands they

passed offered the possibility to continue their pastoral way of life. Adjustments had to be made, but the new habitat was sufficiently familiar to facilitate continuity in their way of life. In short, the migrating Yakuts were preadapted to success in the new homeland. The key component of their pastoralist way of life, use of grasslands for herding cattle and horses, could be continued.

Let us compare the quality of steppe grasses of the Rich Valley that the ancient Yakuts left behind in the south and those in central Yakutia. Two major vegetation and soil complexes characterize the area of the Rich Valley: steppe and meadow. The predominant soils are classified as chernozems and meadow chernozems (Grudinin et al. 1997, 91-92, 161). The steppe chernozem soils allow the growth of a wide variety of grasses, including different wild cereals, such as barley, feather grass, couch grass, and several kinds of leguminous plants, including clover, lucerne and vetch. Some salty and acidic plants, such as dandelions, goosefoot, and sorrel add to the fuller diet of cattle and horses. The meadow soils because of their greater degree of salinity are home to smaller variety of grasses, mainly sod like vegetation and helophytic plants.

The summers in the Rich Valley are considerably warmer with a period of temperatures higher than 15° C lasting for 58-65 days. The growing period in the Rich Valley lasts on average 145 days as contrasted to as few as 90 days in the central Yakutian valleys. This comparison shows almost two months of difference in the length of the vegetative growth period. Even so, the two areas appear as



Figure 4.7: The Rich Valley in the Bayantay District, The Ust'-Ordynsky Buryat Autonomous District.

Source: a photograph by the author 2000.

relatively similar in the Koeppen/Trewartha climate classification. Both the Rich Valley and the Central Yakutian Valleys have microthermal climates, with the winter dry. Bayandai weather station in the Rich valley is classified as Dwc, with January average of -27.7° C, while Yakutsk in Tuymaada Valley is Dwd, reflecting its lower January average of -42° C. In short, the winters are colder and the growing season far shorter in the new homeland (Grudinin et al. 1997, 47-48; *Atlas* 1989, 23; Hudson 2000, 15) (Figure 4.8).

At the same time the differences in climatic conditions are not as dramatic as could be expected after moving more than 2,000 kilometers to the north. This similarity is partly explained by the fact that the Rich Valley lies at an elevation between 500 and 600 meters above sea level, whereas the three great valleys of Central Yakutia are below 100 meters of elevation. The absolute minimum temperatures registered in the Rich Valley stand at -50° C, -51° C. Annual precipitation in both regions is remarkably similar as well and is less than 300 mm (Grudinin et al. 1997, 50; *Atlas* 1989, 24).

Thus it can be concluded that despite certain differences in climatic conditions, there are many similarities between the Yakuts' old and new, more northern, habitat. It is clear, then, that the Yakut colonization of their new homeland included both preadaptation and substantial change. Most of the elements of preadaptation have been already introduced in this chapter. The

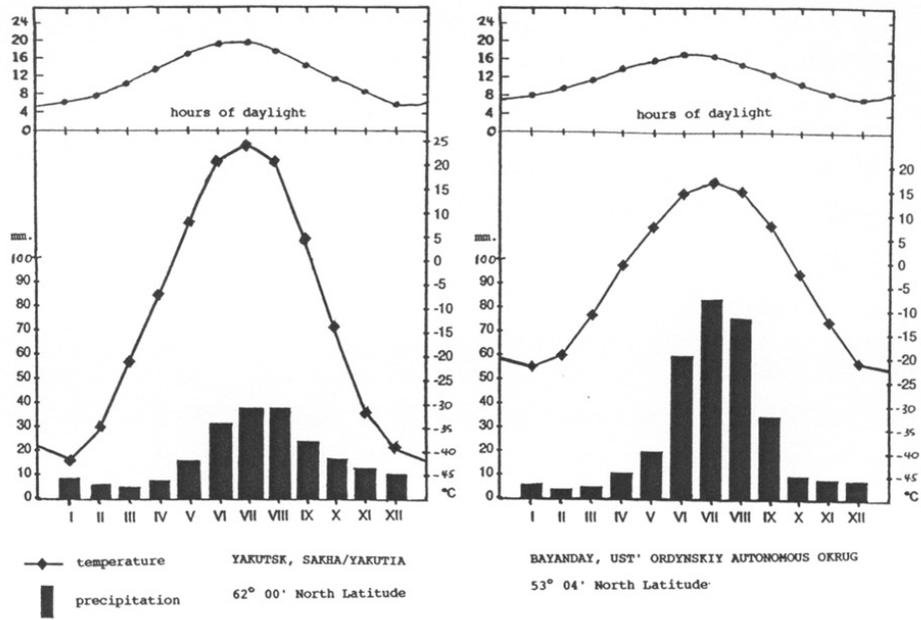


Figure 4.8: A climograph comparing temperatures, precipitation, and daylight hours in The Rich Valley and The Three Valleys.

Source: Grudin, et al. 1997, 47-48; *Atlas* 1989, 23; Hudson 2000, 15.

Yakuts' epic journey down the Lena brought them to a land where their herding way of life could continue. Their very survival as pastoralists serves as strong evidence that they were preadapted to the Yakutian habitat. Even their traditional house type – the *balagan* - served them well in the new home (Müller 1882, 164-165). The balagan's slanted vertical log walls plastered with a mixture of loam and cow dung had the necessary heat-retaining qualities (Figure 3.5, 4.9). Another advantage the newcomers had that served them well in their home was that they arrived with the knowledge of blacksmithing and metal weapon making.

And yet, the ancient Yakuts had to make great changes in their means of livelihood and herding practices at once and in urgency. In the process of radical change they very soon lost much of their ancient Neolithic culture. In the north they lapsed into illiteracy, and no longer did they create the pictographs that adorned the cliffs in their southern home. Sheep, goats and camels disappeared from their herds. Only the words for those lost animals are still archaically present in the modern Sakha language. The reduction in livestock diversity made them much more dependent on cattle and horses. It is quite probable that reliance on horseflesh came about at the same time, in order to compensate for the other sources of meat. The colder and longer winters almost certainly required the construction of warm cowsheds. According to P. von Stenin, such barns, called *khotons*, were traditionally built in the same style as balagans, with few alterations. The cowsheds occupied a large part of the balagan, separated



Figure 4.9: Modern balagan structure, used as a cowshed.

Source: A photograph by the author, 1996.

from the people's section sometimes only by a thin wooden wall. This way people and animals were able to share warmth and conserve energy (Strahlenberg 1738, 382; von Stenin 1897, 5-6).

The production of larger quantities of hay for cattle and horses became their major challenge, given the fact that the growing season was now shortened by two months. Far more hay had to be produced in far less time. The ancient Yakuts had cut hay in the Rich Valley, transporting it in typical Central Asian Turkic land sledges (Huntington 1907, 130; Jochelson 1934, 187). Such sledges survive to the present day for hay hauling in Yakutia (Figure 4.10). But in the southern home considerably less hay had to be stored for winter months.

Their ancient calendar became partly obsolete. With the shifting of nature cycles in the new habitat, the events and practices started to occur at different times. No longer did March – *kulun tutar* - correspond to its original meaning of “month of foaling”. When in 1933 anthropologist Waldemar Jochelson pointed this to Yakuts, they pondered with bewilderment: “How it was that in former times the foals were tied and the mares milked so early” (1934, 100-101). Nor did ice on rivers and lakes in Yakutia begin to break in April – *muus ustaar* – “month of floating ice”. The Yakut Neolithic knowledge of pottery making also took a hard blow. Although they retained pottery making in the new land, it was greatly



Figure 4.10: A traditional hay sledge still in use in distant Sakha villages.

Source: A photograph by the author, 1997.

simplified and somehow the major component, potter's wheel, was lost in the process of migration (Jochelson 1934, 157-163).

The new climate did not allow the continuation of small grains cultivation and bread disappeared from their diet. It was not until the Russians colonized this part of Siberia, that bread was reintroduced (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 39). Gradually Yakuts learned ingenious ways to compensate for the absence of cereals. That and other adjustments in strategy will be discussed in the following chapter that focuses on incremental changes rather than the quick and radical transformations prompted by the immediate necessities of survival.

Chapter 5: Ethnic Boundaries and Territories: A New People of the Ecotone

Indigenous peoples of Yakutia: Evenki, Evens, Yukagirs and Chukchi

It was not enough that the Yakuts found boreal grasslands and could perpetuate many aspects of their pastoral way of life in the north. To survive they also needed to utilize the taiga forest – to become, in a classical Gumilevian way, a people of the ecotone (Gumilev 1993).

Fortunately, when the ancestors of modern Yakuts landed on the left bank of the Lena River centuries ago, they did not find themselves in isolation. The indigenous peoples of this region, Yukagirs, Evenki (also known as Tungus), and Evens (also known as Lamuts), the ancient hunters, fishers, and gatherers of forested eastern Siberia, had roamed this area since times immemorial. They possessed the forest-dwelling skills that were later shared with the Yakuts.

The *Yukagirs*, a people who linguistically belong to the Paleosiberian

group, are considered to be among the most ancient indigenous peoples in northeast Siberia (Slezkine 1994, 1, 3). Mainly fishers, Yukagirs traditionally lived along the banks of major northern rivers of Yakutia, the Yana, Kolyma, Indigirka, and Alazeya, and occasionally along the middle straits of the Lena (Figure 5.1). By the time of Yakut arrival, the Evenki, another indigenous group, had already pushed Yukagirs further to the north, but cultural exchanges and ethnic mixing between the Yakuts, settling in the central Yakuian area of the Three Valleys, and the fishing Yukagirs still occurred occasionally. These encounters were recorded in oral epic of the Yakuts *Olonkho* (Alekseev 1996, 58, Seroshevksy 1993, 230-231; Oiyunsky 1982). Today, Yukagirs who comprise only 1,100 individuals occupy a small area along the low currents of the Indigirka River (Figure 5.1).

The *Chukchi*, like the Yukagirs, are known as Paleosiberian, or Paleoasiatic people, whose language predates the Uralic and Altaic languages. Genetically they are related to the Koryaks and Itel'men of Chukotko-Kamchatkan family (Slezkine 1994, 3; Freeman 2000, 17). These reindeer-herding people traditionally occupied the interior of the Chukotka Peninsula, but in their nomadic travels they occasionally penetrated as far west as the northeast margins of Yakutia. The Yakuts did not encounter them until several centuries after their arrival in Yakutia and generally did not mix with them ethnically

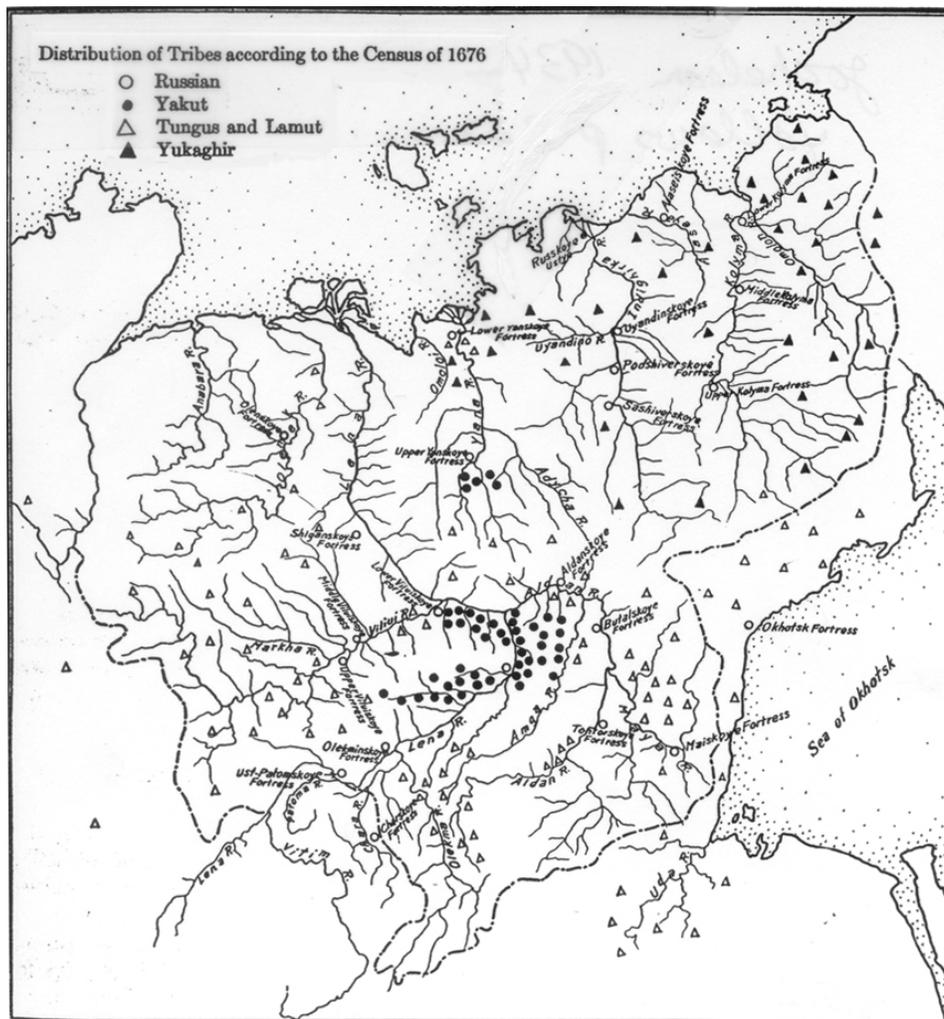


Figure 5.1: Distribution of ethnic groups on the territory of the 17th century Yakutia. Each dot or triangle represents a settlement.

Source: Jochelson 1934, follows p. 222

(Seroshevsky 1992, 241-242). In general, the Chukchi have a reputation as a ferocious, warlike people. They are known to have decimated the Yukagirs, and repeatedly defeated the Koryaks, their neighbors to the south. But most impressively, they repulsed the Russian Cossacks and did not become a de facto part of the Russian empire until the early 20th century (Shimkin 1988, 3; Slezkine 1994, 16-17).

The *Evenki*, the most numerous among the indigenous peoples of Yakutia, belong to Mongol-Manchurian stock. They are also the most widely spread nomadic peoples of eastern Eurasia. Their remarkable mobility since very ancient times was based on their mastery of reindeer hunting and on their domestication of these animals for riding and burden bearing. Early Chinese sources inform of the Evenki use of saddled reindeer as early as the 6th century A. D. (Freeman 2000, 59, 60). Today the Evenki are still among the most dispersed ethnic groups in northern Asia. Beside the Russian Federation, where their numbers exceed 30,000, they also live in northern China and Mongolia. In Siberia, the Evenki live in Krasnoyarsky Krai in the west, in the mountainous area of trans-Baikal, and in the Maritime Province and Kamchatka region of the Far East. Many reside in traditional communities within modern Yakutia (Fondahl 1996).

Because of the widely dispersed nature of these people, encounters between the pastoralist Yakuts and the hunting nomadic Evenki had occurred already in the old Rich Valley homeland. In fact, according to Yakut legends, it

was an Evenki man who told them about the three beautiful, grassy valleys far to the north (Ksenofontov 1992, 23). When the Yakuts finally arrived in the Three Valley area, they found Evenki living in the surrounding forested areas.

The *Evens (Lamuts)*, also of Mongol-Manchurian linguistic group, are so closely related to the Evenki, that the two groups were often lumped together into a single category of '*Tungusic*' people (Jochelson 1934, 222; Slezkine 1994, xv; Freeman 2000, 59). Far less numerous than Evenki, the fishing and hunting Evens lived mainly in the northeastern region of Yakutia, along the upper currents of the Yana, Indigirka, and Kolyma (Figure 5.1). Their substantial contact with the Yakuts occurred several centuries after the settlement of the Three Valleys, when Yakuts under the pressure of colonizing Russians fled to the northwestern and northeastern margins of Yakutia. The interactions between Yakuts and Evens eventually led to the formation of a new ethnic group, the *Dolgans* - those Evens who were linguistically and culturally assimilated by Yakuts. As this process did not start until the middle of the 17th century, it will be described later in the dissertation, in Chapter 6.

Because the Evenki were the largest and closest neighbor, the major cultural exchange occurred between Yakut and them. This cultural exchange was accompanied by ethnic mixing (Fedorova 1998, 13). The process of acculturation affected both groups, but the results and degree of this process were quite different. After several decades the Yakuts expanded their ecological and cultural

boundaries, while the Evenki stuck to their ancient nomadic way of life.

Moreover, they had to cede large areas to Yakuts, who were better equipped technologically.

How did Yakuts and Evenki get along and decide about the division of the territory? Oral tradition is replete with stories about the Yakuts being superior warriors to the Evenki. The latter were armed only with wooden bows and arrows, while the former used long iron knives and spears. The Yakut warriors protected their bodies with metal chain mail, armor, and helmets (Vinokurova 1994, 38-39). Legends also inform of a peaceful solution of conflicts between the two groups. Leaders of Yakut clans or their sons often married a “Tungus princesses” and received parcels of land as dowry (Dalan 1990). However, as smooth as this expansion might have been, the territorial relationships between intruding Yakuts and the indigenous Evenki should not be judged on anecdotal evidence. There is a compelling reason why the more numerous and environmentally knowledgeable Evenki, did not kill the first newcomers, and it is of ecological nature. The southern cattle and horse herders initially sought only the grassy river valleys and meadows surrounding thermokarst lakes, while the Evenki, being a forest people hunted reindeer and other animals, found their basic resources in the boreal taiga. It was only after the Yakuts had firmly become settled in their new habitat and began to appropriate the forested margins of the riverine grasslands, that the Evenki resisted pressure on their land resources.

When Fredrik Barth (1969, 19-20) wrote about ethnic boundaries between different groups of people, he emphasized the use of and competition for resources as the basis for such boundaries. But these boundaries are not simply physical lines between certain habitats. They are more than anything cultural perceptions of *territoriality* of one's own group, as opposed to that of a neighboring group. Thus the Yakuts, a steppe people, perceived grasslands as their cultural or ecological niche, as it served a source for maintenance and reproduction of their culture and livelihood. For nomadic Evenki hunters who rode saddled reindeer, the territory perceived as their own stretches as far as the boreal forest itself. Nomadic Evenki fishers perceive the shores of rivers and lakes as their own territory that sustains their particular way of life. Thus cultural and ecological boundaries for traditional peoples are synonymous.

What follows, then, in traditional societies, is that cultural, or ecologically derived boundaries do not always represent uninterrupted, physical lines on the ground as clearly defined borderlines. In reality such boundaries follow a distribution of certain ecologically similar habitats. In this manner, the ethnic boundaries can be discontinuous and the ethnic territories fragmented.

What ethnic boundaries involve, then, is *territoriality*. This term has different usages, grouped along two basic assumptions. First, territoriality may be an innate sense of territory that humans share with animals. Robert Ardrey in *Territorial Imperative* (1966) argued that attachment to a certain territory is an

instinct and leads to a desire to defend that piece of land. The second view is best of represented by Robert Sack (1986, 19), who stressed the social and cultural-political nature of territoriality. In his opinion, territoriality is “an attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area”.

Without trying to settle this complex issue, we need to note that both Yakuts and Evenki had a similar type of territoriality. It can be better described as a *traditional* type based on the use of resources and primary livelihood. This traditional type was replaced in modern states by a different concept of territoriality, known as *nation-state territoriality*. Such type requires the existence of well-developed political organization. Guntram H. Herb argues that it is the politicized nature of nation-states that makes difference between ethnic groups, dwelling on a certain territory, and nation-states (1999, 16-17, 21). In his earlier work Benedict Anderson listed among the crucial conditions for existence of states clearly defined territorial boundaries and political sovereignty (1983).

When the Russian Cossacks started to colonize Siberia in early 1620s, they imposed on the indigenous population the idea of the Russian state. They began to take censuses, delimitate and map administrative regions with sharp boundaries, and use the army to maintain the borders. Before this process began, Siberian aboriginals did not have a concept of fences and border guards. The Evenki's territoriality, like other indigenous traditional perception of one's

territory, was based on the adaptation of their hunting fishing practices to the land resources. It included both communal use of land resources and the existence of territories assigned to extended families or clans. The concept of landownership was quite different from that of modern state (Karppi 2001, 396- 397). B. O. Dolgikh and M. G. Levin, in their study of Evenki traditional territorial relationships, emphasize clan-based territorial limitations (1962, 306-309). In other words, the Evenki's extensive migrations and nomadic travels in northern Eurasia were driven by the availability and distribution of resources.

The Yakut perception of territory needed for their herds was of a similar nature. But unlike the Evenki, they were more stationary and tended to expand their territorial boundaries in a contiguous manner, rather than scatter throughout large expanses of land. One can argue then, that because resources the two groups sought were initially different, it allowed at first a more or less peaceful coexistence. Moreover, each group had what the other lacked in terms of skills, technology, and knowledge of the habitat. It was a case of forest people living on forest resources and a grassland tribe doing grassland things. The two may have initially had a symbiotic relationship, exchanging good by trade and barter. This staged a perfect scenario for cultural exchange between the Yakut newcomers and the indigenous Evenki. It allowed both peoples the chance to become a new people of the ecotone, but it was only the Yakuts who would seize this ethnogenetic opportunity.

According to Barth, several situations can occur when ethnic groups neighboring each other make use of resources (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation, pp. 12-13). They may occupy completely separate ecological niches, in which case there is no basis for a conflict, or they coexist in the same ecological niche while using different types of resources within this niche. In such cases peaceful coexistence is achieved and the situation is stable. The dynamics of relationships between two or more groups changes dramatically when they all compete for the same resources within the same ecological niche. In this last case two basic scenarios are possible: (a) the stronger (more numerous, or more technologically advanced) group displaces the competitor; (b) they blend together to form a new entity. The interaction between Yakuts and their immediate neighbors, the Evenki, developed in three stages. At first, the newcomers were only interested in grasslands and did not penetrate into the hunting and fishing grounds of the Evenki, relying on trade and barter to get what they needed in the new, colder habitat. The Yakuts' cultural or ecological boundaries were clearly defined and limited by pastoral activities in the grasslands. The Evenki pursued their hunting and fishing activities. This first stage was characterized by reciprocal relations of beneficial exchange and interdependence (Figure 5. 2).

The second stage lasted as long as the Yakuts stayed in the process of trading with and learning from the Evenki. This stage also accompanied interethnic mixing. The diagram illustrates the possible directions and nature of

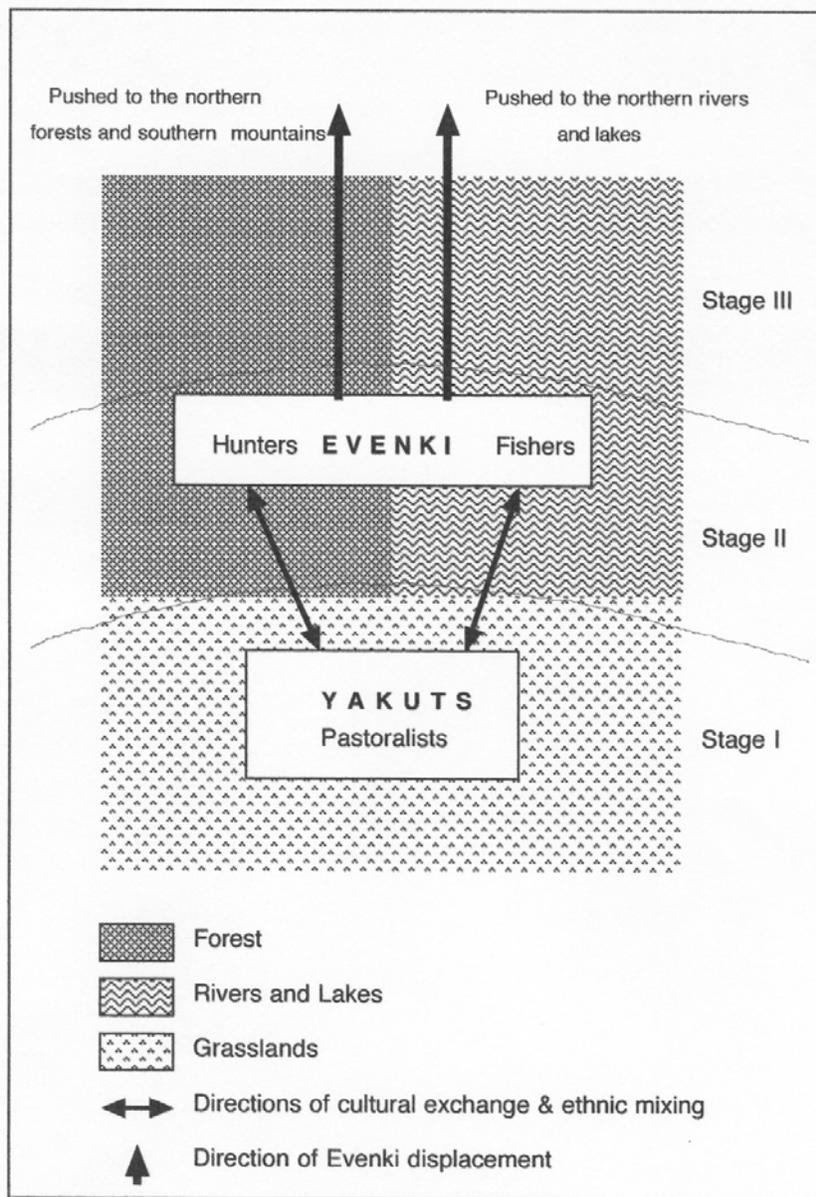


Figure 5.2. Three stages of Yakut initial ethnogenesis

exchanges between cattle herding Yakuts and reindeer hunting and fishing Evenki (Figure 5.2). Three types of boundaries are shown: (1) physical boundaries between grasslands, rivers and lakes, and wooded lands; (2) ethnic boundaries indicating the idealized distribution of ethnic groups; and (3) cultural/ecological boundaries drawn on the basis of type of livelihood and use of resources. For example, the Evenki used both forest and river resources, overlapping a physical boundary. The ethnic boundaries are symbolized by white rectangles. The third type of boundaries is shown by three different lines. The line that corresponds to stage I – the initial settlement and pastoral way of life of the ancient Yakuts – also coincides with their original ethnic boundary. The second line borders Stage II of the Yakut ethnogenesis: the Yakuts are in the process of becoming fishers and hunters and are mixing ethnically with the Evenki. At this stage, not only the Yakuts' ecological boundaries change, but also they become different ethnically, undergoing Mongolization. In the diagram the double-pointed arrows show the directions of cultural exchanges.

In the course of time and cultural exchange, the Yakuts expanded to other ecological niches, to rivers and the alases dispersed in the taiga. During this third stage (shown as Stage III in Figure 5.2), in the process of expansion they began to displace the Evenki, who were no longer needed as trading partners. The Yakuts by then had acquired all the necessary skills as hunters and fishers, adding substantially to their subsistence resources without sacrificing their pastoral cattle

and horse herding culture. Figure 5.2 presents the changes in Yakut cultural and ethnic boundaries, as well as the increase in the occupied area. The longer arrows indicate the direction of displacement of the Evenki. These three processes: (1) ethnic mixing with the Evenki, (2) addition of new skills and environmental knowledge, and dietary habits; and finally, (3) acquisition of new resources for livelihood and expansion of ecological niches, became a crucial factor in the Yakut ethnogenesis. In the course of time and in the process of adjustment to the new habitat they gradually emerged as a new ethnic group, different from those pastoralist people who lived in the Rich Valley, more than 2,500 kilometers away and 9 degrees of latitude to the south.

Ethnic Mixing

Almost every scholar (Seroshevsky 1993; Jochelson 1934; Vinokurova 1994) studying Yakut culture stresses the interethnic mixing that took place between Yakuts and the indigenous peoples. The most visible evidence of such mixing is the existence of several phenotypes among the Yakuts. The Yakuts of central Yakutian Lowlands perceive themselves as “pure-blooded” Yakuts and consider their compatriots who live further from the center as “mixed”, or “tungusized”. At the same time, Seroshevsky (1993) pointed out that some of the most Turkic-looking Yakuts are to be found in the Suntar area where they arrived much later, few decades after Russian colonization in the middle of the 17th

century. Individuals belonging to the “unmixed” type have oval faces, noses with a slight crook, rather thin lips and large black eyes (Seroshevsky 1993, 235; Maak 1860, 250-251). This physical type is still considered as an ideal of beauty for both men and women (Figure 5.3). Middendorff likened this Central Asian Turkic phenotype among Yakuts to the some types of North American Indians (1875, vol. 4. part 1, 1347).

Although mixing with Evenki greatly diluted the ancient Altaic phenotype, the process of racial Mongolization almost certainly had begun earlier, in the ancient Rich Valley hearth. When I was there in 2000, I found great physical resemblance between Buryats and Yakuts. Aleksandre Middendorff (1875, vol. 4, part 2, 1545) in his travels in the Buryat steppes and throughout Yakutia in the 1840s noticed among the Dolgans, the Yakut-speaking northern Evens and Evenki, several individuals who looked very much like Buryats. Middendorff also pointed out that Yakuts he observed were much Mongolized through the marriage to Tungus women, as the Yakuts did not require that their wives come from their own tribe (see also Kohn 1953, 582). As a result, most of the Yakuts were a mixture between a Turkic, or Altaic, and a pure Mongoloid, or Manchurian, physical type. In size these people were taller than Evenki, but shorter than Europeans, and had larger hands and feet than Evenki. According to Middendorff’s observations, the Tungusic features were more common among the younger generation of Yakuts, and were less prominent among the rich families



Figure 5.3: A Yakut woman from a rich family, the 19th century drawing. Source: Seroshevskiy 1993, 236.

who intermarried, thus preserving an ancient Turkic phenotype (Vol.4, part 2, 1545).

The process of racial Mongolization that started in the Rich Valley accelerated in Yakutia, where the practice of marrying Evenki began early and continues to the present day. The process of racial mixing with Russians and other Europeans will be discussed briefly in Chapter 6, as this process did not begin until the 1630s.

Linguistic borrowings serve as another indicator of ethnic and racial mixing. Scholars of the Yakut language differ in their assessments of Mongol lexical borrowings. Most agree that they make up at least 30 percent in the modern Yakut vocabulary. However, these borrowings do not make up a system, but instead represent inclusions in different parts of the lexical system. Most typically the loan words concern the names of certain planets, like in “Cholbon” for “Venus”, or names of metals, like in “altan” for “copper” and “myongun” for “silver”. It is also interesting to note that some ancient Turkic words were transformed in the Mongol dialects and then reentered the Yakut language in a slightly different phonetic form. This explains some consistent phonetic differentiations of the Yakut prosody from other modern Turkic languages (Sleptsov 1972, 602). Thus the linguistic evidence reconfirms that ancient Yakut and Mongol-speaking Buryats lived in ultimate proximity.

As to the purely Mongol-Manchurian, or Evenki, borrowings in the Yakut language, there are surprisingly few. Those mainly include the names for certain types of dwellings that were unknown to Yakuts prior to ethnic mixing. Among loan terms for structures are “kholomo” – a structure of thin logs, covered with the sod, and “yyteen” – a hunter’s hut. The Yakuts also borrowed names for certain animals, especially all the terms concerning reindeer, like “abylahaan”, indicating a two-year old reindeer, and the words for plants, like “labykta” – the Evenki word for “reindeer moss” (Sleptsov 1972, 602; Benyukh 1997, 812). According to Middendorff, the word “ty” (boat) also came from the Evenki language (1875, vol. 4, part 2, 1548). His explanation is that the ancient Yakuts did not have true boats until they begin to live among the Evenki. This view assumes that they either borrowed their first boats to come down the Lena River from southern Evenki, or used rafts.

Cultural Exchanges

It has been pointed out earlier in this chapter, that the Yakuts had better protection in the battles, as they were clad in iron armor. They also had diverse metal weaponry. Despite all that they were vulnerable when it came to fighting in the forest. In their old homeland the Yakuts were used to fight on the open steppes, and the wooded terrain was an alien habitat for them. They could make good use of horses in the forest. Just like the Tatar-Mongol horsemen could

penetrate into the marshy forests of northwest Russia and Belarus', or as Romans could not bear the coldness of Scottish weather, the Yakuts could not expand into the forest as fast as they wanted. Not only the indigenous Evenki were better bowmen, as they had been primarily forest hunters and their survival itself depended on the mastery of bowing arrows, but their knowledge of the taiga was incomparably superior to that of the newcomers (Gmelin 1751-72, 344).

Gradually the ancient Yakuts must have learned from the Evenki, either through observation and imitation, and, perhaps through accepting an Evenki man into their clan, how to hunt in the forest, use the traps for fishing and hunting, and how to harvest the gifts of taiga, whether it were the medicinal plants, berries, nuts, or construction materials. This, in turn, made the Yakuts a new, ecotonal people.

Demitri Shimkin writes that the Evenki practiced burning of the forest for hunting purposes (1988, 3). Other northern hunters of Eurasia have been known to practice "fire encirclement hunting". The Finns used to set the forest underground afire in a circle, causing game animals to flee toward the center of the ring. Hunters followed the fire on foot, closing the circle with both flames and weapons (Jordan and Kaups 1989, 226-228). As a result of such forest fires in the permafrost environment new grasslands were inadvertently created. It is logical to assume that the Yakuts, having seen the results of fires, imitated the practice of burning, though with the different goal in mind. What they wanted, as a pastoralist people, was the creation of new meadows.

Despite the gradual process of the Yakut expansion into the forest ground, the Evenki held their hunting grounds in the mountainous areas. The lichen and moss of the mountainous tundra was desirable for them and could be of not use for the pastoral Yakuts. In some places, like in the plateau of southern Yakutia, the Evenki held their grounds forever (Gmelin 1751-52, 345). Even nowadays, large Evenki reindeer herding communities are found in that area, to the east of modern mining city of Neryungri.

Yakuts, who were heavily mixed with Evenki, still exhibit particular possessiveness over hunting ground. Since I was a child I heard the stories about Nyurba men (Yakuts who have more Evenki blood than most) threatening the lives of the Suntar hunters if they trespassed what the former perceived as their hunting grounds.

Important dietary habits were also borrowed. From Evenki and Evens the Yakuts learned to eat frozen fish, which in the northern diet usually compensates for the absence of cereals. Meat provided K and B-complex vitamins, and the oils of fish supplied vitamins A and D (Moran 1982, 130-131). The opportunity to get vitamin D was very important as the longer and darker subarctic winters did not provide enough sunlight for a prolonged period of darkness. Instead of bread Yakuts learned to eat the sap from the young pine trees. Strahlenberg described February and March as “months of harvest” for sap (1738, 382). According to his observations, Yakuts would cut the inner bark from young trees and dry it for

consumption during winter season. In order to consume this product they needed to make it into powder, boil it in milk and eat it with the powdered dry fish. Conserving fish in the form of dry powder also came from the northern fishers, Evenki and Evens.

Yakut Shamanism as Influenced by Evenki Shamanism

Both the Yakuts and the Evenki were shamanists, but originally the two differed, in the sense that Yakut shamanism dealt largely with facilitating life on the steppes, while the Evenki pursued a forest-based type (Anisimov 1958).

Shamanism as a system of religious beliefs belongs to a larger tradition of animism. It presupposes that a surrounding world is inhabited by various spirits, both benevolent and evil, and that humans have to negotiate with them in order to assure certain favors from those spirits, such as good luck in hunting, request for healing of a sick member of the community, or birth of a healthy baby. A shaman serves as a mediator between human beings and spirits.

Shamanism is widespread in Eurasia – from Central Asia to Mongolia and Korea (Basilov 1992; Musi 1997; Humphrey 1996). As soon as the Europeans reached the eastern margins of Eurasia in the 17-18th centuries, they discovered that similar cultures and peoples existed on the northern fringes of the world. Strahlenberg from Sweden, Gmelin and Middendorff from Germany, and

Seroshevsky from Poland, who traveled through Siberia and Russian Far East, all agreed that there was very much in common between the circumpolar cultures. The most powerful manifestation of that similarity was the common religious practice of shamanism among the peoples of Siberia they encountered. Every early European traveler to Siberia left a note or two on the ‘curious’ traditions of shamans among the natives. They documented also the evidence of a particular type of social and cultural behavior associated with shamanism. However, the scientific research on Siberian, and in particular, Yakut variety of shamanism did not begin until the 1920s.

The groundbreaking works were those of Gavriil Ksenofontov, the first encyclopedically educated Yakut, who applied his knowledge of antique and modern history to the culture of his people. Ksenofontov was the first who clearly formulated the religious dualism of Yakut shamanism. His view was that existing dualism in native Yakut religion was intimately connected with the historical change of gods. The dualism results from the battle of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ gods. The winner, the ‘new’ god settles in the sky, while the loser had to go underground and became a devil. Moreover, this process reflected the socio-economic phenomenon of domestication of horse and formation a clan-based society. This dualism of good and evil forces is further reflected in opposition between “white’ and ‘black’ shamans as representatives of two diametrically placed deities. Ksenofontov traced this religious dualism to an ancient origin of

dualism in Zoroastrian religion of Eurasia (1992, 29-32). Dioszegi supports this point of view, stating that shamanism as an early religious formation grew out of the archaic dualistic worldview. This system existed in the form of unwritten rules and was handed down and preserved for centuries through oral tradition and with the help of symbolism, such as drawings on a shaman's drum (1996, xiv).

An accomplished scholar of shamanism, Marjorie Balzer, who spent decades in different parts of northern Siberia conducting research on shamanic practices among Evenki, Yakuts, and Evens provides interesting data on migration of these natives based on interaction and exchanges of ideas reflected in their cosmology and rituals. She suggested, for example, that when the Turkic ancestors of the Yakuts, traveling north from their ancient homeland near Lake Baikal, encountered and intermarried with Evenki and Yukagir peoples, they found their shamans to be especially frightening and more powerful (1998, 311). One of the reason Yakuts found Evenki and Yukagir shamans more powerful and dangerous was because their shamans used a raven as a patron, which for the grassland people was associated with death and underworld (Vasilevich 1996, 137). The newcomers therefore borrowed many rules and rituals from these reindeer hunting and fishing societies of the forest.

In keeping with the logic of these reputations, a rich cross-fertilization of shamanic traditions continues to this day. Modern Sakha still believe that Evenki shamans are more powerful. Though in modern Yakutia only seven people are

recognized as true shamans, an Evenk female shaman is considered the highest in the hierarchy. Recently she summoned a promising young Yakut man for a pilgrimage and apprenticeship (Balzer 1998, 311).

At this point some comments should be made as to the basic elements of the shamanist cult. In the process of describing basic elements of Yakut shamanist traditions, I point out the influences of Evenki shamanism, as a religious system of hunting and fishing nomads, on a southern variety of original Yakut shamanism of pastoralist society.

The majority of authors agree that one basic element of the shamanist tradition is the shamanic séance – “the heart of shamanism” (Balzer 1997, xvii). It is during séances that a shaman displays his or her extraordinary abilities to transcend the boundaries of his body and communicate with the spirits. Such performances usually involve a trance of a shaman and sometimes other participants. As shamans explain themselves, they pursue various goals, that may include recovering patient’s lost soul, escorting person’s soul who just passed away to the other world, or on a broader social level, asking god or spirits for fertility of land and the well-being of the community. The shamanic séance has a clear meaning to its participants. It represents the shaman’s voyage to the other world in search of the sufferer’s soul, or to negotiate with gods or spirits over a concrete deal. Shaman’s gestures and chants show where he is at that very moment, what he sees and what he is doing. The only thing that varies is the

purpose of such séance, which changes according to the nature of the spirits the shaman encounters (Basilov 1990, 11; Zorniskaja 1996, 128-129).

As important as a figure and his functions are, a shaman by himself does not comprise a shamanist society. Shamans are not the only creators of ideology, mythology, or rituals of the Arctic, Siberian, and Asian peoples. It has been pointed out by several scholars that these elements are older than shamanism, or at least developed parallel to it, in the sense they were the product of general religious experience and not of a particular class of privileged beings, “technicians of ecstasy” as Mercia Eliade called them (1964, 375-376). A shamanist cult is deeply rooted in the social matrix of a cultural group and serves clearly defined psychological and social functions of keeping people in harmony with their environment and each other (Hamayon 1992, 7). Carla Musi adds that the shamanism of Siberian peoples also provided a whole system of symbols and rituals that reinforced their ethnic identity (1997, 1).

Another basic element in most Siberian shamanist societies is the idea of exchange between humans and the nature in order to sustain a balance. Life itself is viewed as a result of skillful negotiation and exchange. This exchange is carried out through the ritual of sacrifice. Among hunters and gatherers the necessity of payoff to the other world is of special significance. However, among pastoral people, including Yakuts, the animal sacrifice offered by peasants to the spirits is a substitute, rather than a pure sacrifice, and therefore, the relationship with the

supernatural is no longer one of reciprocal exchange (Hamayon 1992, 69-74; Diachenko 1994, 66-68).

Traditional Yakuts believed, like many other shamanic peoples, that the universe has a three-leveled structure, in the golden navel of which stands the Tree of Life with eight branches. The roots of this tree come from the primordial paradise where the first man was born and feeds himself on the milk of the woman half out of the trunk of this tree. It has been pointed out that such image could hardly been developed by the Yakuts in the bitter climate of northern Siberia (Eliade 1964, 272).

The sky is inhabited by superior spirits or gods, the middle world is the home for humans, animals, and spirits of nature with varying degree of benevolence, and the underworld is a realm of powerful evil spirits or 'abassy'. Although sky deities are benevolent, they are usually quite passive and not interested in the affairs of the middle world. Their chief is *Art Toyon Aga*, the Lord Father Chief of the World, who resides in the ninth, highest sphere of the sky. Powerful, he remains inactive; he shines like the sun, which is his emblem, he speaks through the voice of the thunder, but mingles little in human affairs. In the fourth sphere *The White Lord Creator* can be found. Side by side with him are *The Gentle Mother Greatness, the Gentle Lady of Birth, and the Lady of the Earth*. Below dwell other eight great gods, headed by The All-Powerful Lord of the Infinite, *Uluu-Tuyer Uluu-Toyon*. *Uluu-Toyon* is not evil or ill-disposed; he is

only too close to the middle world, in affairs of which he is very much interested. It is he who gave fire to people, created the first shaman, birds, woodland animals and the forests themselves. He does not obey the supreme Art Toyon Aga, who treats him as equal. The Yakut dualism is vague and complex, hence the Yakut shaman serves both the gods above and the gods below, because those below can be allies and not necessarily evil (Gmelin 1751-52, 357-365; Alekseev 1990, 50-53; Eliade 186-188; Jochelson 1934, 124-134; Ksenofontov 1992, 54-71).

According to Yakut tradition, the first shaman possessed extraordinary power, and in his vanity, refused to recognize the Supreme God. This shaman's body was made of a mass of entangled snakes. The Supreme God sent fire on him, but a toad emerged from the flames; from that creature came the demons, which, in turn, supplied the Yakut people with their shamans. This myth indicates that the true shamans are those closely familiar with the "evil" spirits rather than with sky gods or benevolent spirits. Therefore, a true shaman is a 'black' shaman. The 'white' shamans are only priests for sky gods. They offer sacrifice to the sky gods only, perform their rituals only during the daytime and do not have to go into trance. The Yakut shamans are distinguished according to their possible power: a) the 'last' who are mere diviners and interpreters of dreams and who can heal only minor illnesses; b) common shamans, who are healers; and c) great shamans, the powerful magicians, to whom the Great Lord Uluu-Toyon himself has sent a

tutelary spirit (Ksenofontov 1992, 47-51; Balzer 1998, 311; Eliade 1964, 184-185).

The power of a Yakut shaman is reflected in his so-called *iie-kyyl*, or beast-mother. N. A. Alekseev who conducted research on shamanist systems among the Turkic-speaking peoples of Siberia emphasizes that only Yakuts have such beast-mothers, which, in his opinion, were borrowed from Evenki (1990, 103). Typical *iie-kyyl* of central and northern Sakha include the eagle, raven, crane, bull, elk, deer, and bear. The strongest shamans have a bear or an eagle, and weaker ones have a wolf or a dog. The cult of the bear is found typically among the circumpolar peoples of the north. In the grasslands of Central Asia ancient Yakuts could hardly have developed such a cult. But as they moved to the north, a bear, the “master of the taiga”, must have overwhelmed the other wild animals in their imagination. The bear was not only a unique source of meat and fur, but was also perceived as a strong and dangerous enemy who could kill many people (Spevakovsky 1994, 105-107). Yakut tales have many accounts of bears kidnapping young women and fathering unusually strong *buhatyrs*, or warriors. Seroshevsky recorded a conversation with a Yakut man who hunted bears and believed that a bear was not a simple animal but a magician: “You should have looked at him, after I skinned him. He turned into a naked woman: breasts, legs, everything he had was that of a woman” (1993, 636-637). Bears’ special strength was also attributed to their magic powers (*Yakutskiye Skazki* 1972). To this day

the flesh and fat of the bear is considered to be one of the most powerful remedies for many diseases. When I would have a bad case of bronchitis, my mother, a medical doctor, melted bear's fat and made me drink it. But before I did it, I had to say, following the ancient superstition, a word "huk" three times. That was necessary to appease the spirit of the killed bear.

It is difficult to know if the figure of the eagle originated in the Evenki variety of shamanism or existed in the Yakut shamanist tradition before their migration to the north. Symbolically it is tied to the Tree of Life. On its branches a large bird-of-prey hatches the eggs containing souls of shamans – for weaker ones this eagle sits on the eggs for one year, for medium strength shamans – for two years, and finally, for the most powerful ones she spends three years (Dioszegi 1996, 69; Balzer 1998, 309-311, Alekseev 1990, 48).

The Tree of Life determines the sacredness of a place. Myth has it that when Ayi Toyon created a shaman he also planted in his celestial dwelling a birch tree with eight branches, on which he placed nests containing the Creators' children. In addition, he planted three trees on earth. It is in the memory of those first trees that a shaman has a particular tree on which his/her life depends. The area around of such sacred tree becomes a special zone where ordinary people should dare to approach. It could be that the monastic nature of Yakut shamans and remote places in the dense taiga considered to be forbidden for common folks again developed through the Evenki influence.

There is another type of Yakut sacred place that serves communal purposes. During the summer celebration of Yakut New Year, a symbolic post is put to the center of the festive ground. Here the 'white' shaman performs a ritual of sacrifice to celestial deities in front of the post. After the ceremony is complete, the newly dedicated ground becomes sacred and will be used in future only for sacred activities (Diachenko 1994, 269-270; Dioszegi 1996, 70-71).

The shamanic séance among Yakuts included four stages: (1) evocation of the helping spirits; (2) discovery of the source of illness, usually an evil spirit that has stolen patient's soul or entered his/her body; (3) expulsion of the evil spirit by threat, noise, etc.; (4) shaman's ascent to the sky or descent to the subterranean world. In order to understand why the shaman needs to make such a journey, some explanation should be provided about the Yakut concept of spirituality. According to traditional Yakut beliefs, a person has three souls: the *iie-kut* or mother soul, *buor-kut* or earth-clay soul, and *salgyn-kut* or air-breath soul. If any of these particular souls is captured by evil spirits, a person becomes sick. It is up to the shamans to identify the type of the soul affected and decide which spirit to approach. As a general rule, during a séance, he uses himself as a ransom to the spirits and has to feign his own death. This moment, described as a catatonic trance, marks the end of the shaman's journey into the supernatural (Eliade 1967, 73; Dioszegi 1996, 5, 228; Balzer 1998, 308; Oinas 1989).

Individuals who witnessed a Yakut shamanic séance agree that it presents a highly emotional drama, involving a variety of movements, chanting, jumping and stomping. The jumping and stomping imitates rutting activities of animals or birds that are considered endowed with sexual and martial powers. The male and female shamans choose between a “reindeer” and “bird-flight” dances to match the purpose of the séance. The antlers of reindeer ground into powder were traditionally consumed by Yakut men to enhance their sexual vigor (Flaherty 1992, 23). The appearance of reindeer antlers in a shamanic séance directly indicates borrowings from the Evenki shamans (Figure 5.4) (Witsen 1785, plate 1). The use of reindeer antlers as a part of a shaman costume and the fact that Yakut and Evenki have a distinctive, egg-shaped, type of a drum that is not found among other Siberian natives serve as evidence that important basic elements of entered Yakut traditional culture through ethnocultural exchange (Alekseev 1990, 105). Roberte Hamayon pointed out that Yakut shamans share with Evenki shamans a manner of performance – jumping and stomping, that makes their séance distinctive from that of Buryat shamans who would shake their heads and/or horns instead (1992, 78).

Some authors point out that the atmosphere of a séance is charged with sensuality and sexual energy, and some participants, especially women, would lose self-control and throw themselves on the performing shaman. The release of female sexual energy was considered necessary for fertility rites (Diachenko

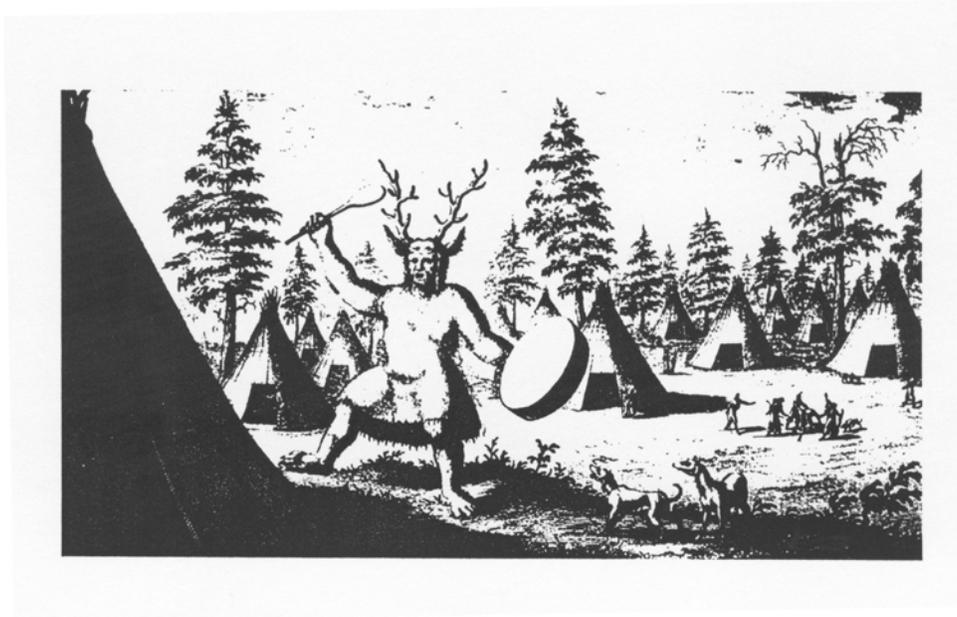


Figure 5.4: An Evenki shaman, dressed to imitate a reindeer, performing a ritual.

Source: Witzén 1875, plate 1.

1994, 270). Women particularly relied on shamans for fertility or recovery of health. The shaman goes to get the souls of women to the sky goddess Aiyhyt. To help a suffering woman they to travel even further, to the main sky god Ayii Toyon (Kharitonova 1995, 221-223; Zorniskaja 1996, 127-128).

Among other elements that Yakut ancestors borrowed from the Evenki were their burial practices. According to N. K. Antonov (1993) the possible archeological remnants of proto-Yakuts in the cis-Baikal area show that they cremated their dead and buried the remnants in clay pots. Several travel accounts describe Yakuts “burying” their dead above ground, in the trees. This was obviously not possible in the steppes of Central Asia and came from the culture and tradition of the forest people – Evenki and Yukagirs (Seroshevsky and Sumner 1901, 100).

The evidence is abundant, then, that Yakut shamanism changed to acquire a dual, ecotonal character. Along with other elements of the forest culture, they seemed to have acquired the new shamanistic traits and practices incrementally.

Incremental Cultural Change

Before the Russian colonization in the 1630s Yakuts had lived in the new homeland for at least three and a half centuries. During this period they were influenced by the ethnic mixing and cultural exchanges with the neighboring peoples, especially the Evenki. Without abandoning their ancient pastoral ways,

they learned to be successful hunters and fishers. Middendorff summed it up nicely, when he wrote: “This gifted people accepted elements of Tungus culture without sacrificing their culture and identity” (1875, vol. 4, part 1, 1561). Even the massive influence seen in transformation of Yakut shamanism, did not change center of its main cult of a horse. They continued to celebrate New Year festival by sacrificing white horses and drinking fermented mare’s milk – *kymiss*. The nature of their livelihood in its core remained the same – that of cattle and horse herders. They added new sources of food through hunting in the forest and fishing all the year round. That they learned from Evenki, Yukagirs, and Evens by mending their way of life in an incremental manner (Doolittle 1984).

Through such system of incremental cultural changes Yakuts became masters of both grassy lands and boreal taiga, gaining access to two different types of land resources. They became a people of an ecotone, and ultimately a new ethnos, different from the people who first arrived to the middle currents of the Lena River. This was a crucial factor in their ethnogenesis, allowing them later to withstand the challenges of Russian colonization and instead of diminishing in size and vigor, like many small groups of Siberia who relied only on one type of resources, the Yakuts continued to grow in population and expand their territory to new areas. The following chapter deals with the Russian encounter and its role in the ongoing process of Yakut ethnogenesis.

Chapter 6: Building a Homeland: Yakut Response to the Russian Conquest (1630s-1921)

Early Russian Colonization of Yakutia

The same river that carried the early Yakuts to their northern refuge, Grandmother Lena, as Yakuts call it fondly, later brought the Russian Cossacks, who would become Yakuts' new nemesis. In the summer of 2000, I stood on a high bluff above the Lena, in the town of Kirensk (situated today on the territory of the Irkutsk Region), far upstream from the Three Valleys and Yakutsk. I read an old inscription on a red stone erected there by the first Russian Cossacks on their way downstream to subjugate another people of Siberia, the Yakuts, of whom they had heard from the Evenki of southern and western Siberia (Pavlov 1994; 37-38). This rock inscription that incredibly enough remains intact since 1631, marked the first stage of the Russian conquest and colonization of Yakut lands, and, therefore, also a new phase in Yakut history and ethnogenesis.

Cossacks

Ironically, the conquerors' name, Cossacks, is derived from *Kazakh*, a Turkic tribe of Central Asia. Before the beginning of the 16th century, the Cossacks were a scattered group who lived in the steppes of southern Ukraine and

along the lower courses of the major rivers of the Great Russian Plain -- the Dniester, Dnieper, Don, Kuban', and Volga. Some of them farmed the land and herded cattle, others were pirates of the Black Sea, and still others were known as roughneck horse-riding adventurers of the vast southern steppes. Occasionally they served as the guardians of Muscovy's frontier against incursions of Tatars, Turks, or Persians. Centuries of warfare against these ethnic groups, who were part of the Mongol empire, had affected the Cossacks in a curious manner. They became turkicized in most of their ways, except for language and the Russian Orthodox religion (Longworth 1969, 3). The centuries-old conflict with the steppe peoples had molded these border-guarding Russians and Ukrainians into a unique warrior cultural subgroup, who could both ride horses like Mongols but who also maintained heir old Varangian navigational skills to use on the numerous and treacherous waterways of Eurasia.

But until the rule of Ivan the Terrible (1533-84), the free-booting steppe Cossacks were perceived more as a nuisance than as a useful force. Ivan the Terrible was the first to recognize their value as border guards against Tatars and Turks, but also as "shock troops" who could suppress a potential rebellion. By the time of his reign, the Cossacks had already attained a reputation of skilled horsemen and fierce warriors who were highly skilled with pistols, sabre, pikes, swords and even artillery. The Cossacks used ambushes and sudden surprise charges against their enemies and they never took prisoners. They were feared by

other peoples of the steppe. The Cossacks proved to be the perfect force in Muscovy's Russification of the "Wild Lands" of the Black and the Caspian Sea areas in the middle of the 16th century (Longworth 1969, 18-21).

By the end of Ivan the Terrible's rule, Cossacks were on the front line of eastern expansion of the growing Russian state. Between a vast continental expanse to the east, with its promising natural riches and new lands, remained the only hurdle – the Western Siberian kingdom of the Tatar Khan Kuchum. In 1581 the Cossacks under the leadership of Yermak Timofeev defeated this last stronghold of the Mongol empire. After that historical victory, nothing could stop these driven people in their thrust to the east, especially as most Siberian natives were technologically lagging, poorly organized socially, and numerically small (Lincoln 1994, 41-47; Dmytryshyn et al. 1990, xlii). In exchange for tax privileges and free land, the Cossacks expanded the Russian empire from the Urals to the Pacific Coast in just 70 years (Slezkine 1994, 13-14; Mote 1998, 41-43). These Siberian conquerors were driven by the imperial vision of new frontiers and a thirst for the fabled riches of Siberia, and especially 'soft gold' – the sables and other precious furs of the boreal taiga (Dmytryshyn et al. 1990, xxxv; Slezkine 1994, 32; Mote 1998, 43).

Cossacks establish a tax collecting system in Yakutia

The Cossacks took advantage of the extensive waterway system of Siberia and the Far East. To the land of Evenki and Yakuts they came by the way of rivers. Among the first men who ventured down the Lena River from Ust'-Kut, was the Cossack Yermolin. He learned about "a rich people, the Yakuts", but he could not complete his 1628 journey, because in the land between lived "Evenki bandits" (Maydell 1896, Part II, 449). Then in 1632 Petr Beketov, a Cossack in service of Czar Fedor Mikhailovich, with 30 men arrived in Yakutia and subjugated the population (Maydell 1896, Part II, 450). Beketov founded a fortress on the left bank of the Lena River, from where he collected tribute in sables, sable fur coats, and red foxes. In his 1633 report to the czar, Beketov wrote:

"I, Petr, together with servitors, built an *ostrog* [Iakutsk] on the Lena River for the Sovereign Majesty in his distant lands for the purposes of collecting the Sovereign's *iasak* and to receive the Iakut people in submission. There had never before been any of the Sovereign's *ostrogs* anywhere on the Lena River in the Iakut territory. I, Petr, built the new *ostrozhek* for the Sovereign near the Iakut prince Mamyk's *ulus* and very close to many other *uluses*, in the heart of the whole Iakut territory" (Dmytryshyn et al. 1990, 144).

In the same letter he described numerous encounters with Yakut *toyons*, whom he called “princes”, and their initial refusal to pay tribute. Militarily, the Yakuts could not withstand the superior Cossack gunpowder technology, and gradually they were made to swear their loyalty to the Russian czar.

The military superiority was combined with the cunning coercive policies towards the native population. Sweets, bread, and vodka served as powerful attractions for Yakuts (Vaughan 1999, 96-98). Another Russian tactic was to take the leaders of the clans hostage. These people were kept in special prisons and from time to time shown to their relatives to prove that they were still alive. The trapped compatriots felt an obligation to pay the fur tribute (Slezkine 1994, 20-21). After having established the desired *status quo*, Beketov very soon headed further down the Lena River to its mouth “to collect the Sovereign’s iasak and to explore new lands” (148). In his footsteps followed other Cossacks, and within a decade, several more ostrogs were built on the lower Lena and other rivers. *Zimovye*, or a winter settlement, called Zhigansk, was built on the lower Lena just north of the Arctic Circle in the same year as Yakutsk. A year later the Cossack Ivan Rebrov sailed down to the Lena delta and then to the Yana River mouth. During his next trip, in 1638, he established a Russian presence on the Indigirka. In 1642 Ivan Stadukhin sailed from the Indigirka delta to the mouth of the Kolyma River (Vaughan 1999, 101). All, but one, of these ostrogs survive to the

present time as towns and cities on the territory of the Sakha Republic (“Istoriya Zashiverska”).

The initial small fortification on the Lena’s bank, Yakutsk, was gradually enlarged and became a true fortress (Figure 6.1). The original fence was enclosed with high log walls and watchtowers, as a shelter to several hundred Russian gunmen and later, their families. The main purpose of such a fortress, however, was to function as (1) the administrative center of a newly colonized territory, (2) a center for collecting yasak, and (3) as a settlement protected from the potentially hostile natives (Dmytryshin et al. 1990, li). Besides the living quarters inside the fortress there were a prison for hostages, the yasak treasury, and warehouses for storing pelts and fur coats (Opolovnikov and Opolovnikova 1983, 13-15).

Only 6 years after its foundation, the Yakutsk ostrog became an official administrative center for a huge Yakutsk *uyezd* (“region” or “territory” in the seventeenth century imperial Russia), but it did not affect the size of its population – in 1638 there were only 200 people living in the town of Yakutsk (Priklonsky 1896, 2; Sivtsev 1992, 5-6). Despite its modest size it proved an efficient center for carrying out czarist policies. Yasak was promptly collected; numerous Yakuts were converted to the Russian Orthodox faith. By 1642 the Yakutsk *uyezd* had become a main fore post in the exploration of Eastern Siberia, and, by the end of the 17th century, it was the largest territorial unit in all the Russian empire (Sivtsev 1992, 13).



Figure 6.1: The only surviving tower of the Yakutsk ostrog, dated 1632.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1996.

The consistent demand for sable pelts soon depleted the population of these fur-bearing animals. In the 1650s approximately 145,000 sable pelts were sent from Siberia to the czar's court (Vaughan 1999, 98). The documentary records from 1659-1663 offer a rare insight into the situation concerning the yasak. In 1659 petitions, the Yakuts of Bordong and Baturusk uluses, located in central Yakutia, pleaded with the Russian czar to decrease the number of precious pelts they owed, as it had become increasingly difficult for them to find sables, foxes, or ermines in the surrounding taiga. For that reason they had to sell their cattle and horses. According to these petitions the exchange rate was two cows or three or four mares for a single sable pelt. The Yakuts of various *volosts* (another term for *uluses*) complained about the burden of the extra yasak, which had been demanded for their dead debtor fathers and elder brothers (Dmytryshyn 1990, 350-353). These petitions inform of discontent of Yakuts who now had to live under the new colonial rule, and of the ecological burden brought by the single-minded demand for 'soft gold'. They also hint, however, that after several decades of dealing with Russian bureaucrats, Yakuts might have learned how to work the system.

Also needed for consideration is the ecological impact of the initial contact with the Cossacks. Yakuts withstood it remarkably well. Their numbers dwindled a little bit at the beginning of the colonization, but that was mainly due to military actions rather than diseases. Being a Neolithic people from the ancient

times, they were less vulnerable to European diseases or the effects of vodka. As compared to Yakuts, the paleoasiatic, nonagricultural Yukagirs, who lived in isolation, were truly decimated. According to Slezkine (1994, 27), smallpox became the main cause of decrease among Yukagirs. During the 17th century, the already small Yukagir population declined threefold from approximately 4,500 to 1,450. Likewise, the Evenki population in the northwest of Yakutia was drastically decreased by epidemics (Gurvich 1962, 39).

It should be noted that the Russian colonizers also experienced loss of life. As they moved further into the Arctic, the winters became more severe, the land less populous, and the availability of food supplies less reliable. Especially those who stayed in the winter settlements (*zimovyas*) suffered malnutrition, scurvy and other diseases (Dmytryshyn et al. 1990, lii-liii). The need for local knowledge of the terrain and sources of food was a strong incentive for peaceful relationships between the aboriginal population and the newcomers. Unmarried Russian males often took native women as their wives or mistresses (Vaughan 1994, 102).

Social and Economic Organization of the Yakuts at the Time of Russian Arrival

When the Russian Cossacks arrived at the Three Valleys, they found a people who lived in a society characterized by clear clan-territorial divisions. By

the 1630s the Yakut peoples consisted of 80 patriarchal clans, called *uluses*, living on clearly assigned territories in central Yakutia (Olson 1994, 732-733; Toumousov et. 2001, 450-456). The Yakuts were concentrated mainly in central Yakutia and occupied lands along the middle Lena and middle Amga Rivers, the lower Vilyui, and near the mouth of the Olekma River (Fedorova 1992, 14). Some scholars hold that a small number of Yakuts had already moved to the upper Yana River (Parnikova 1994, 140). The rest of the Lena River Basin was occupied by several Evenki tribes. The most numerous and well-known clan was the *Kindigir*, who roamed along the Kolyma and upper Aldan. Also important were the *Nanagir*, from the lower Olekma to the Vilyui; the *Shelogon* and *Fuglyd*, along the left tributaries of Vilyui; the *Kaltakuly* – along the lower Vilyui; and the *Izhigantsy*, *Adyany* and *Sinigiri*, in the basin of Olenyok and Anabar in the northwest. Other Evenki clans occupied the basin of upper and middle Aldan. To the east of Aldan stretching almost to the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk lived other four Evenki clans (Fedorova 1992, 14).

The Evens (Lamuts) lived mainly to the east of lower Lena, and in the lower Yana, Indigirka, and Kolyma. In these three last areas the Evens contacted and mixed with the Yukagirs, with whom they shared similar way of life. These people fished, hunted animals, including wild reindeer, and to some extent practiced reindeer herding (Fedorova 1992, 16).

The Yakuts maintained their ancient cattle and horse-raising tradition. This factor determined the pattern of settlement. They lived in small territorial clans in places that allowed the harvesting of grasses and the acquisition of water. Such places in Central Yakutia were found on the banks of larger and smaller rivers, but also in alases separated from each other by 2-3 kilometers (Basharin 1962). Yakuts traveled seasonally from winter settlements to summer places in order to rotate feeding sources for their cattle. They used to put summer places (just as they still do today) near pastures, while the winter dwellings were located near the hay-cutting meadows. Winter settlements were permanent and solidly built, while the summer huts were made of lighter materials, like birch barks or thin tree branches. According to Fedorova (1992, 31) there was also a third type of dwelling structure – a temporary shelter on the spot of fall pasture for cattle, between the completion of hay harvesting and the first snow. In many parts of central Yakutia the first snow usually falls between 10 and 15 September, and the permanent snow cover is formed in the second half of October (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 27). The Yakuts would spend a period of at least two months in a third location.

Although Yakuts lived in tightly knit clans, they practiced strictly a law of exogamous marriage. This could explain, in part, the unusual vitality of this people, who always have been keen on bringing in new blood, and, by so doing, diversifying their gene pool. By the beginning of the 17th century, patriarchy was

firmly established among Yakuts, although Seroshevsky describes certain surviving elements of matriarchy (1993, 418-421).

Relationships within tribes or clans were quite strong. The leaders took care of the old, needy, and invalids. Seroshevsky recorded a story about a safety net system that existed among Yakuts. He wrote with admiration that during time of famine, impoverished members of the clan were given food and shelter by more fortunate members. “How can one die from starvation, if you can always go to your neighbors!” (1993, 425). Such charity meant the later payback in labor for the richer relatives, especially during the season of hay harvesting.

Although clan-tribal loyalties were strong, by the time of the Russian arrival, they were weakening because of the emergence of a new social class of *toyons*, feudal-type landlords who possessed large tracts of land, thousands of heads of cattle and horses, and who had landless Yakuts as their serfs.

The most prominent tribal leader, Tygyn Darkhan, presided over the core of the new homeland, the luxuriant pastures around the Saisaary Lake in the Tuymaada Valley. The Saisaary Lake later became the core of Yakutsk. Tygyn is believed to be the first king-like figure in the Yakut history, who unified most of the Yakut *uluses* (Dalan 1994; Sivtsev 1992, 5; Fedorova 1998, 16-17). In reality, however, such unification did not occur. Yakut clans were widely dispersed due to their pastoralist activities that required large territories. The prolonged feeding of livestock during the winter months required large pastures, allowing the

collection of massive quantities of hay. Because of the nature of their economy the Yakuts started to disperse from central Yakutia even before the arrival of the Russians (Basharin 1956, 25-26). After establishing a new estate leaders of the clans each felt safe in their own domain. That illusory security was destroyed in just a few months after the Russian arrival.

First Russian farming villages

The colonizing Cossacks, seeking the *yasak*, represented only the first wave of Russian settlers in Yakutia. They were the first colonial officials whose task was to lead the expansion of the empire, collect taxes, and protect Russian people. But three other groups followed on their heels. Soon after and sometimes almost simultaneously with the Cossacks came traders and trappers called *promyshlenniki* as they were called at that time looking for new goods to take back to European Russia markets. This second group took advantage of the native peoples and sought to acquire furs by all possible means (Dmytryshin et al. 1990, xl). It was mainly these people who used the seductive powers of vodka and sugar to trap the indigenous people into giving them the best pelts at the lowest prices. These unscrupulous people rarely established a lasting influence, as their goal was to acquire fortunes rapidly and to return home. The role of *promyshlenniki* in the colonization of Siberia has been disputed by historians. Indeed, in opposition to

the previously accepted view, some scholars argued that these merchants were key people in pushing further the eastern frontier, especially as the distance between the center of power in Moscow and new outlying settlements increased. The trading people acted on their own risk, sometimes ignoring the directives of governors (Lincoln 1994, 58).

Peasants, craftsmen, and missionaries of the Russian Orthodox Church represented the third group. This group made a lasting impact on Yakutia and its development. They not only made the survival of newly constructed and isolated fortresses on Siberian rivers possible, but they were also indispensable agents in the transformation and modification of life among Yakuts. The impact of this group is so important that it will be discussed in greater detail later.

The fourth group consisted of various people, whose turbulent experiences in the eastern frontier gave rise to the image of Siberia as a land of misfortune, exile, and banishment. Some of these people were prisoners from Russia's war with different European states, including Poles, Lithuanians, Swedes and others (Dmytryshyn et al. 1990, xl-xli). Others included criminals, political exiles, and religious dissidents, from Russia's own citizens. There were also vagabonds, or "wanderers", called *guliashchie liudi* (usually serfs), who escaped the cruel routine of feudal enslavement and sought a refuge in far away places (Lincoln 1994, 85, 88). Collectively the impact of such people is considerable but very difficult to trace. Suffice it to say, that these people played a prominent role both

in Russianization and Russification processes, because they strove to preserve many of their European ways. Their influence was in most cases confined to towns, which enhanced an already existing urban-rural contrast.

Russian Farming Settlements

The third group of people, mentioned above, who by contrast to promyshlenniki, came to stay in the new lands, consisted of peasants, craftsmen and Russian orthodox priests sent by the czarist government to the Siberian outposts. It was this wave of permanent settlers who began to slowly but surely transform Siberian reality. Peasants began plowing the grasslands that had never before been plowed. They sowed wheat, rye, and barley, as their main function was to provide food for people in the forts and towns. The arrangement was as follows: peasants cultivated part of their land for the government, and in return, received seeds, tools, and livestock (Dmytryshyn et al 1990, liii). A family could get on average 2 hectares (5 acres) of land for 0.4 hectare (1 acre) they tilled for the government (Lincoln 1994, 88).

This new presence on the eastern frontier is easily detectable in the landscape. Russians built their new settlements in the same way as they did back at home. The resulting pattern is known as a ‘street village’ (Jordan-Bychkov and Jordan 2002, 362-363). In such a settlement houses are strung along one single

street, with the vegetable gardens, barns, and farm fields in the back of the house. Villages like this are still easily recognized in modern landscape of Yakutia, not only by their characteristic layout, but also by the names. Toponyms, as is well known, are among the most conservative features on the landscape, often persisting long after the civilizations that created them are gone. Very often, names such as *Vladimirovka*, *Berezovka*, *Russkoye Ust'e*, *Belaya Gora*, indicate that the villages were founded by Russian farmers (Figure 6.2). Moreover, the location of these villages has a diagnostic value for cultural geographers. These settlements were almost always located on the banks of the major Yakutian rivers. Seeking good land for agricultural activities, the Russian peasants began to encroach on traditional settlements of Yakuts in the riverine prairies (Müller 1882, 260-261) (Figure 6.3). In the 18th century, Russian farming villages were located along the middle and upper currents of the Lena River, on the middle Vilyui, and along the middle Amga River, a tributary of the Aldan (Figure 6.4). A map predating the early 1900s shows that such villages form a continuous belt along the Lena River, from its upper stretch in the south to just above the city of Yakutsk. In addition to farming settlements on the Amga and Vilyui Rivers several new villages appeared on the Aldan (Safronov 1961, 484).



Figure 6.2: The 17th century Russian village Vladimirovka, situated on the left bank of the Lena River, 25 kilometers south of Yakutsk.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1997.



Figure 6.3: An early Russian settlement on the Lena River Bank.

Source: Müller 1882, p.261.

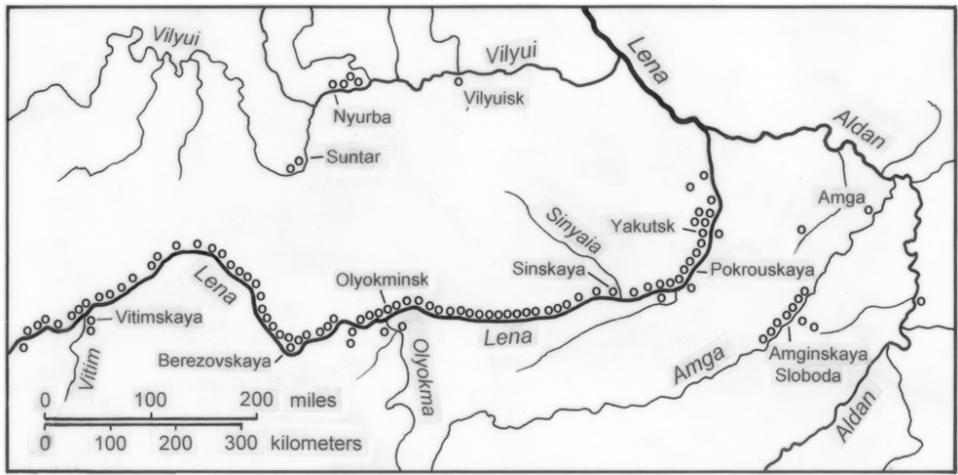


Figure 6.4: Russian settlements in Yakutia by the 1900s.

Source: F. G. Safroneev 1961, follows p.84.

Effects of Russification under Czarist Government: Cultural Exchanges and Ethnic Mixing

The colonizers and those they colonized influenced one another through systematic cultural exchanges and ethnic mixing. The first Cossacks, as has been discussed, usually took native women as wives and mistresses. The numbers of Yakut women who were given to them, however, were far fewer than Yukagir or Evenki women. This fact alone demonstrates the cultural resistance of Yakuts. At first, Yakuts considered Russians as unpleasant looking, “with white eyes and big noses” (Dalan 1994, 7-8). That initial perception changed as the time passed. Many Yakuts today acknowledge that their bloodlines are mixed with those of the Russians. In the 19th century Seroshevsky divided all Yakut phenotypes into three groups, one of them “having obvious traces of Russian blood” (1993, 235). It is usually suggested that the mixing occurred long ago and that they have only a small trace of Russian ancestry. In this sense, Yakuts are not unlike the Appalachian southerners of the United States, who typically claim some Indian

ancestry, such as a great-grandmother who was a Cherokee “princess” or the like. This mixing, both in Yakutia and Appalachia, was accompanied by vigorous cultural exchange, involving foods, vocabulary, crops and religion, sufficient to contribute to the ethnogenesis of a new people (Jordan 1993b, 176, 178, 182-190).

As a result of several centuries of living with Russians, Yakuts changed into a new people, different from those who first came to the Three Valleys. It needs to be noted that ethnogenetic process also affected the Russians – those who stayed in Yakutia permanently and acquired a respectful title of *starozhily* (“old settlers” in Russian) did change as well. Some of these people learned the hunting and fishing techniques of the indigenous people. Some spoke Yakut so well that they have only a rudimentary command of the Russian language today. Today, one can still meet such people in villages along middle Lena. Here blonde, blue-eyed villagers greet visitors in the Yakut language, not in Russian. Cultural and linguistic acculturation especially affected those Russians who settled in the far north of Yakutia.

Yakutia continued to be a land of exile. The 19th century was a period when Eastern Europeans who rebelled against Russian imperial rule were sent to Yakutia. As a result, some Yakuts have Polish last names, such as *Tomsky*, *Polyatinsky*, *Chernogradsky*, *Kugaevsky*, and other. Today these names are almost synonymous with blue-blood ancestry. Most of the Polish exiles were educated nobility sent to Yakutia after several rebellions in Poland were suppressed.

Travelers to Siberia noted the educational role of Poles in general, along with their contribution to the development of new spheres of commerce. They opened the first hotels, cafes, and confectionaries, and introduced sausage production to Siberian cities (Priklonsky 1896, 178-179). The preference for Polish genes versus Russian ones could be understood in psychological terms. Exiled Poles and Yakuts were on the same side of the issue, while Russians were the oppressors.

Among the various types of Russian cultural influence on the Yakuts and their ethnogenesis, two stand out as good examples of Yakut adaptability and at the same time cultural resistance. The first example illustrates the impact of Russian technology and the resulting transformation of certain aspects of Yakut material culture. The second example relates to the spiritual and educational domain. It shows how impermeable Yakuts proved to be to the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. They demonstrated a remarkable flexibility in dealing with the imposed culture, by adopting what they found useful and rejecting, at least internally, what was deeply alien to their shamanist tradition.

Russian Agricultural Technology and Construction Style

The introduction of farming techniques and building styles by Russian peasants had profound and lasting effect on the Yakuts' way of life, as had the new political and social structure imposed by the Russian state. The Yakut way of building houses gradually gave way to Russian style notched-log construction

(Figure 6.5). This new type of house, heated by a central brick stove, was much more efficient in retaining heat, so its advantages were soon appreciated by adaptable Yakuts. The old *balagan* house type persisted only in the most remote places of Yakutia until the 20th century, but almost everywhere else it began to be designated as cowshed (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 43). Changes were not limited to house construction. Yakuts began to bury their dead in Russian-style cemeteries. In the past, Yakuts preferred to abandon the house where a person died, often burning it. If they could not afford abandonment of their homes, they deposited the dead in trees (Strahlenberg 1738, 383; Gmelin 1751-52, vol. II, 477). In the new Russian tradition, a small log-notched structure was erected above the grave (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 65-66) (Figure 6.6, 6.7).

The Russian settlers introduced new agricultural technology. Among new tools, the Russian-style scythe was a major improvement (Figure 6.8). Before they had scythes Yakuts harvested hay with a sickle that had not changed much since the times they lived in the southern grasslands. The efficiency of new tools, which also included the rake and the pitchfork was several times greater and was fully appreciated by Yakuts, for whom sufficient the amount of hay prepared for winter months was crucial (Seroshevsky 1993, 261, 264).

In a long-term perspective, grain cultivation in the upper and middle Lena area and its tributaries, the Amga and Vilyui, was relatively successful (Alekseev



Figure 6.5: A Russian style house in the modern village of Suntar. Notice the Russian style picket fence.

Source: a photograph by Terry G. Jordan, 1997.

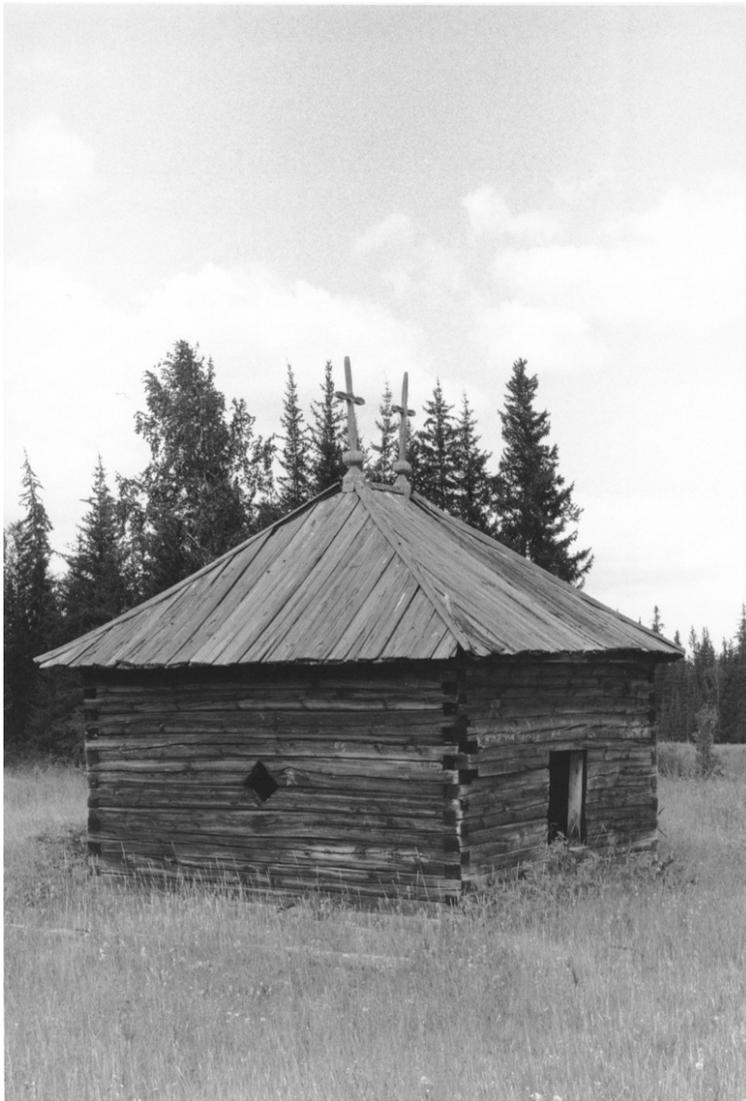


Figure 6.6: A grave house dating to the beginning of the 19th century. A rich merchant and his wife were buried in this site. The Russian Orthodox cross shows the couple was Christianized.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1996.



Figure 6.7: A burial site on the territory of an abandoned 19th century Yakut hamlet. Only one of the grave houses has a Russian Orthodox cross.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1996.



Figure 6.8: A Russian style scythe still used by rural Yakut haycutters.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1997.

1996, 57; Safronov 1961, 100-101). Georgiy Basharin, a prominent Yakut scholar, specializing in agrarian relationships in Yakutia, concluded that by the middle of the 17th century Russian farmers had modified those areas of central Yakutia into crop-growing agricultural landscapes. This modification developed slowly until the 1760s, after which time, it acquired a more intensive character (1956, 26).

Not everyone supports Basharin's conclusions. According to A. A. Khrapal', proper crop agriculture in Yakutia did not begin until the 1730s. One of his arguments is based on Georg Gmelin's observation of the state of grain cultivation near Yakutsk in 1737-38. While traveling in Yakutia at that time Gmelin learned from local monks that they used to sow barley but eventually stopped that practice, as in some years it did not ripen at all (Gmelin 1751-52, vol. II, 519; Khrapal' 1940, 21). Strahlenberg also remarks that little grain is cultivated near Yakutsk in the first quarter of the 18th century. According to his observations, there were several reasons for that. First, the inhabitants preferred to spend their time hunting valuable fur animals, secondly, they relied on the grain supplies coming from Vitim and Kirenga Rivers basin where the yields were higher and more reliable (1738, 384).

Still, given the climatic conditions and the short growing period, it remains remarkable that grain cultivation was achieved in such high latitudes. Strahlenberg is amazed how quickly grain ripens in that area – in just six weeks

time! “The Reason of this is, because the Sun is hardly ever below the Horizon in Summer, but affords its cherishing Warmth, both Night and Day, to the ground: and what is most observable, is, that, during the whole Time, it does not rain; but the Earth, though fat and black, yet never thaws above six or nine Inches deep: Insomuch that the Roots are plentifully supplied with Moisture from below, whilst the constant heat of the Sun above irradiates what is out of the Ground; and this, I presume, is the cause of so quick a Harvest” (1738, 384). He was, indeed, right.

Russian-introduced agriculture in Yakutia involved dry farming that relied on several sources of water (e.g., Doolittle 2000, 220-222). The precipitation during the growing season is very modest in this part of Siberia, and summers are warm. Rainfall, as a result, hardly provided enough moisture. In the riverine prairies, annual flooding generally provided ample soil moisture. The *alas* chernozems lie atop permafrost, and the thawing of the upper layer of the underground ice allowed moisture to percolate upward by capillary action to reach the roots of the grain plants. The native grasses acquired water in the same manner.

The real problem for grain growing in the area, however, was not so much the paucity of moisture, as much as it was the shortness of the growing season and the not-infrequent midsummer frosts. Crop failures often occurred. Even so, and even at the typical low yields of 5 to 10 centners per hectare, grain cultivation was an economic necessity, the alternative being to import grain from European

Russia – a prohibitively expensive enterprise. It has to be noted, that the enterprising *promyshlenniki* sought an opportunity for grain supplies in warmer provinces of Eastern Siberia, especially in the Amur River Valley (Lincoln 1994).

The area under cultivation and grain yields grew incrementally in Yakutia. A century after Gmelin's observation of agricultural failure in the Yakutsk region, 1,248 centners (1 centner equals 100 kilograms) were harvested from 840 hectares. In 1834 "Agricultural Gazette" informed that "wheat planted near town of Yakutsk ... is expected to be quite good this year" (Khrapal' 1940, 22-23). By 1917, 98.8 percent of all arable land in central Yakutia, amounting to 13,800 hectares was under grain cultivation (23).

The naturally non-agricultural Yakuts took on crop cultivation slowly. In 1738 the same Strahlenberg remarked that Yakuts "eat Bread, when they can get it, but it is no usual Part of their Diet, because they neither Plough, Sow, nor Plant" (382). Gmelin supported this observation: "Yakuts do not bother to make bread", instead "they eat diverse roots" (1751-52, vol. II, 469). More than a century later, Müller commented on Yakuts' indifference towards tillage: "They view tillage as a sin, and being by origin a herder folk, only slowly became accustomed to crops". The Russian local official complained to him that Yakuts did not have a real desire to sow and, moreover, refused to follow the example of the Russians through their "Asiatic stubbornness" (1882, 252-253).

Few Yakuts became Christians, lived with the Russian *pashenny* (the term literally means ‘tilling people’), and learned tillage. But, as to the majority of the native population, it remained beyond production of bread. Russians settled mainly in the river valleys, where grain cultivation was practiced, while Yakuts occupied the alases.

Crop growing never did extend beyond the boundaries of central Yakutia. Today only the area surrounding Yakutsk is considered to be a viable crop-cultivating region, due mainly to its fertile loam soils (Pavlov 1994, 90-91). Russian settlers in the northern regions, along the Kolyma, Yana, Oymyakon, and Indigirka Rivers had to limit their agricultural activities to vegetable growing. Above the Arctic Circle, Russian ingenuity allowed harvests of cabbage, carrots, turnips, dill, lettuce, parsley, and after the 1800s, potatoes (Alekseev 1996, 57). Yakuts accepted growing of garden vegetables more readily than production of grain. In the 1860s Maak observed Yakuts growing cabbage, beets, and turnips (1994, 351). Müller noticed cucumbers and even watermelons grown in hothouses (1882, 255).

Crop cultivation remained on the level of subsistence throughout the three centuries of czarist rule. It was not until Stalin’s collectivization in the 1930s that people in Yakutia were forced by decree to produce grain on a larger scale (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001).

Impact of Russian Christianity

Among the first settlers were also missionaries of the Russian Orthodox Church. In a manner similar to the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of the New World, the conquest of the Siberian subcontinent went hand in hand with conversion of the indigenous population to Christianity. As Yuri Slezkine informs us, it was not a straightforward process (1994, 41-43, 44). On the one hand, the missionaries actively sought converts among the Siberian natives. On the other hand, the government was not too keen on complete conversion of its new subjects. The reason was simple. Once a pagan person, or an *inoverets* (literally meaning a person of a different faith), was baptized, he received most of the privileges of a full Russian subject. Most importantly, it meant they either were exempt from paying taxes for a few years, or their *yasak* was reduced substantially. In spite of such obvious economic advantages, the Yakuts, like many other northerners, were not very keen on becoming Christians, because it also meant they had to sever ties with their own clan and become Russianized. The government did not think of the slow pace of Christianization among the indigenous population as a big problem as long as the new subjects were not rebellious and paid *yasak* on time. In fact, the governmental directives urged their envoys in new lands “not to offend them” (Lincoln 1994, 85) “not baptize any foreigners by force, so that the Siberian land of the Lena flourish and not become deserted” (Slezkine 1994, 43).

By the beginning of the 18th century the number of Yakuts who converted to Christianity remained small. Concerned with this situation, Peter the Great issued an order that gave the newly baptized people an offer very few could resist – exemption from all taxes and yasak for three years! Many natives flocked to local churches to be baptized and the flow of valuable furs and tax money to the Russia's capital became a mere trickle. No wonder that just six years after Peter's generous offer Catherine the First, his widow, cancelled it (Priklonsky 1896, 42).

During baptism Yakuts were given Russian names and surnames. Those who paid a bribe with a sable or fox pelts could choose a name that appealed to them. The majority were poor, so a *batyushka* (a Russian Orthodox priest) would give them name of "Popov", or "son of priest". This explains why today Popov is the most widely spread surname in Yakutia.

In the 19th century the most ambitious and wealthiest merchants in Yakut ranks built churches and got involved in charities. If their contribution was substantial, they were invited to the czar's court and given a prestigious rank of *pochetny inorodets*, literally translated from Russian as "honorable citizen of a foreign land". In the large village of Suntar, one such church was built by a rich trader, but did not survive the crushing forces of militant atheism during the Soviet regime. Today the locals want to build a house of worship based on their own shamanistic traditions and cosmology (Zedgenizov 1997). Having lived in Yakutia for most of my life, I have not met a single Yakut who proclaimed to be a

follower of the Russian Orthodox Church. After 1991 the situation changed as many different denominations came to Yakutia and Siberia in general to convert, and quite a few Yakuts began to explore diverse religious practices. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 8.

All in all, as Victor Mote poignantly remarked, Yakuts did not become ardent followers of the new religion, and by the turn of the 20th century, after almost 300 years under the Russian imperial rule, they remained Christians “in name only” (1998, 70). Perhaps, the most important contribution of Russian missionary work among Yakuts was the introduction of literacy and written version of the Yakut language. The first publication in the Yakut language was logically the New Testament, sponsored by the Russian Church.

By accepting a foreign religion formally, but not in essence, Yakuts demonstrated again their cultural flexibility. As they had to live under the Russians, they realized that it was beneficial for them to comply with the wishes of the stronger ones, but deep inside they kept their traditional religious and spiritual beliefs intact (Toumousov et al. 2000, 168-174). They continued to rely on their shamans in cases of emergency and sacrifice white horses to Uluu Toyon during ysaakh. The authority of Yakut shamans was held in high esteem not only by Yakuts themselves, but also by the Russians as well. In fact, there is a story that once a Russian governor of Yakutsk himself visited a famous shaman on several occasions (Seroshevsky 1993). The superficial acceptance of the Russian

Orthodox religion became evident with the establishment of the Soviet power. There were no efforts to build Russian churches or secretly meet and worship Jesus Christ. All Yakuts really wanted was to celebrate yasakh. The tensions caused by that will be discussed in Chapter 7, dealing with Yakuts under the Soviet regime.

Two Major Factors of Yakut Ethnogenesis: Demographic Growth and Expansion of Habitat

Demographic Changes

After a little more than a century after the Russian arrival in Yakutia, the number of Yakut males reached approximately 35,000. The fact that the Russian authorities only counted the men is easily explained by their pragmatic motives. As only adult men and sometimes male children were taxed in valuable furs, women and female children were excluded from censuses (Parnikova 1971, 69; von Baer 1845, 9; Fedorova 1998, 14). It is logical to assume that the real population exceeded the census figure by perhaps three times. It gives us an approximate figure of 100,000 persons. That also means that from the 1630s to 1790s the population of Yakuts grew almost twofold. By 1800 there were 50,064

male Yakuts registered as yasak contributors (Parnikova 1971, 80). Russian subjugation, then, did not affect the demographic vitality of the Yakuts. They blossomed under the new regime by adapting certain Russian habits and elements of material culture. They found ways to live with the conquerors in a manner that allowed them not a mere survival but a healthy demographic growth. On January 1, 1852 Yakutsk territory became an oblasts'. Its first governor was K. N. Grigoriev (Priklonsky 1896, 168).

Russian migration to Yakutia increased in the late 19th century. From 1871 to 1896 18,200 people came to Yakutia, while between 1897 and 1916 the number of migrants went up to 41,100 (Kabuzan 1991, 626). This happened despite the fact that the gold-mining area in the late 1890s administratively became a part of Irkutsk oblast' (Parnikova 1971).

At the same time the Yakut population increased slowly but steadily. By 1897 their numbers reached 225,400. On the eve of the October revolution of 1917 there were approximately 226,900 Yakuts, out of a total of 264,100 of the population of the region (Sokolov 1925, 25; Diakonov 1962,21).

Expansion of Yakut habitat: New Boundaries of a Homeland

According to several studies of their geographical distribution during the past three centuries, the Yakuts began to expand beyond the core area of the

Three Valleys even before the Russian arrival (Ivanov 1966, 41, 45; Parnikova 1971, 42-43; Fedorova 1998). This first stage of Yakut expansion was on a modest scale and did not go beyond the boundaries of a rather compact territory around the middle Lena River, and in the area between Lena and Amga Rivers, characterized by low lying terrain with numerous grassy alases (see Figure 3.2). Ivanov argues that the nature of Yakut cattle and horse herding economy combined with a growth in population led to this first stage of Yakut expansion. As was discussed in Chapter 4, the grasses in alases are often as good in quality as riverine valley grasses, so as long as Yakut herders were able to find pastures, they settled in them. Traditionally Yakuts lived at considerable distances from each other in small groups. Their tiny hamlets did not look like Russian villages at all. I.A.Goncharov, a famous Russian writer, noticed during his travels through Yakutia in 1854: “Here there are no villages or settlements as such. Instead these people live in *naslegs*. *Naslegs* are groups of yurts separated by several *verst*s (old Russian measure of distance, equaling approximately a dozen kilometers). Several generations coming from the same clan or ancestor live in such places” (Parnikova 1971, 109). One of the first Soviet censuses of rural population of Yakutia provided convincing evidence to this specific character of Yakut traditional settlement pattern. For example, in Vilyusk okrug 72,100 people lived in 3,332 winter settlements. This figure indicates that an average settlement did not exceed 20 people (Fedorova 1998, 31).

The second stage of Yakut expansion was more intensive and triggered principally by the Russian colonization. As is evident from petitions dated 1659-63, Yakuts were completely subjugated and asked for favors of tax exemption. Some of them tried to escape the burden of yasak by moving away from central Yakutia (Seroshevsky 1993, 222). Such escapes were carried out in several directions. First, they moved further away into outlying alases beyond the core of Yakut settlement that was formed by the beginning of 17th century. Second, they went to the Vilyui River basin, where the majority of population was Evenki. The attraction of that area was that it had numerous alases fit for pastures and full with hay meadows (Figure 6.9) (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 38-42). The third route led to the north. Gradual penetration of Yakuts into the northeast and northwest of Yakutia was studied by Dolkhikh and Gurvich. The Yakuts who moved to the north had to abandon their pastoralist way of life, as climatic and environmental conditions no longer permitted cattle or horse herding. Yakuts had to take on the fishing and hunting ways of life of Evens and northern Evenki. In the process of this economic acculturation, they did not lose their Yakut identity or language. Instead, the northern peoples became linguistically, and to some extent culturally, assimilated by Yakuts (Gurvich 1962, 35-36; Dolgikh 1962, 24-25).

The Yakuts who settled in the margins of northwest and northeast Yakutia all came from the uluses of central Yakutia. By the middle of the 18th century



Figure 6.9: A large meadow formed on the site of a former alas with a big central lake. Near a village of Elgyai, Suntar ulus, in the Vilyui River basin.

Source: a photograph by Terry G. Jordan 1997.

Yakuts occupied a contiguous area from the upper Vilyui to its mouth, the middle and upper Lena, the lands between the Aldan and Lena Rivers, and the upper Yana River (Figure 5.1). Some scholars hold the opinion that by that time Yakuts already lived as far north as Zhigansk ostrozhek (along the lower Lena), along northern Rivers of Olenyok, Anabar, Indigirka, and the lower Yana River (Parnikova 1965, 76). There is, however, not convincing enough evidence to support this point of view. In this respect I prefer to err on the conservative side rather than overstate the Yakut distribution on the basis of insufficient data. The main point to be made here is that Yakuts did indeed expand their homeland during the first century of the Russian rule and continued growing in numbers. By the beginning of the 20th century more of them moved to the northern margins (see Figure 2.2), but as was mentioned before, they could not pursue their cattle and horse raising economy there.

The growing Yakut population was still concentrated in the central regions of Yakutia by expanding to the less desirable lands of poorer quality. Such lands were mainly settled by the poorest strata of the population (Ivanov 1966, 47-48). In order to improve the quality of the pastures, these people often drained alas lakes and used fire to expand the grasslands (Maak 1994, 345-346). As a result, by the end of the 19th century all of central regions of Yakutia were rather densely settled by Yakuts. Both environmental and cultural parameters came into play at this stage of Yakut ethnogenesis – the cattle and horse herding Yakuts sought and

occupied grassy riverine valleys and alases. As soon as they filled this habitat, the Yakuts remained within these clearly defined boundaries and began increase in numbers *in situ* (Figure 6.10) (Parnikova 1971, 110-111). The ecological niche of grasslands defines the natural limits of Yakut homeland.

The Second Stage of Russian Colonization in Yakutia: Major Economic and Societal Changes during the 18-19th centuries

Economic changes

a) Mining in Yakutia

As was seen in the earlier part of this chapter, the early Russian presence manifested itself in the establishment of fortresses for the purpose of collecting taxes, and farming villages that sought to provide town folks with food. Mining activities were carried out in the western provinces of Siberia, supplying the Russian empire with iron and coal (Lincoln 1994, 270-271). Yakutia did not provide any hopes for mining exploration, though already in 1812 Alexander I, who needed money for his wars with Napoleon, issued an order allowing freedom for all residents of Siberia to prospect for gold and silver (Priklonsky 1896, 95).

The 1860s brought profound changes to the Yakutian economy when large deposits of gold were discovered in the upper Lena River, approximately 1,200



Figures 6.10: The contiguous area of the Yakut traditional homeland.

Source: Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 6.

miles to the north of Irkutsk. By the early 1870s, Lena gold mines produced one ton of gold each year. A decade later, 40 tons of gold were sent to the czar's court. In 1908 Russian and British investors organized a joint-stock company, *Lena Goldfields Ltd*, that operated more than 400 placers and was financed by twelve million rubles capital (Lincoln 1994, 271-272).

b) Raising cattle and horses

The opening of gold-mining operation in southern Yakutia had a direct impact on the well-being of Yakuts. They were not caught by the grip of mining molokh, but instead became actively engaged in energetic trade of livestock. The new mines created an unprecedented demand for beef. This factor affected the traditional ratio of horses to cattle. The Yakuts had previously kept more horses than cattle, because such arrangement required less work and smaller amount of hay, as Yakut horses took care of themselves (Basharin 1956, 25). In dietary terms, they traditionally preferred horseflesh to beef (Gmelin 1751-52, vol. II, 471).

From the middle of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century cattle raising industry was dominant but unstable. After 1861 there was some increase in livestock that lasted until 1870. From 1870 till 1905 heads number declined from 585,048 to 430,179, or by 26.47 percent. At the same time the

traditional Yakut ratio when horses outnumbered cattle was changing as well. Yakutsk Oblast' Statistical Reports from 1879-1891 documented gradual changes in ratio in favor of cattle. In 1891 in all of Yakutia number of cattle exceeded by 110,000 head that of horses. The actual number of horses declined steadily as well. If in 1879, during the initial period of gold exploration on the upper Lena, there were 144,325 horses, a decade later this number shrunk to 131,978 (Seroshevsky 1993, 255-257) (Figure 6.11). Dietary preference for beef among the increased Russian population was an obvious factor that influenced Yakut livestock economy. Among other factors Basharin included: (1) concentration of land and capital in the hands of few *toyons*; (2) the Czarist government did not have anywhere in Russia veterinarian programs (1962, 111-114). According to the 1917 census published by the Soviet government in 1926, an average statistical Yakut family had 2.4 horses and 9.3 heads of cattle (Sokolov 1925, xxxi).

Coincidentally, the rise of gold and silver mining spurred a similar growth of cattle raising in Mexico and western North America (Jordan 1993a, 126, 222, 228, 230-231, 246-247, 292-294, 299-300). This suggests that not just the Russians, but also the Yakuts became a part of the supply-and-demand system of the world economy. Despite the fact that the Yakuts rarely worked in the mines, capitalist relations developed among Yakuts, initially in the form of livestock trade.

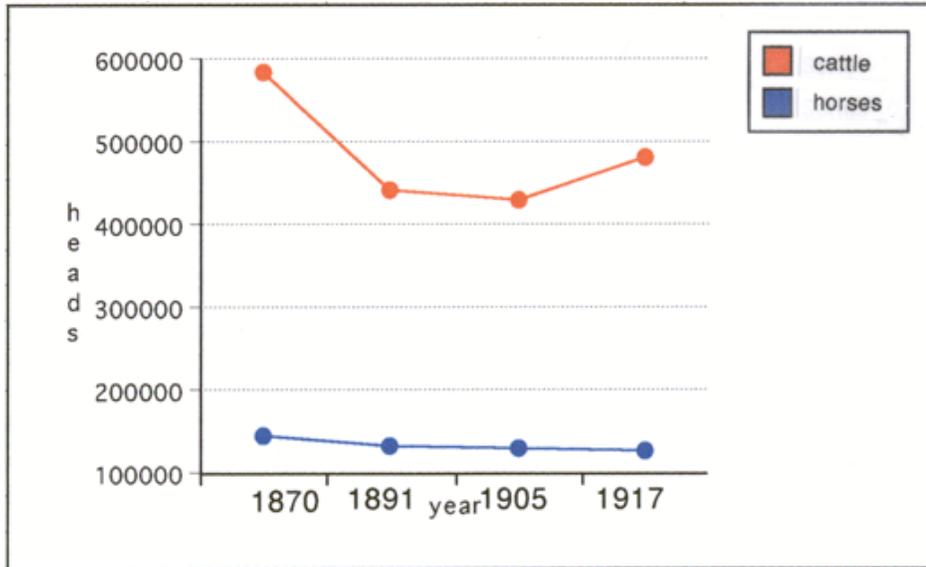


Figure 6.11: Change in cattle and horse numbers during the 19th century.

Source: Seroshevsky 1993.

c) Changes in the System of Land Property Relationships

P. S. Safroneev proposed a theory that explains the emergence of individual land property among Yakuts. It is based on the fact that Yakuts did not live together in villages like Russians, or in *ouls* like Kazakhs in Central Asia, or in *kuryens* like the Buryat Mongols. They lived in small groups in hamlets in alases, and along the small rivulets and creeks with grassy banks, and in riverine grasslands. The distribution of meadows and pastures dictated such a dispersed population pattern. The first form of individual private property was applied to pastures and derived on usufruct possession of such. Individual ownership of pastures became the first step in the disintegration of tribal and clan common property (1965, 21, 35-36).

Societal changes

The traditional social structure of the Yakuts also underwent considerable transformation. The distribution of wealth was not only concentrated now in the hands of a few landlords, but also a new class of merchants emerged. These wealthy Yakuts participated in diverse trade activities with the rest of Russia, China, and Japan. When the Bolsheviki came to establish the Communist rule in Yakutia it took several years of civil war, since the newly emerged Yakut capitalists supported the White Army with money and recruits. The richest of all Yakut families, the Nikiforovs, who had the nickname of *Mannyettakh* ("The ones

with the money”) escaped to Japan, where they found a refuge. Today, as a result, a tiny community of Yakuts can be found in Japan (Nikolaev 1998, 13-17).

Before the advent of the revolution of 1917, some bright and talented Yakuts had already begun the formation of a Yakut intelligentsia. These people were able to study in St.Petersburg and Moscow at various academic institutions. The first Yakut writers, playwrights, lawyers, and doctors formed a new, if small, social stratum of the society. For example, after graduating from Moscow University, Prokopy Sokol’nikov became the first Yakut medical doctor. Superbly educated, Sokol’nikov was reputed to correspond with Leo Tolstoy (Nikolaev 1998, 10-12).

The most prominent figures among the new Yakut intelligentsia were writers. Aleksey Kulakovsky, Platon Oyiunsky, Anempodist Sofronov created seminal works of literature. They are considered classic writers today, and remain popular among modern Yakuts, because they told the stories of the past. These stories often romanticized pre-revolutionary life, and also the life before the Russian subjugation. After 1921 most of their works were forbidden and most of the leaders of the literary movement were repressed, exiled, or executed. The new Soviet power did not have any need for this bourgeois ideology.

One turning point in modern Yakut history and ethnogenesis was the foundation in 1906 of an organization called “Sakha omuk”, also known as “Soyuz iakutov” in Russian. Led by a Yakut-born lawyer, Vasiliy Nikiforov, this

organization presented the czarist government with a series of political and economic demands. Among the most important among them were the following: a) return of all indigenous lands to Yakut possession; b) self-government of the Yakut territory; c) cancellation of all police supervision of Yakut citizens (<http://www.SAKHA.RU/SAKHA/nasled/writer/HTNL/sud.htm>; Nikolaev 1998, 26-29). Given the nature of these demands, it is needless to say that the czarist authorities did everything possible to suppress the nationalist movement. But the seeds of nationalistic discord were sown, and as it will be shown in Chapter 7 and especially Chapter 8, Yakut ethnonationalism never died out. It persevered throughout seven decades of Sovietization and blossomed in the post-Soviet era.

Under czarist Russian rule, then, Yakut ethnogenesis took new directions and forms, and proceeded vigorously. Yakuts grew greatly in numbers between 1632 and 1917, becoming a proper nation, and finished an impressive expansion of their homeland. Yakuts absorbed many elements of Russian culture and also mixed genetically with the Russians, without ceasing to be Yakuts. The intrusion of Russian colonizers did not adversely affect the rise of the Yakut nation.

The Yakuts took what they liked from the Russian way of life – bread, vodka, crop and garden cultivation, commercialization of the economy, landlordism, increased attention to cattle raising, house types, literacy, and the development of the intellectual elite – without losing their identity. Quite the contrary, they entered the Soviet period stronger and more aware of their cultural

and national identity than they had been before 1632. A true ethnonationalism, a powerful factor in ethnogenesis, had taken deep root.

Other important factors of Yakut ethnogenesis include the transformation of Yakut culture during Soviet period through modernization and urbanization.

Chapter 7 is predominantly dedicated to those factors.

Chapter 7: The Impact of Modernization on Yakut Ethnic

Identity: Soviet Rule (1922-1991)

Establishment of The Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

On April 27, 1922 Soviet power was officially in place in Yakutia. After several years of Civil War the Bolsheviks had finally overwhelmed the remaining White Army divisions. The status of the Yakut oblast' was changed to a republic, as the Communist Party leaders recognized the Yakuts as a large group with a developed national conscience, residing in their traditional homeland.

This strong national identity manifested itself in a continued resistance of wealthy Yakuts to the establishment of the Communist rule. In 1922 the elite realized that they could fight against the Red Army on their own, and invited a White general, Anatoliy N. Pepelyaev, to lead their troops. At that time Pepelyev lived in Harbin, China, where he had fled after the Siberian White Army under Kolchak was defeated in most regions of Siberia and the Far East. Pepelyaev was able to organize 657 people and moved into Yakutia. By the beginning of 1923 his division was able to take over the areas near Yakutsk and prepared to attack the city itself. But the chance appearance in Pepelyev's rearguard of a lost Red Army unit consisting of 281 soldiers overturned the plans. Arrested and convicted, the White general wrote in a letter to his friends abroad (Pesterev 1993, 86-87):

“From the very beginning of the Siberian Movement, I fought against the Communists. I had only one goal – to save our Motherland... That is why when the representatives of the Yakut people called upon me, I with a group of selfless people went to the remote and severe Yakutia. We wanted to help people who were doomed under the Communists...”

This excerpt is important because it illustrates the mindset and appeal of the young Yakut bourgeoisie and intelligentsia. At the same time, support for the Bolsheviks was very low, counting just a few hundred Yakuts in 1921 (Smith 1990, 306).

Rich merchants and intellectuals were not the only Yakuts, resisting the Communists. The Evenkis of the Okhotskiy region rebelled in 1924-1925. Their slogan was: “We want the Soviet power without the Communists” (Pesterev 1993, 100). There were at least three reasons for their resistance, known as *the Tungus Rebellion*. First, a new territorial division of the Yakut ASSR did not include the Okhotsk coastal region where the majority of the population consisted of reindeer herding and fishing Evenkis (Balzer 1996, 107). Second, during the years of “military Communism” representatives of the new regime expropriated everything, including reindeer, tools, and food (Pesterev 1993, 104-111). Third, and perhaps most important, the new regime did not acknowledge the Evenkis as a separate nation with its own territory, cultural ideals, and aspirations (Pesterev 1993, 106). The relations between Yakut and Evenki national identities would later follow complicated and intricate paths. These are discussed in Chapter 8.

Sovietization and Modernization

The Soviet state had several major issues on its agenda, but reconstruction of the predominantly feudal society into a modern one was a primary goal. In the early 1920s the most efficient way to start this process was deemed through collectivization.

In Yakut ASSR the overwhelming majority of farms were organized as *kolkhozes*, where the peasants were paid a share of the harvest. In theory, such collective farms were voluntary producer cooperatives, led by elected officials called “*kolkhoz* democracy” (Smith 1990, 307; Hedlund 1984, 10). The process of collectivization did not gain momentum until after the early 1930s, when every region in the USSR was transformed by the Stalin’s iron determination to modernize the country and devastation of the purges (Hedlund 1984, 54-57). The brutality of the drive for collectivization resulted in famine and loss of millions of human lives, described by Robert Conquest as a ‘harvest of sorrow’ (1986). Figures concerning collectivization in the Yakut Autonomous Republic show that this process swept through the republic between 1929 and 1934. In 1929 only 3.6 percent of peasants were listed as members of *kolkhozes*, but by 1932 the proportion of collectivized households had risen to 41.7 percent. By 1940 there were 1,160 *kolkhozes* in Yakutia (Stuart 1972, 11, 13; Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 64).

As was the case elsewhere in the Soviet Union the policy of collectivization brought much suffering to rural people. Large losses of livestock, food shortages and famine occurred in most parts of Yakutia. The movement was carried out with “a total disregard for the local peculiarities” of Yakut culture (Slezkine 1994, 195), and some experts attribute the decline in the Yakut population, from 240,500 in 1926 to 236,700 at the 1959 census, to the negative impact of collectivization (Conquest 1986; Wixman 1984, 220). Others disagree, pointing out that the WW II was a major factor in the population decline (Pesterev 1993). The republic not only sent its men to the front, but also struggled through years of starvation.

Wartime famine occurred in several central regions, hitting the population of the Churapchinskiy region especially hard (Figure 7.1), and caused relocation of thousands of people to the northern regions where the starving people were supposed to survive on fish. The results were devastating, with large human losses. One Yakut woman, who I interviewed, as a small child, survived this episode of forceful relocation during 1942-43. She shared with me the horror of losing her entire family and being left with strange people, constantly suffering from under nutrition (Bosikova 1997; Pesterev 1993, 135-136, 138-139; Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 65). The decline in Yakut population between 1929 and 1956 was, most likely, a result of a combined effect of the brutality of collectivization and hardships of the wartime.

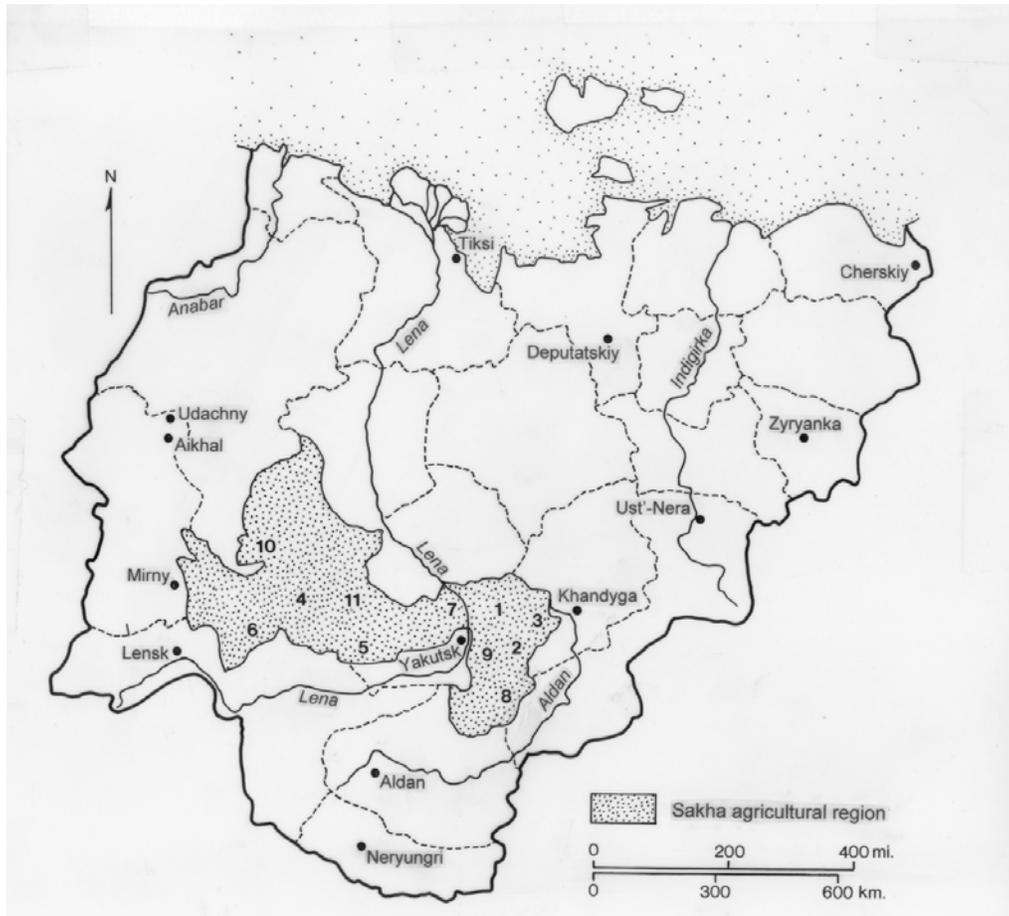


Figure 7.1: Regions of central Yakutia and the Vilyui River regions, where Sakha comprise the majority of population.

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| 1- Ust'-Aldanskiy | 7- Namskiy |
| 2- Churapchinskiy | 8- Amginskiy |
| 3- Tattinskiy | 9- Megino-Kangalasskiy |
| 4- Verkhnevilyuisliy | 10- Nyurbinskiy |
| 5- Gorny | 11- Vilyuiskiy |
| 6- Suntarskiy | |

Source: *Torgovkina* 1999.

Collectivization had a profound impact on all aspects of the life of rural Yakuts, including the social organization of their communities, economic mode of agricultural production, education, health, and diet. Traditionally, Yakuts lived in hamlets separated from their neighbors by grassy pastures and hay meadows necessary for raising cattle and horses. The Soviet state changed this pattern dramatically in several ways. First, the Communists believed in keeping ‘naseleniye’ (population) in one place where they could be better indoctrinated in socialist teachings “on a daily and systematic basis” (Smith 1999, 17; Turnock 2001, 50). Second, it was done for economic purposes – the socialist concept of agricultural modernization presupposed large units of land under single control, where mechanization of labor was deemed to be most productive (Kosmachev 1969, 607). As a result, small traditional hamlets were abandoned almost everywhere, except in the northernmost fringes of the republic, and the Yakuts as Soviet citizens began to live in the gridiron-patterned socialist villages. Such villages contained a school, a farm office, and often a small medical facility (Takakura 2002, 3-4).

Another important aspect of the social restructuring was ideological. The Marxist point of view held that a rise in production, either industrial or agricultural, would create a new socialist and, at the same time, a modernist mentality in the populace (Gurvich 1962, 20-21; Takakura 2001, 40, 42-43). What actually happened had many diverse consequences. On a social level, the socialist

ideas gradually gained support among the majority of the population (Turnock 2001, 50). One of the reasons for such social consent, some argue, was greatly improved public health. The 1925-26 medical survey showed that respiratory diseases, including tuberculosis, parasitoses, ulcers, and blindness were rampant. Child mortality was as high as 61 percent (Smith 1990, 306-307). One of the undoubted advantages of the socialist social system was the availability of medical services. Medical facilities provided by the Soviet government changed health conditions among the Yakut population for the better, especially in rural areas.

Third, the economic structure of agricultural production in rural Yakut underwent dramatic transformations. Soviet collective farms changed Yakuts, the subsistence pastoralists, into essentially ranch workers (Takakura 2002). The five-year-plans handed down from the central government set strict quotas specifying amount and kinds of agricultural produce. Collectivized farms made an enormous effort in expanding tilled land, because one of Stalin's obsessive ideas was that of transformation of nature. According to this concept, 'gardens will bloom in the Arctic and Central Asian deserts'. One official policy that Joseph Stalin dictated personally in the 1930s was to grow small grains in Siberia, even above 60° north latitude. As a result, between 1917 and 1946, the cultivated area in the republic increased by two and a half times its size, reaching 227,000 acres. In areas where arable land was available, especially in the Lena-Aldan interfluvium, state policy

was to consolidate small plots to larger, often elongated, tracts of land. Before the revolution, an average size of a plot did not exceed 2.7 acres, after collectivization was completed, the average size of a cultivated plot increased to approximately 4.1 hectares. Between 1957 and 1967 a further consolidation of land occurred that brought up the dimensions of arable land tracts to 12.5 hectares, allowing a more efficient use of machinery (Kosmachev 1969, 604, 607, 608; Wein 1991, 196). Special hybrid crops characterized by a shorter maturing period and a higher degree of frost-resistance were developed by the Soviet agronomists to be sown in the Siberian villages (Tokarev and Gurvich 1964, 291; Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 71).

But the main thrust of the governmental quotas concerned production of meat and milk (Armstrong 1967, 10; *Atlas* 1989, 104). State agrarian planners had as their main goal a large-scale agricultural economy. New breeds of dairy and beef cattle from central Russian region of Kostroma were systematically introduced to the collective farms of Yakutia (Takakura 2002). The animals adjusted comparatively well, but the productivity was never up to the planned standards. The key element to stable meat production had remained the availability of good quality hay. In order to boost hay productivity, beginning of the 1940s the government made an effort to supply collective farms with machines of various kinds, including tractors, trucks, grain and silage combines, seeders, and hay mowers (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 78). State supervised

agricultural production never proved to be economical. Over the past three decades of the Soviet regime, Yakutian agriculture, like most Soviet agriculture, remained heavily subsidized (Hedlund 1984, 11, 86; Korotov 1989, 109; Wein 1991, 194).

In the social sphere, the benefits of collectivization did not favorably affect the lives of the rural Yakuts' lives until after the Stalin era. It was not until Khrushchev's beneficial agrarian reforms that villagers began to feel improvements in the standard of life. Khrushchev's policies towards the rural population of the Soviet Union have not been fully appreciated so far. Yet it was Khrushchev who raised prices for farm produce, allowed the private ownership of vegetable gardens, and permitted a limited amount of privately owned poultry and livestock. Ever more beneficial, the collective farm workers began receiving cash wages instead of shares of harvest. Moreover, for the first time in their Soviet experience, they were able to leave *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* at their own will, because they were given the right to hold passports.

The middle 1960s also witnessed improvement in health care with the development of "an efficient flying doctor service" (Armstrong 1965, 10). The people's diet became more diversified, partly through the adoption of vegetable growing. The Soviet state also provided primary childcare, including supplies of vitamins and canned fruit. Salaries increased, and the state price subsidies for agricultural products increased seventeenfold between 1965 and 1989 (Bater

1996, 189-191). All in all, from the middle 1960s until the beginning of the 1980s, the residents of rural Yakutia experienced what can be described as a 'golden age'. During this period a spur of demographic growth occurred in most rural areas, and life expectancy increased considerably (Malkhazova et al 1997, 11; Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 78-80, 82-83; Marples 1999, 67-72).

Growth of the Industrial Sector and Urban Development

The territory of Yakutia had only rudimentary industry before the establishment of Soviet rule. In addition to the gold mines in the south, there was only small-scale manufacturing, including leather works, soap works, brick production, salt-mining, and small mills. Approximately 45 percent of the territory's revenues came from timber sales, while another 45 percent came from fishing (Torgovkina 2000, 28).

Significant industrial development began only after the Second World War, when the Soviet state devised a plan for exploration of Siberia's most remote regions for natural resources. Coal, rare metals, precious metals, including gold and silver, and timber were the principal targets for the socialist industrialists. Geological research was conducted in the northernmost margins, including territories beyond the Arctic Circle (Mote 2002).

Mining industries

Diamonds were discovered by a group of Russian geologists near modern town of Mirny (means “peaceful”) (Figure 7.2). The challenge of developing new technology for mining precious stones from permafrost was met in a few years. It included drilling in the permafrost, blasting hard ground with explosive devices, hauling the mixture of soil and rough diamonds to the processing plant, and finally sorting by hand. In 1953 the first open-pit mine began to operate in *Mirny*, producing the high quality diamonds that were equal to those mined in South Africa (Wein 1991, 200).

Mirny is entirely a Soviet creation. Prior to the discovery of diamonds, the wild open tundra was practically uninhabited, visited only occasionally by migrating reindeer herders (*Atlas* 1989, 40-41). Within a short period of time thousands of mining engineers, technicians and mine workers were brought from Russia and Ukraine (Wein 1991, 200, 203). Leningrad provided most of the highly educated specialists. The town mushroomed as block after block of Soviet style apartment buildings grew at rapid speed. Salaries in Mirny were high, the recruited specialists could keep their flats in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev, while in Mirny they could have a new apartment. Schools were of good quality as well, as teachers immigrated from central cities. The supply of goods and food products attracted the specialists. The town became the fastest growing city in the entire republic as new diamonds pipes were discovered further north of Mirny. Mirny

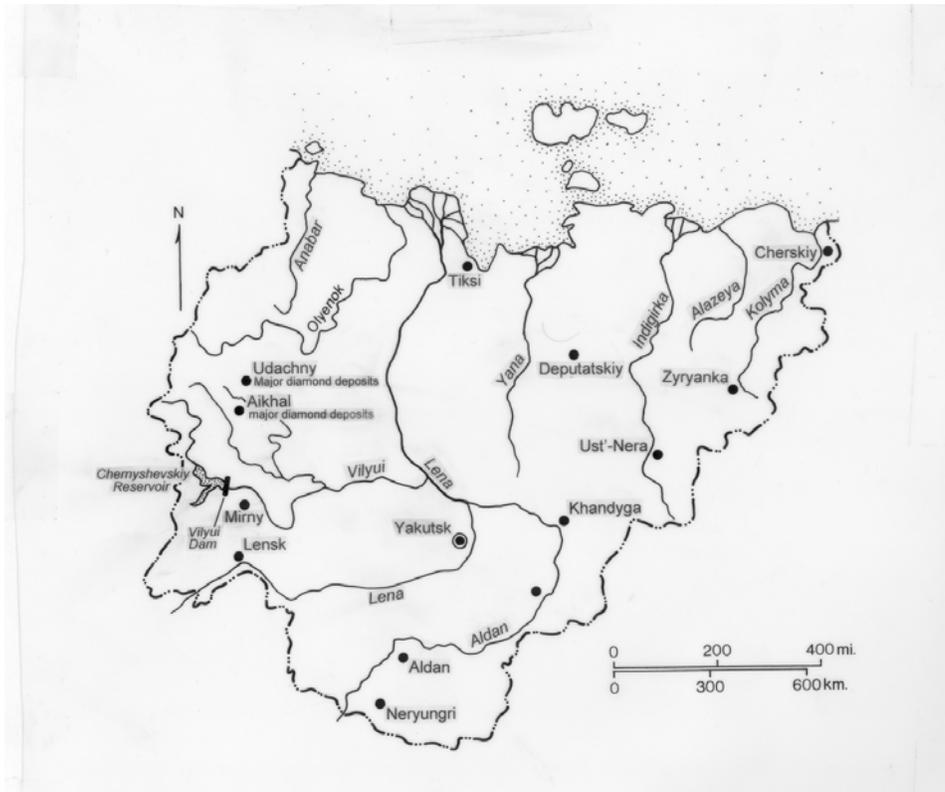


Figure 7.2: Major mining centers in Yakutia.

Source: *Wein 1991; Mote 1994.*

was and still remains a closed city, off limits to ordinary folks and foreigners. In 1982 I visited relatives there. My aunt Elena Nikiforova and her husband were among a few token Yakuts who worked in the diamond plant. The early 1980s were the depth of “zastoy”, a Russian word coined in Gorbachev era to describe the period of economic and social stagnation under Brezhnev era. *Zastoi* meant a limited variety of foods and consumer goods, and long lines in the stores. In Mirny I was struck with the range and quality of products available at the stores and even boutiques. I was invited to different apartments and again impressed by the difference in the mere size of apartments and overall higher standard of living in this closed city.

Mirny was not the only city of its kind. Deputatsky, in the very margins of the continent, above the Arctic Circle, was developed because of discovery of large deposits of tin and mercury. The old gold mining areas in southern, eastern, and northeastern Yakutia were further developed by the Soviet state, using modern technological processes. This also led to increased populations in mining towns, such as *Aldan*, *Ust'-Nera*, and *Zyryanka* (Figure 7.2) (Lishenyuk 1995, 31).

Neryungri became the second largest city in Yakutia grew because of discovery of large deposits of highest quality of coking coal, and other valuable minerals, including gold, rare metals, and iron ore (Torgovkina 1999, 180-181). By the 1970s the coal deposits in European Russia and Ukraine were largely

depleted. This led to increased coal-mining operations to Siberia and the Far East. In the period between 1970 and 1988 coal production in Siberia grew by two-thirds (Mote 1994, III-2, III-3). Expansion of the Trans-Siberian railroad known as BAM (abbreviation for the Baikal-Amur Magistral') further sped the development of the southern Yakutian *industrial-territorial complex* (Soviet term for a new type of resource-base development, implying that some crude processing takes place besides mining). Yakutian leadership lobbied for the construction of northward branch of the BAM that became known as 'little BAM' and was to reach Yakutsk at some future time (Mote 1998, 121-122). This line running for 800 kilometers, only recently reached *Berkakit*. The projected railway spurred coal production in the South Yakutian region (Torgovkina 2000, 39). The gross annual output increased from 3.1 million metric tons in 1980 to hefty 15.5 million metric tons in 1988 (Mote 1994, III-7).

This development, however, brought few advantages for the local people of Yakutia. This is explained largely by the arrangement of the so-called "compensation treaties" signed between the Soviet and Japanese governments in the early 1970s. The essence of these treaties was that Japan provided machinery, caterpillars, heavy trucks and consumer goods in exchange for Yakutian coal (Linge 1992, 138). Most of the mined coal was shipped to Japanese steel mills (Smith 1990, 307). The Japanese did not allow access to the mining equipment technology, nor did it share any secrets of manufacturing of new parts for

machinery or caterpillars. It was a classic case of colonial trade. Twenty years later with almost 90 percent of the coaking coal gone, while no domestic technology was developed. The area is marked today by rusting machinery in huge open pit mines, and hills of industrial waste. Modern Neryungri presents a picture of economic depression. The production of coal had already decreased to 12.4 million metric tons in 1991 and continues to decline (Mote 1994, III-7). Neryungri, after having reached its population peak of 121,000 people in 1990, is loosing residents slowly but surely. At least fifteen thousand people left in 1998 alone (Torgovkina 1999, 181). The out migration of European Russians and Ukrainians, who constituted majority of workforce, is a main reason for the latest development.

Production of electrical energy

Production of electrical energy became an urgent necessity in order to support growing extractive industries and an increasing urban population. One of the largest hydroelectrical projects was the construction of a series of dams on the left tributary of the Lena River – the Vilyui, not far from Mirny (Figure 7.2). Mining diamonds from the permafrost required immense amounts of energy (Luk'yanov 1982, 523-524). The Vilyui hydroelectric project in 1968 ranked as the 12th largest in the Soviet Union (Wein 1991, 201-202). The construction of the third branch of this large and only hydroelectrical project on the territory of

Yakutia is still underway (Torgovkina 2000, 31). In addition to hydropower, natural gas is also used to generate electricity. Vast areas in central Yakutia contain natural gas that is transferred through pipelines, providing central heating and hot water for the city of Yakutsk and surrounding areas, including several industrial towns, particularly *Jatai*, where maintenance and repair of river ships is concentrated, *Moksogolokh*, an important center of cement production, and the *Kangalass* coal mining operation (Fedorova 1998, 55-56).

Discovery of oil in the upper Lena basin in the early 1970s caused some optimism about the possibility of partial self-sufficiency in oil production (Lishenyuk 1995, 30-31). There are 31 known petroleum reserves, estimated at approximately 253.8 million tons (Lishenyuk 1994, 18, 22). During the years of 1992-94 I worked for the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Sakha and interpreted at many meetings on the oil development of Sakha. Domestic and foreign oil engineers were invited by the Sakha government to assess the feasibility of oil drilling in that region. The outcome of these talks was usually the same: the depth of permafrost and certain geological conditions make developments of oilfields in Yakutia a prohibitively expensive proposition.

Transportation

One of the most significant changes was a gradual but constant improvement of a modern transportation network. The most noticeable change

came with the introduction of aviation, both for industrial and passenger services. The first airplane flew into Yakutsk as early as 1925 (Pesterev 1993, 111). In 1961 a flight on a Soviet make Il-18 from Yakutsk to Moscow took more than 12 hours. Three decades later the same flight takes less than 6 hours. During the Soviet period aviation was heavily subsidized all over the USSR, but especially in the north. As a result, air tickets to major Soviet cities were affordable for the rank-and-file Yakutian (Armstrong 1965, 10-11).

As far as the 'civilizing rails' are concerned, Sakha remains largely out of the limits of this inexpensive and effective means of transportation. By the end of the Soviet period there were only 250.7 kilometers of railways, all of them along the single line of the Little BAM.

The length of the road network amounts to meager 27,350 kilometers, with less than one third of them being paved (Torgovkina 2000, 40-41). There was no all-year-round road with hard cover linking the Trans-Siberian Railroad with Yakutsk. As a result, winter season became the only time allowing heavy trucks to deliver freight, because the frozen rivers were used as parts of the route.

But for the interior river waterways and access to the North Sea Route during July-August, transportation costs to Yakutia would have been even more expensive than they were (Armstrong 1965, 10). Construction of the seaport of Tiksi near the delta of the Lena River allowed the republic to import heavy equipment, necessary foods and consumer goods from central parts of Russia at

economical rates. Like all settlements of non-agricultural function in the Soviet Union, the town of Tiksi (Map 7.1) was heavily subsidized. In the early 1990s, when the subsidies from the central government dwindled people began to leave. As a result, Tiksi's existence itself became an issue seriously discussed by the Sakha government. In May of 1994 I accompanied President of Sakha M. Ye. Nilolayev to Tiksi to address this issue. Nikolayev promised the local people that the republic needs the port more than ever and would definitely subsidize their living north of the Arctic Circle (Nikolaev 1994).

Urbanization: Ethnic Implications

As a result of industrial development, the population of Sakha became highly urbanized. Two major factors contributed to this process. The first factor was discussed earlier in this chapter in connection with in-migration of European Russians and Ukrainians, who overwhelmingly settled in industrial towns. Second, modern educational and cultural amenities attracted the brightest village dwellers to Yakutsk, a city that grew disproportionately faster than other towns in Yakutia. Concentration of medical facilities, access to the university and many vocational schools became magnets for young people with aspirations of a professional career.

By the time Soviet rule was established in Yakutia, only 5.3 percent of the population lived in cities and towns. In 1939 this figure reached 26.9 percent and by 1950 37.6 percent. By 1970 more people lived in cities and towns than in villages. The 1960s saw the ‘emancipation’ of kolkhoz workers. According to Khrushchev’s new law, the villagers could obtain a passport, allowing them to leave rural areas and seek jobs in cities and towns. These new rules were accompanied by the Russia-wide project of eliminating small rural settlements by organizing large sovkhozes (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 64-88). These combined factors intensified the process of urbanization and abandonment of rural regions everywhere in the Russian Federation, including the Yakut ASSR. By the end of the Soviet period 66.6 percent, or exactly two-thirds of all Yakutian residents had become urbanites (*Osnovnye* 1999, 6).

The most important aspect of my analysis of urbanization in Yakut ASSR, involves the ethnic differentiation. Most of industrial towns in Yakutia have a majority of European Russians and Ukrainians, while the rural population overwhelmingly remains Yakut. It is especially true of traditional areas of cattle and horse breeding in central Yakutia, the homeland. As one looks at the ethnic makeup of outlying areas, it is unevenly tilted towards the workers arriving from other parts of the Russian Federation (Khazanov 1995, 177). Thus the Russian census of 1989 registered at least a dozens towns and cities within the Yakutia where Russians and Ukrainians made up a majority of residents (Table 7.1). Even

the capital city of Yakutsk showed a low proportion of ethnic Yakuts - 25.1 percent, while Russians and other nationalities comprised over 74 percent (Torgovkina 1999, 185). These figures reveal several very important facts about both industrial development and urbanization process in the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

First, development of industries, predominantly of an extractive nature, took place beyond the core of the Yakut homeland, and as a result, the largest indigenous group, the Yakuts, did not become the beneficiaries of urban infrastructure, social benefits or higher incomes (Takakura 2001, 44). In fact, they have become a minority even in the republic's capital. That, in its turn, means that a number of schools using Yakut as language of instruction decreased every decade. According to the Soviet ideology, things should be strictly proportional. Following this logic, the number of schools with Yakut instruction in Yakutsk in 1989 was 2, while in 31 schools every subject was taught in Russian (Wein 1991, 200-201).

Second, though official figures and statistical reports announced that Yakut ASSR had a highly urbanized population, it did not reflect the situation of the indigenous peoples, not only Yakuts, but also Evenkis, Evens, Dolgans, Yukagirs, and Chukchis. The rural areas where agriculture was the major source of income remained underdeveloped in a classic core-periphery pattern. Very few representatives of these groups joined the ranks of working class, and therefore

were left out in many respects. For example, by the end of the Soviet era, agricultural workers in Yakutia, almost 90 percent of whom were ethnic Sakha, received wages averaging only 16 percent of those who had jobs in more highly subsidized mining and energy sectors (Balzer 1996, 119-20). Another communist doctrine proclaimed that under socialism every person will be urbanized and will develop socialist labor mentality turned out to be a farce. The native Yakutians did not seem to have a chance to develop such a mentality. But some would argue that they actually did not actively seek the jobs in the mines and open-pit operations. Some would say that doing so would have undermined their cultural identity. More thoughts on the relationship between social-economic development and cultural restrictions and taboos are outlined in chapter 8.

It is important to realize that as a consequence of urban development and exploitation of natural resources of Sakha, the local population developed a strong resentment to major modernization projects. After the *Chernyshevsky* Reservoir was built in the The Vilyui River Basin (Map 7.2), the local hunters and fishers began to complain about the deterioration of wildlife and water quality. They benefited from the electricity, but also lamented the destruction of nature (Graham Smith 1990, 312). They might have resented such projects less if they had a fair share of the profits from diamond or gold industries. In reality, the opposite was true. The Yakuts never saw even a fraction of the fabled Yakutian riches. But people in the Vilyui bend were aware of nuclear explosions that took place to the

north of Mirny (Tichotsky 2000). Several residents of Djarkhan, a small village in that area, confided in me in 1988 that at night they used to see a procession of tightly sealed trucks driving through their village with the air of utmost secrecy (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 4). They speculated that the nuclear waste from these so-called nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes were taken to be buried somewhere in the taiga. Needless to say, the locals were never consulted or informed about the waste sites.

Russianization and Russification

In Chapter 1 the two processes of Russification and Russianization in the Soviet Union were introduced. *Russianization* was policy that was a direct consequence of communist policies of modernization and Sovietization. The socialist regime developed a doctrine that the more developed and industrialized center should help the peripheries modernize, so that the whole country would in several decades become one smoothly run economic machine. Such a policy demanded sending thousands of Russian engineers, teachers, doctors, and other specialists to the margins of the country. Between 1959 and 1970 the Russianization, or direct increase of number ethnic Russians living in various non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, occurred on an unprecedented level (Wixman 1981, 667). This process brought about economic, social, and cultural

consequences that affected the ethnic minorities and their homelands. The main cultural and psychological impact was *Russification* of ethnic minorities.

Russification is a more complex process, as compared to a mere increase of relative proportion of Russians in the ethnic territories. It involves gradual ethnic acculturation, including linguistic assimilation (Silver 1974, 89-91; Dostál and Knippenberg 1979, 197-199). Some of the ethnic minorities under the influence of supremacy of Russian culture became assimilated, or “Russified”, in all ethnic territories and republics, but all to different degree (Harris 1993, 571-572).

Ultimately *Russified* individuals declared Russian their native language and presented themselves as Russians, though in appearances and names they remained ethnic. In the Yakut ASSR the number of such individuals was small, despite the fact that from September of 1967 all instruction in schools in the republic became obligatory in Russian. According to the 1970 census approximately 3.7 percent of ethnic Yakuts declared Russian as their mother tongue (Dostál and Knippenberg 1979, 198). By the end of the Soviet era this figure only slightly increased to 4.9 percent in the entire republic, while in urban areas it reached 6 percent (Harris 1993, 572; Gnatyuk 1996, 38-39). It is a remarkably low figure as compared to other ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union. Within the Yakut SSR the Russification rate for other ethnic minorities was much higher: approximately 28.5 percent of Chukchi, 10.7 percent of Evens and 8.9

percent of Evenkis declared Russian their mother tongue in 1989. It is important to point out that these ethnic groups had a high rate of linguistic assimilation in general, as approximately 70 percent of them name a Yakut language as their mother tongue (Gnatyuk 1996, 39-40).

Scholars studying cultural and linguistic assimilation suggest that many diverse factors could explain the uneven degree of acculturation among ethnic minorities. The most important factors include: (1) *cultural distance*, ‘measured’ by existence of common history and religion, related language, or the absence of such binding similarities; (2) proportion of Russians in the total population of a given region or ethnic republic; (3) the size of the minority group; (4) degree of cultural autonomy, especially in the language of instruction; and (5) physical distance between an ethnic homeland and the Russian core (Wixman 1981, 674-675; Silver 1974, 90-91; Knight 1982, 514-517; Herb and Kaplan 1999). It is important to notice that existence of a homeland proved to be another crucial factor in resisting cultural assimilation. In the Soviet experience, groups such as Jews, Greeks, Poles and Hungarians, that were not assigned ethnic territories (despite their large numbers) had shown high degrees of Russification, up to 78 percent in case of Jews.

A great cultural distance separates Yakuts and Russians, as they do not share a related language, nor do they share common history besides the Soviet regime, that some Yakuts say was imposed by the Russian communists. The

Russian Orthodox religion played a certain role in bringing these two very different cultures together but, as was argued earlier in Chapter 6, the majority of ethnic Yakuts embraced Christianity only nominally. The second factor – proportion of the Russians in an ethnic homeland – had a more significant impact on Yakuts than other factors. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, Yakuts became a minority group in their own homeland by 1959 (Diakonov 1962, 28-29; Gnatyuk 1996, 39). The presence and influence of a large number of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians was somewhat compensated by the big size of Yakuts as a group.

Moreover, in rural areas where most ethnic traditions persevere, the newcomers never made a significant difference. Central agricultural regions where the majority of the population is made up by the ethnic Sakha never attracted many newcomers. It just happened so that the major mineral discoveries on the territory of the YASSR lie beyond the traditional Yakut homeland. This is another example of the accidental character of ethnogenesis. The Yakuts got lucky again, as they had gotten lucky when they discovered grassy alases beyond the The Three Valleys – the factor allowing them to expand their habitat. If the Soviets began mining, excavating and exploding in the very heart of central Yakutia, the rates of Russianization and Russification could have been incomparably higher (See Table 7.2, Figure 7.1, and 7.2).

Political development

The policies of nationalities in the Soviet Union were like a two-sided sword. On the one hand, the Soviet government proclaimed as its ultimate goal a creation of the “Soviet person”, that is a Socialist type of an individual, with no discernible ethnic or religious distinction (Graham Smith 1996). On the other hand, the Soviet policy played a game of ‘let us keep old folk traditions alive’, allowing ethnic theaters, dancing and song companies, and publication of literature in different national languages. At the same time, the ethnic ‘flourishing’ had a very strict limitations, it could go beyond cute dresses and folk museums. In politics, every ethnic group in the former USSR had to go along with the ‘Big Brother’. Any step aside from the party line was severely persecuted, including imprisonment. Political dissidents of any type were often confined in mental asylums.

“Nationalist deviation” was proclaimed by the communist government a major crime, as it threatened the integrity of the Soviet empire (Armstrong 1965, 12). In order to keep the ethnic minorities in line, Moscow selected the leaders for the ethnic republics with utmost care. The Soviet cadre policy put officials from Moscow in key positions in the republic. For seven decades of Communist rule the same triangle - the regional secretary of the CPSU, the chairman of the republic’s Council of Ministers, and the chairman of the presidium of the Soviets of the YASSR - was in charge of this huge region’s economic, social, and

political affairs. The first secretary of the republic's committee was usually an ethnic Yakut, while the head of the minister's cabinet was unchangeably Russian. The token leaders representing ethnic indigenous groups in Soviet republics did not have much say in economic issues. The majority of heads of mining companies, ministries responsible for natural resources exploitation, transport were nominees of Moscow. This was not a secret to anyone, and it caused a great deal of resentment among the ethnic Yakuts, especially young members of intelligentsia.

In March 1979, when the first armed confrontation between students of the Yakut State University and Russian teenagers from a low-income neighborhood of Yakutsk occurred, officials did everything to present the whole situation as “a ‘non-ethnic’, purely criminal event”. At that time, at the height of ‘zastoy’ (translated from Russian as “stagnation”) no other results were expected. In 1986 the same two groups confronted each other again, and gunshots wounded several young people on both sides (Balzer 1995, 142-143; Balzer 1996, 128-29). This time the secretary of the republic's regional Communist Party committee, Yu. N. Prokopiev was faced with a difficult dilemma.

The Yakut nationals organized a political demonstration in front of the local communist party headquarters with slogans and signs that did not leave any doubts about the ethno-nationalist nature of the students' demands. Prokopiev did not want to lose his position, yet how could he easily pacify the angry crowds

(Gordon Smith 1996, 310). In the end, he took Moscow's position and accused the students of 'nationalism'. If the events of 1979 went unnoticed by the 'Soviet specialists' abroad, the second disturbance was immediately covered by mass media organs, like *Radio Liberty* (1986, 1-5) and discussed in academic publications concerning interethnic conflicts (Klyuchevsky 1989, 107-110). That was the beginning of Gorbachev's period of *perestroika* and *glasnost*', and Yakut students aspired to share their long-harbored frustrations with the rest of the country.

Thus, just a month after the conflict one Yakut State University student, an ethnic Sakha, wrote a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev asking him to intervene on behalf of the Yakuts and allow them more political and cultural freedom.

Yakut Ethnic Identity as Shaped by Sovietization

The seven decades of the Soviet rule brought unprecedented changes to the land of Sakha. Almost every aspect of life and culture was affected by the new order. The economy of the republic was transformed from a predominantly subsistence-style agriculture with a few gold and salt mining operations into a major resource base for the Soviet Union. Not only precious minerals and metals, such as diamonds, gold, and silver, but also rare and strategically valuable elements, including uranium, wolfram, tin, aluminum, iron, and mercury, were

extracted and delivered to the industrial core of the Soviet Union or foreign countries (Diakonov 1962, 24-26; Fedorova 1998, 55). A classical colonial pattern of relationships developed, when a mineral rich periphery becomes a mere appendage for the more developed core, while the periphery lacks in infrastructure, modern amenities, and has lower standards of living.

Rural Yakutia underwent transformation as well. The widely dispersed hamlets of the pre-revolutionary times were put together in larger settlements. Hundreds of new villages were created, especially during the collectivization years. The pastoralist agriculture, predominantly subsistent in nature, was transformed into a larger scale mechanized modern production. In the process, the rural Yakuts became exposed to various aspects of modernization. Their educational, health, and life standards increased manifold as compared to the pre-Soviet period.

These gains did not come without losses. The traditional culture of the Yakuts that allowed them to adjust, survive and even thrive in a northern harsh environment suffered, some would say, irreparable damage. Among many traditional elements of culture, the Yakut shamanism, an ancient practice based on sound environmental assumptions and ecological practices seemingly vanished. The communist ideology did not leave any room for alternative explanation of the world and its workings. By the time Yakuts declared their sovereignty in 1990, essentially no shamanist structures survived.

The Yakut diet, their worldly experience, health standards, jobs, and educational standards – all changed. At the same time, their ethnic identity did not lose its strength, but actually intensified. This phenomenon has been analyzed by several scholars. According to one hypothesis, the higher the number of college educated people in the former Soviet republics, the higher is the ethnic group's self-consciousness and national pride.

Until recently, this factor – formation of national intelligentsia – has been underestimated as a powerful agent in molding of a national identity. But, in fact, very often the impact of a generation of enlightened individuals, highly educated in history, law, language, and literature, can be a powerful force in cultural resistance to a dominating colonial power. The psychological factor, the power of the mystic of folklore, search for the national roots and identity, became a strong factor for Yakut ethnogenesis, as Chapter 8 will demonstrate.

Chapter 8: Sovereignty and Ethnonationalism: The Evolution of a Sakha Post-Soviet Identity

Devolution and political indigenization

Even before the official disintegration of the Soviet Union, devolutionary processes began in some large ethnic republics, including Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, and Yakutia. On September 27, 1990 the leaders of the Yakut republic declared it a sovereign unit within the Russian Federation (Lishenyuk 1995, 8). The republic's title was changed to include an indigenous self-name of the largest ethnic minority – the Sakha. The Russian word for the republic was put in parenthesis. Two years later the first article of the new Constitution of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) announced that the republic was “a sovereign, democratic and law-based state, with a right for self-determination” (*Konsultativny* 1996, 4). This occurred while the central federal government was economically weak and still shaken from the abrupt demise of the Soviet empire. As a result, statements of this kind did not bring the army and tanks to the streets of Yakutsk. In fact, the Sakha Republic was a part what political analysts promptly labeled as “parade of sovereignties” (Blakkisrud and Honneland 2000, 53-54). All 21 ethnic republics in Russia began taking devolutionary steps in order to secure the territorial, economic, and political autonomy from a weak

federal center that languished in the wake of the collapse of the communist regime (Kempton 1996, 594-597; Shaw 1999, 64).

These “sovereignty projects” (Graney 1999, 611-632) in post-Soviet Russia brought different degrees of economic independence, but they ensured political indigenization in the former Soviet ethnic republics. The ringleaders of sovereignty, such as republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, Sakha, and several others, insisted on delimitation of political and economic powers between the federal government and the republics in their respective territories. President Yeltsin induced 18 out of 21 republics to sign the so-called *Federal Treaty* (Shaw 1999, 66; *Konsultativny* 1996, 13). The negotiated separation of judicial, legislative, and executive powers made the Sakha Republic legally a “state within a state” (Balzer 1995b, 139; *Konsultativny* 1996, 18). Moreover, the new Yakut constitution did not agree in some parts with the constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, and the republic is still referred to as ‘state’, which still causes tension between the Moscow leaders and Sakha government (Balzer 1995b, 142, 152). But the leaders of the Sakha government, unlike the Turkic-speaking, Lamaist Buddhist ethnic republic of Tyva, did not push the issue of secession (Shaw 1999, 66-67).

In December 1991 the Yakut Parliament, called *Il Tyumen*, elected the first Sakha president, Mikhail Nikolaev, who remained in office until 2002. He was instrumental in stressing the issue of national identity and political

indigenization. The term *political indigenization* implies the predominance of the representatives of the indigenous population in the political system, especially in leading political structures (Marsh and Warhola 2001, 221-222; Aasland and Flotten 2001). As a result of this process, by the end of the 1990s, Sakha individuals dominated most of the governmental positions and comprised up to 59 percent in the republic's executive branch, and 63 percent at city and *rayon* (county) level (Bahry 2002, 679).

According to *Ethnonationalism and Democratization Survey, 1997-98*, 58.5 percent of interviewed Russians living the Sakha republic felt "a sense of collective discrimination", and a higher percent of 72.4 of Russians felt discriminated against when it came to competing for a governmental position (Bahry 2002, 692). One of my former colleagues in the Ministry of Foreign Relations of the Sakha Republic, born in a mixed family with a Russian mother and Yakut father, applied for a diplomatic position in Canberra, Australia. He had to complete a form that contained questions about the burial grounds of his maternal grandmother. Needless to say, he never got the position (Anisimov 1999). This reverse discrimination is felt in many spheres of cultural and political life today in Sakha. In new publications in the Sakha language, Russian culture, including its Orthodox religion, is ridiculed (Toumousov 2001).

De-Russianization and de-Russification

Several factors have caused a continuing de-Russianization of the Russian North and Far East, including Yakutia. The economic instability of the early 1990s, the cancellation of federal subsidies for northern regions, and ethnic tensions were among the important ones (Hanson and Bradshaw 2000, 95-96). Ethnic Russians and Ukrainians began to leave the Sakha Republic in 1990. By 1995 the absolute number of out migrants reached a peak of 31,266. Not surprisingly the places that lost most of their Slavic population were the mining towns that experienced the negative effects from the reduction of industrial output and the abrupt discontinuation of federal social programs (*Trud* 1996, 9). The majority of those who left, were born outside the republic and lacked attachment to the land. The Ust'-Yanskiy, Aldanskiy, and Neryungri regions, where during Soviet times the Slavic share of population was among the highest in the republic (see Table 7.1), experienced the highest rates of emigration (Heleniak 1999, 4, 5). The mining town of Chersky (see map 7.2) lost half of its population between 1993 and 1994 (Linden 1995, 53).

After 1995 the number of emigrants began to decline in absolute terms, but it still remains higher than that of new arrivals (Kaiser 1998). Largely because of this net out-migration, the total population of the republic declined by 105,700 people between 1991 and 1998 (Heleniak 1999, 4). In 1989 the Russians made up 50.3 percent of the population of the republic, but since that year their number fell

below a majority level. Besides the out-migration of ethnic Russians, differential rates of natural increase played a role. The Sakha population demonstrated a healthy natural increase: in 1993 the total fertility rate of ethnic Sakha was 2.623, while the Russians residing in Yakutia had a lower TFR of 1.968 (*Itogi* 1994, 53; Heleniak 1999, 163).

Despite the general tendency of “depopulation of the Russian North” (Heleniak 1999, 170-171), and a decrease in the total population of the Sakha Republic since the end of the 1980s, the city of Yakutsk did not follow this trend. Out of the eleven largest cities of the Far East, with population over 100,000 residents, Yakutsk (along with Blagoveshchensk) grew slightly over the last decade (Kontorovich 2001, 401-402). This does not mean that the ethnic Russians and Ukrainians did not leave the city; it shows instead that many rural Yakuts came to the capital city in search of jobs and new business opportunities. The government, realizing the trend, invested heavily in the construction of urban residences. The amount of square meters of housing gradually increased throughout the 1990s, from an average of 12.7 sq. meters per person in 1991 to 16.4 in 1998 (*Regiony* 1998, 471).

The rural out-migration of ethnic Sakha is easily understood in the light of the abandonment of the diversity of social programs that existed under Soviet rule. Subsidized agricultural, educational, health care and cultural programs used to provide a large number of state jobs. With the collapse of the socialist

distribution of social and economic funding, the rural people in Yakutia discovered that the choice was between hustling in a market-oriented economy and trying to solicit jobs sponsored by the republic's government (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001).

This situation became the subject of sharp debate between two different schools of thought among the new Sakha bureaucrats. One is represented by a former Minister of Foreign Relations of Sakha (and my former boss), Vitaliy Artamonov, a Sorbonne-educated intellectual, who said in his many 'enlightened speeches' that his people "should not live like they did in the times of Genghis Khan" (*Konsultativny* 1995; Artamonov 1997). His solution is to abandon the unprofitable agricultural sector altogether, except in the three valleys nearest to Yakutsk, and to live in cities subsidized by the revenues from the sales of diamonds. If Kuwaiti can live and prosper on their oil money, why should Sakha be slaves to their unproductive physical environment?

He has few opponents. One of them is the Minister of Land Reform of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Innokentiy Pakhomov (and my uncle, which explains why I had so many opportunities to discuss this dilemma). Pakhomov believes deeply that the governmental programs should subsidize even non-economical villages. The heart of his message is that the soul of a nation survives in traditional settings. According to him, the key to keeping young people in small

villages is to provide them with a high school education, basic medical care and government-sponsored jobs (Pakhomov 1995, 1997).

De-Russification

De-Russianization, or an absolute decrease in the number of ethnic Russians residing in the region, went hand in hand with active policies of de-Russification. De-Russification in Sakha (Yakutia) began with educational reform, with the changes of subjects at all levels of education. Kindergartens with instruction in the Yakut language opened in various neighborhoods of Yakutsk. The textbooks for grade and high schools were rewritten with an emphasis on the history, culture, traditional cosmology and literary tradition of the Sakha. At the university level, a new geopolitical mentality brought instruction in Japanese, Chinese, Mongol, and Turkish. The republic's government sponsored two *All-Asia Children Games*, most recently in summer of 2000, as a symbol of the Yakuts being members of a larger Asian community (Figure 8.1).

The image of the republic as a part of a larger Asian community was not totally a Sakha initiative. In fact, Mikhail Gorbachev was the first leader of the Soviet state who clearly announced that the USSR was a part of the Asian Pacific community. That meant already in 1986 that a vigorous economic development of the Russian Far East was declared a goal (Linge 1992, 125). This new approach did not go unnoticed by Yakuts. Dozens of joint ventures were organized in



Figure 8.1: A poster advertising the coming All-Asia Children Games.

Source: a photograph by the author, 2000.

Yakutsk, especially with Japanese and South Korean firms. Japan remains the largest international trade partner, counting 75 percent of all Sakha exports and 35.7 percent of its imports in the 1990s (Lishenyuk 1995, 40).

On a political level the Sakha leaders also sought new political and trade partners in Asia. Besides the treaties with Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, signed in early 1990s, the government aimed at widening its cooperation with the Turkic-speaking countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, and Turkey. The strengthened cultural ties with Turkey resulted in a new gymnasium for boys, where the languages of instruction include Turkic, English, and French, but not Russian. The exchange program, during which the Sakha youth spend several months in different colleges in Turkey, has been widely advertised in the republic's media.

As a part of de-Russification, the Sakha began to make efforts to revive traditional cosmology. Some scholars studying present day Yakuts categorize them as shamanists, because they have preserved many diverse elements of shamanism (Lehmann 1998, 466, 467-468). At the same time three centuries of Christianity did not vanish without a trace, so today the Sakha display a mixture of Russian Orthodoxy and shamanism (473). A typical town-dwelling Sakha talks about Ilya the Prophet when July thunderstorms arrive and marks a calendar for Saint Nicholas day. The seven decades of Soviet atheism, however, weakened the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which had never been very successful

at an internal level. Susan Lehmann in her study of religious beliefs among the ethnic Yakuts made some interesting observations. According to her 1993 poll, 12 percent of those interviewed stated that they “believe and practice Russian orthodoxy”. Another 28 percent declared that they “only believed in God but did not practice” a formal religion. More than a third of the informants, 36 percent, stated that they were atheists (474). Whether atheists or nonpracticing believers, majority of the Sakha are unanimously fond of their midsummer festival of *ysyakh*, which initiates the Sakha traditional New Year.

The revival of *ysyakh* is, perhaps, the most powerful manifestation of de-Russification and de-Sovietization, because it engages the Sakha population on such a large scale that no other event in the republic can (Figure 8.2). During the Soviet times the celebration of the Yakut New Year celebration was strictly regulated (Balzer 1995, 145). The festival had to be held on the same two days everywhere in the republic. Such arrangement contradicted the ancient purpose of *ysyakh* – traditionally, the Sakhalar spent at least two weeks traveling, visiting their neighbors and sharing news, gifts, striking deals, and organizing marriages. For that reason, each village scheduled *ysyakh* on different dates, so after having received guests in their own homes, the villagers would be able to go on a visit themselves. Today, this ancient tradition has been revived and supported by the government. Rural and urban communities compete with each other in



Figure 8.2: Ysyakh celebration in Oktyomtsy, Khangalasskiy ulus.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1997.

preparing the most glamorous festivals, including the construction of gigantic ceremonial poles (Figure 8.3, 8.4).

With the revival of *ysyakh* came the necessity to prepare people competent in ancient rituals, especially white shamans. As Marjorie Balzer observed during her several seasons in Sakha, studying shamanism, “many Sakhas are finding a new cultural pride and confidence in the emergence of shamans from the underground” (Balzer 1997b, 39). In reality, rather than the underground shamans coming into the spotlight, people with special performing and healing skills began to train themselves as shamans. Moreover, they do not work separately from one another, as they did in the past. Rather they are organized in a sort of a professional society.

The fame of Yakut and Evenk shamanic powers reached different corners of the world, where people are still interested in preserving this ancient system of beliefs and especially its alternative ways of healing (Rogers 1982; Ripinsky-Naxon 1993; Aziz 1994; Musi 1997). To this end, the International Symposium on Shamanism was held in Yakutsk in 1992 (Balzer 1993). This convention spurred more interest in traditional religion among the Sakhalars themselves. As a result, a Sakha cultural revival movement, called *Kut-Sur* (Heart-Soul-Mind-Reason), reviving ancient shamanic concepts and rites, was founded. A famous Sakha healer, Vladimir Kondakov organized an Association of Folk Medicine, whose services and performances are in high demand among local people. In



Figure 8.3: A new ritual post in the village of Suntar.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1997.



Figure 8.4: Another ritual post at the same village of Suntar, made of natural wood. Ksenya Tikhonova, my grand aunt, is wearing a traditional Yakut-style dress that she made herself.

Source: a photograph by Terry G. Jordan, 2000.

1995 Balzer was able to witness the entrainment of twenty patients by folk healers, who used drumming and *khomus* (the Yakut equivalent of the Jew's harp, used for different rituals) to accomplish their goals (Balzer 1997b, 39; Kharitonova 1995).

In 2001 F. S. Toumousov published *The Encyclopedia of Yakut Traditional Knowledge*. Chapters in this voluminous tome of more than 800 pages discuss different aspects of Sakha tradition, including relations within a Sakha family, cosmological structure of the world and energy flows according to the ancient beliefs, the genealogy of the principal Sakha clans, and norms of ethic behavior, worthy of a true Sakha person. The book ends with a gallery of short portraits of prominent Sakha people, who should serve as an inspiration for the young. The spirit of this publication is overwhelmingly nationalistic. Ethnic Russians or Ukrainians would not be able to read this publication in the Yakut language.

Other publications that have idealized the Yakut ancient past (Zakharov 2001; Dyeremey 2001), especially its legendary forefathers, such as *Omogoy Bay* and *Elley* came out in large press runs. Ksenofont Outkin contributed to this idealization of the pre-Russian colonization past in his book *San Sagattan (Since the Times Immemorial)* (2000).

Traditional cultural landscape as a means for enforcing ethnic identity

The most profound and visible resurrection of the nation's spirit came with the revival of the Sakha traditional cultural landscape. Many scholars studying traditional cultures in transition have emphasized the importance of a traditional landscape and the landscape vision for ethnic identity (Sundberg 1999; Unwin 1999; Sörlin 1999). Bunske especially makes an impressive case for the importance of reconstitution of isolated hamlets for post-Soviet Latvian identity (1999, 121-138).

It seems that a right to hold the patent to a certain people ethnic and cultural tradition has become a matter of contestation for many post-communist societies, including Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Unwin 1999, 113-120). As Behnke emphasized, "landscapes provide valuable points of entry for examining competing visions of nature and society, and the relations between them" (2002, 170). This is, indeed, true in the case of the Sakha Republic. Some Sakha intellectuals call for the Rousseau's "back to nature" philosophy, while others stress the importance of surviving in the modern technological world.

There is, perhaps, one undisputed common ground for all involved in this debate, and that is the importance of preservation, and in many cases, restoration of the traditional Sakha landscape. For, it seems, the idealized vision of self can be most efficiently achieved through the idealization of the past. Semyon Zedgenizov and other leaders of rural communities with whom I had a chance to

discuss this issue during my three trips to rural Sakha are keen on restoring ancient houses of worship. They believe that ‘going back to the roots’ will improve the moral health of their people (1996, 1997, 2000).

Representative of the renewed interest in traditional landscapes are two persons I met during my 1997 field research. The first, Vasilii Atlassov, resides at the alas hamlet of Soto, approximately sixty kilometers east of Yakutsk and across the Lena River. The Soto hamlet had become completely depopulated in late Soviet times, yet it contained numerous traditional farmsteads. Atlassov, assisted by his wife Valentina (Figure 8.5, 8.6), has resurrected Soto as a tourist center, museum, and performance arena displaying Yakut folkways. One of the main attractions is a house of traditional Yakut cosmology and worship. Built with specifically positioned openings in the roof, the structure renders unusual an flow of light and energy, reproducing the ancient Sakha geomancy (Figure 8.7).

When Soto became widely known and popular, the Ministry of Tourism of Sakha helped to build an auditorium and a small hotel (Figure 8.8). Thousands of visitors have come during all months of the year, usually by helicopter, including not only urban Yakuts but also tourists from as far as Canada, France, Great Britain, and the United States. Performances of traditional songs and dances have been augmented by an annual ice-carving contest. Some rural Yakuts have moved back to Soto to work at jobs generated by this enterprise.



Figure 8.5: Valentina and Vassiliy Atlassov. Alas Soto, 1997.

Source: Advertising booklet, published by The Ministry of Tourism and Youth Affairs of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), 1996.



Figure 8.6: Valentina Atlassova in a traditional Yakut dress, trimmed with sable, and the author, in a field trip uniform.

Source: A photograph by Terry G. Jordan, 1997.



Figure 8.7: A reconstructed house of worship that ancient Yakuts used before the Christianization of the 17th century. At alas Soto.

Source: An advertising booklet published by The Ministry of Tourism and Youth Affairs of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), 1996.

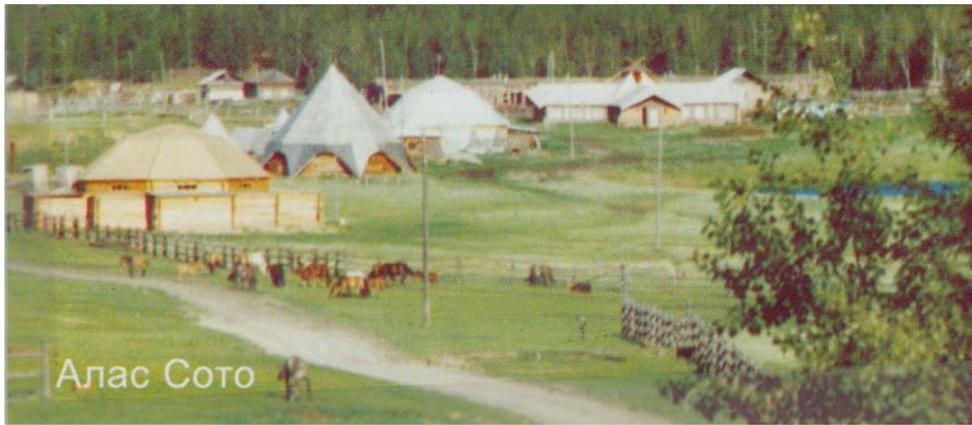


Figure 8.8: The newly restored cultural landscape of Soto.

Source: Booklet published by The Ministry of Tourism and Youth Affairs of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), 1996.

The second is a more modest example of a landscape revival, which I observed in my native village of Djarkhan in Suntar ulus (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001). Moisey N. Ivanov, a summer seasonal resident who retired some years ago and spends winters with his family in Moscow, decided to build a traditional Sakha *balagan* as a museum exhibit (Figure 8.9). He built it on the high school campus in order to show the young people how their ancestors lived. He wanted a new generation to hold onto at least a visual memory of vanishing traditional ways. The symbols representing the Yakut traditional culture continuously pop up in a landscape, be it a sign announcing the entry to a new *ulus*, or ritual posts put up in the middle of a city neighborhood (Figure 8.10, 8.11).

Economic Changes

The economic situation in Sakha did not change as rapidly as the political system (Bahry 2002, 691). Sakha in 1997 failed to transfer millions of dollars worth of tax revenues to the federal government, which responded by threatening to cancel its financing of federal programs (Selm 1998, 607). Under earlier agreements, Sakha was allowed to keep a larger share of tax revenues than most other republics. In 1995 Sakha did not receive any federal subsidies, and the republic's government, in retaliation, left 99 percent of the taxes in regional budget (Stavrakis et al. 1997, 226-227).



Figure 8.9: The interior of a traditional *balagan* dwelling. Notice the objects borrowed from the Russians, including a *samovar*.

Source: a booklet published by The Ministry of Tourism and Youth Affairs of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia).



Figure 8.10: An entry to the Elgyai district is marked by a modern rendition of the ritual post and sacred birds, the shaman's helpers. Notice also the multicolored shamanist bands that are used to decorate the sculpture.

Source: a photograph by Terry G. Jordan, 1997.



Figure 8.11: Ritual posts put up in one of the neighborhood of Yakutsk.

Source: a photograph by Terry G. Jordan.

As was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, political indigenization developed comparatively rapidly in the Sakha Republic. At the same time, efforts to control further development of the diamond and gold industry proved to be a much harder task. According to a special agreement with the Russian federal government, the republic gained the right to control and sell directly 20 percent of its raw diamonds and 11.5 percent of its gold. In the early 1990s the export potential was estimated at approximately 1.5 million US dollars (Lishenyuk 1995, 40). Simultaneously, efforts were made to indigenize the diamond industry by creating small diamond-cutting factories in Sakha villages. Twelve such plants were established in small towns with predominant Sakha populations. This program had several important goals. First, because the previously established diamond-mining sectors were overwhelmingly dominated by ethnic Russians, the government wanted to place more Sakha people in positions that would allow control of valuable natural resources. Second, the program targeted unemployment that was significantly higher in rural regions than in cities (Bahry 2002, 691).

During my first field research in the summer of 1997, I visited one such factory, established in the county seat of Suntar, population 9,300. The enterprise was organized and subsidized by the republic's government with the goals of (1) cutting gems out of rough diamonds and (2) producing jewelry, using diamonds, gold, and some semiprecious stones unique to the Sakha republic, such as charoite

and chrome deopside. As I learned from my visit to the factory and through the interviews with the manager and director, their main challenge was the lack of skilled cutters. About forty young men were sent to Yekaterinburg and St. Petersburg to learn the international standards set for producing gems. Several years will pass before it is clear whether any of those forty men will be able to do a decent job of cutting precious stones. When I visited the factory, it did not produce any profit and financial prospects looked bleak.

In 1995 when the federal government felt stronger, it began to restructure the diamond industry. All diamonds mined and sold in Sakha were supervised by a new stock company, entitled *Almazy Rossii-Sakha*, or better known by its abbreviation *Alrosa*. Company stocks were divided into three equal parts, one belonging to the government of the Russian Federation, another belonging to the government of Sakha, and a third sold to independent companies and individuals. This third part of the stocks made a crucial difference in control of the industries. A complicated scheme of sales and contracts resulted in a situation in which over 51 percent, or the control over the company, ended up in the hands of Moscow. The Yakut leaders gave up some of their stocks and privileges for cottages in Moscow and Switzerland, or scholarships to Cambridge and Oxford for their children and grandchildren. In essence, they sold out natural resources that on paper belonged to all the residents of Sakha. This failure to control the diamond

industry led one scholar to refer to the Sakha Republic as “Russia’s diamond colony” (Tichotsky 2000).

The economic sector in Sakha, despite the outmigration of thousands of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, still shows more diversity than the political sector. The diamond and coal mining industries still employ a high percentage of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, while the oil and gas industry tends to be run by Sakha (Bahry 2002, 691).

Among all Russian regions, Sakha has the highest food and commodity prices, partly because of high transportation costs, and partly because of its inadequate agricultural base and slow rates of land privatization (Selm 1998, 608). In order to overcome their dependence on the Russian government for food, the Sakha leaders have made attempts to diversify the republic’s trade relations both domestically and internationally. In the early 1990s, Sakha signed Friendship and Cooperation Treaties with Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and since 1993, the republic has bought wheat directly from those two countries. During that decade, food and consumer goods accounted for almost one-fifth of Sakha imports (Lishenyuk 1995, 14, 40).

Small-scale private businesses, through intensive trade with northern regions of China and South Korea, provide cheap prepackaged foods. In several market places in Yakutsk and other cities in Sakha people with low incomes can buy boxes with noodle soup and an array of relatively inexpensive clothes from

China, and a variety of South Korean and Taiwanese kitchen appliances and electronics, including personal computers. All these are brought in by “chelnoki”, people who go to these countries, buy large quantities of cheap products, and then sell them in eastern Siberian cities.

Despite its significant dependencies on the federal government for food and energy supplies, Sakha ranked highest in economic performance of all Russian regions in 1995. That was the peak of diamond trade. The average income in Sakha was 5.4 times higher than that of the poorest Russian region, and the unemployment rate was as low as 0.8 percent. Despite a 25 percent decline in industrial production during the period between 1990 and 1995, Sakha was considerably better off than most regions in the Russian Federation (Selm 1998, 614).

Neotraditionalism

The post-Soviet structural changes in the economy might be best seen in neotraditionalism. This concept was first applied to describe changes in way of life of small ethnic groups of the Russia’s far northern regions (Pika and Prokhorov 1999). In post-Soviet times, when most federal subsidies were withdrawn and many social programs collapsed, these peoples reverted to their traditional pre-Soviet ways of life. The state that used to regulate every aspect of their daily lives, providing education and health care, supplying tools and fuel,

clothes and foods, but also imposing quotas on reindeer or fish production, forcing sedentarization on the nomads of the northern tundra. This very state then abandoned them. Out of dire necessity, they had to revive subsistence practices that the Soviet regime was so eager to annihilate. Instead of using all-weather vehicles or snowmobiles, the reindeer people of the Russian north are now using dogs and reindeer; they began to live again in nomadic camps, and tried to trade the reindeer skins and meats at a new changed market. *The New York Times* recently published an article about some new marketing skills these people are developing and their increasing ingenuity in dealing with the larger world (Williams 2002, A29, B34).

With the Yakuts, neotraditionalism manifested itself in a change of ratio of horses and cattle in the villages. As in old times, the number of horses is again is three to five times that of cows (*Regiony* 1999, 469; Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 108). This change can be observed at fresh meat markets in towns and cities, where the supplies of horseflesh significantly exceed the offerings of beef. The Minister of Agriculture, whose dissertation topic was dedicated to horse breeding in Yakutia, told me that eating horseflesh is healthier than any other meat, and is a major reason why the Sakhalars traditionally did not suffer from cardiovascular diseases (Sivtsev 1997).

Environmental and health issues

In 1961 the testing of the Soviet hydrogen bomb on Novaya Zemlya doused Sakha with a heavy fallout of plutonium, causing widespread health problems (Yegorova 1994, 35-37). The Bulletin of The International Geographical Union, concerned with the environmental pollution in Russia, defined Sakha's "environmental quality" as "low" (just one level above "very low" (Malkhazova et al. 1997, 10), and the state of health of the population as "poor" (11). The low quality of the environment was assessed as a combined effect of several factors, including trapped and harmful substances, the byproducts of mining industries, low percentage of wastewater treatment, substandard drinking water, and poor hygiene of the food supply (1997, 8-9).

David Marples makes a convincing case showing how the damage to the Sakha habitat spurred ethnic anti-Russian feelings and created distrust of central authorities, giving the Sakha people a strong incentive to take charge of environmental monitoring (1999, 62-77).

During my 1997 field trip to the regional center of Maya, I had a wonderful encounter with a local geography teacher who gave me some hope for the Sakha environment. He teaches environmental courses by taking his students to local lakes to monitor the quality of the water (Figure 8.9). At the time of our

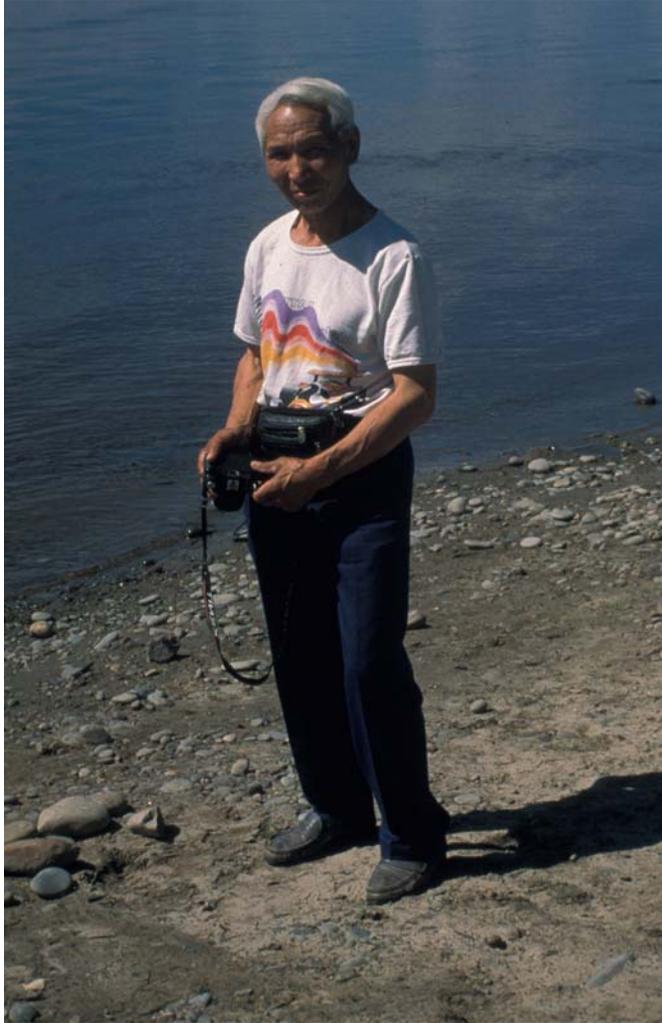


Figure 8.12: M. Ivanov – a geography teacher at Maya high school, Megino-Kangalasskiy ulus.

Source: a photograph by the author, 1997.

conversation, he tried to persuade the republican government to launch a program that would have helped to save the lakes and the surrounding area from destruction. This man seems to personify one of the noblest human virtues, described by Yi-Fu Tuan as *topophilia* (Tuan 1974). Moreover, he has a great talent of transferring his love of his native land to his students. In his own words, “as I reached middle age and could foresee the end of my life, I decided to try to create a nature preserve as a legacy” (Ivanov 1997).

This man is not alone. An increasing number of people and organizations in the republic are becoming active in nature preservation.

In 1995 Republic of Sakha along with other Siberian regions made a top story in the September issue of *Time Magazine*. “Soviet exploitation managed to poison and degrade 35,000 square miles of the vast republic” (47). “Yakutia, which suffered horribly from radioactive fallout from nuclear tests and chemical pollution during the Soviet era, has shown itself to be farsighted in dealing with some environmental issues.” The Lena Delta Biosphere Reserve lies on considerable oil and gas deposits. Says Vasiliy Alekseev, the Minister of Ecology: “Since there is no truly clean technology to extract those reserves, we felt it better to create the Lena Delta Biosphere Reserve and protect the area. Perhaps in 50 or 100 years there will be a new technology for extraction, and then, if we still need oil and gas, future generations can decide whether to review the reserve’s status (Linden 1995, 52).

Environmental issues worldwide have become a litmus test, indicating the degree of benevolence of a political system. The Sakha politicians, therefore, invest a great deal of time and parlance in the discussion of nature preservation and the cleaning of the environment. The creation of the Lena Delta Biosphere Reserve allowed them to attract the attention of the heads of many European governments, including the Duke of Edinburgh, the Chairman of the Worldwide Wildlife Foundation, who visited the reserve in 1999 and gave his approval to the project. The Sakha government, for which I worked for two years in different capacities, seeks exactly this kind of international exposure. This allows them to negotiate above the heads of the Kremlin bureaucrats. Whatever the motives are, as long as it helps to preserve the fragile ecosystems of the Yakutian Arctic, the ends seem to justify the means.

Ethnoregionalism and Politics of Federation

The ethno-territorial division of the Russian Federation into 21 republics and 10 autonomous okrugs provides formal differences between these ethnic regions and the other oblasts and kraia (Gordon Smith 1996, 391-410; Marsh and Warhola 2001, 220-233). Is regional separatism in Russia a reflection of revived ethnic identity, or is it a power game of the politicians concerned with maintaining a high standard of life for the national elite (Gorenburg 1999, 245-

274)? The tension between the efforts of the Russian government to create a more centralized polity and strong devolutionary claims of ethnoregionalism makes the modern Russian state an 'asymmetrical federation' (Marsh and Warhola 2001, 221). Some scholars suggest that increased ethnic nationalism continues to create instability within the Russian Federation (Shaw 1999, 68-69, 71).

In case of the Sakha Republic, the compromise of the ethnic identity of its new president, Vyacheslav Styrov, an ethnic Russian and one of the former CEOs of *Alrosa*, suggests that the Sakha people are politically weak and not seeking full independence from Russia. The two other Turkic-speaking peoples, Tatars and Bashkirs, insist that the majority of political leadership in their republics should be representatives of the titular groups. Given their economic well-being, based on significant oil deposits and a strong industrial base, they seem to be able to negotiate their relations with Moscow more aggressively (Gorenburg 1999, 247-249). Still, the Sakha have used the new conditions of politics and economy to strengthen their ethnic identity. Their ethnogenesis continues vigorously, even under Russian domination.

Extrapolating from the available migration data, we can assume that the Sakhalars today form a plurality of perhaps of 45 or 46 percent in the republic. Russians, then, have declined from their majority status in 1989 to a minority, accounting for, perhaps, 43 or 44 percent (Heleniak 1999). The 2002 census of Russia (taken in October 2002 and not yet available) will reveal the exact ethnic

situation (Myers 2002, A3). Now that the ethnic Sakhalars have a plurality and dominance of the government in the republic, they have to deal with all the territorial and cultural issues facing the numerically small indigenous groups residing on the territory of the republic (Fondahl et al. 2001).

So far, the Sakha government has been rather cooperative concerning diverse demands of the Evenks, Evens, Chukchi, and Yukagirs. From the very first years of sovereignty, various steps were taken to guarantee the political, economic, and cultural rights of these minorities.

The basic question concerned the allocation of ethnic territories, as well as the usufruct rights. Several ethnic okrugs were created for each of the above-mentioned peoples. In fact, the way the government treated the Evenks, Evens, Chukchi, and Yukagirs got a positive evaluation from Canadian geographers who study land claims rights of numerically small peoples (Fondahl et al. 2001). One of the co-authors of the article on native Russian style 'land claims', Vasiliy Robbek, is an ethnic Even. He agrees with the main message of this publication that the Republic of Sakha in several respects is ahead of Western governments, when it comes to treatment of ethnic minorities (Fondahl et al. 2001, 547). The authors of this article stress that a major distinguishing feature of the Sakha law on native self-ruled territories is that they can unite not only aboriginal peoples, but "also representatives of other indigenous peoples and ethnic communities, as long as they are involved in activities considered 'traditional' for aboriginal

peoples” (Fondahl et al. 2001, 552). This inspires an entirely new debate on ‘traditionality’ versus ‘aboriginality’. Unfortunately, a summary of this discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation. What remains important is that the Sakha government realizes and is willing to accommodate the rights of other numerically small ethnic groups on its territory. In my opinion, the Republic of Sakha will become a truly democratic society when the rights of every individual are realized, based on the concept of citizenship and not on an ethnic affiliation.

Ongoing Ethnogenesis in the Post-Soviet Era

Post-Soviet times witnessed a continuation of the Sakha (Yakut) ethnogenesis, or even an acceleration of that centuries-old process. The causal factors developments during this period included: (1) devolution that brought semi-genuine level of self-government and political indigenization; (2) de-Russianization, caused by the removal of federal programs and subsidies, that in its turn led to a plurality status for the Sakhalars; (3) the revival and strengthening of ethnic identity, resulting in de-Russification that is most visible in the cultural landscape in the Sakha republic; (4) weakening of the central government grip over natural resources led to the increased Yakut economic power; and (5) the post-Soviet disclosures of habitat damage created anti-Russian sentiment and desire to monitor their own environment. The on-going ethnogenesis of the Sakha

people displays itself most powerfully at two levels. First, the heightened sense of ethnic identity is reflected in all aspects of culture, including a boom in publications and performances in the Yakuts language, and wider use of the Sakha language in school instruction and media. Second, which is, probably, of most interest for cultural geographers, is the increased display of the Yakut material and spiritual culture in the landscape. The Sakha people who are rediscovering their ethnic roots and cultural traditions in the post-Soviet times seem to be very much concerned with constructing landscapes that serve as convincing and tangible symbols of their ethnic revival.

Chapter 9: A Geographical Perspective on Ethnogenesis

The previous eight chapters laid the basis for certain conclusions. As stated in the opening paragraphs of this work, the goal of the research was threefold: (1) to consider the major factors that are essential to the process of ethnogenesis, and to identify those of a causal nature from a geographical point of view; (2) to analyze a concrete case study of the largest Siberian ethnic group, the Sakha people, in order to identify the causes and circumstances of ethnogenetic processes; and (3) to formulate the essence of a theory of ethnogenesis, especially based on application of classic geographical concepts, such as *migration*, *preadaptation*, *homeland*, and *landscape*.

The main inspiration for this study came from the work of Russian geographer, Leo Gumilev, whose theory of ethnogenesis presented a new perspective on the emergence and development of groups. His theory is based on assumption that each ethnic group goes through several consequent stages, and that their development is faced in one direction, similar to the development of living organisms. He emphasized the revolutionary bursts of creative transformation, early in the ethnogenetic process, accompanied by the most

intensive phase of habitat modification. Such landscape change subsequently slowed, along with ethnogenetic process, producing a stability of sorts that lasted until the next burst of activity or collapse of the culture (1968, 600). Here I questioned certain points of his theory. First, I assumed that ethnogenetic process could hardly be a straightforward arrow-like process, because doing so would imply inflexible, rigorous, and predictable developments. The case study of the Yakut ethnogenesis demonstrated, in fact, contrary nature of ethnogenetic developments and its partially accidental character. The chance that the ancient Yakuts would have found large grasslands in a much colder new habitat was rather slim. Nor could they predict the later use of grassland openings in the taiga due to thermokarst nature of the habitat and its instability and vulnerability to human activity. The existence of alas grasslands was a major beneficial accident in Yakut ethnogenesis.

Gumilev's second postulate about the direct influence of the physical environment on ethnogenetic processes also raised doubts. Thus, I attempted to demonstrate that certain interactions between people and their habitat depend heavily on the existence or lack of preadaptation of a people to a new habitat. Chapter 4 shows how similarities in old and new habitats allowed the proto-Yakuts to adjust successfully to the climate and terrain of central Yakutia.

I also questioned the revolutionary nature of modification of the habitat that Gumilev emphasized in his works. Instead, I show that Yakuts' adjustment to

their new habitat developed in rather an evolutionary manner, rather than in ‘burst and collapse’ way. The changes were by nature incremental, as the Yakuts needed time to learn from their neighbors. Especially, in the absence of a written tradition, the dispersion of knowledge was slackened.

Though revising Gumilev’s perspective, I did not discard all his premises and conclusions. I found his concept of an *ecotone* as a factor for ethnogenesis most useful for my study. One of the major stages of the Sakha ethnogenesis occurred when these people became dwellers of an ecotone. By combining the traditional use of the grasslands for cattle and horse herding and newly borrowed knowledge of the boreal taiga, the ancient Yakuts were able to compensate for the loss of their old home in Central Asia.

Fredrik Barth’s theory on *ethnic boundaries* helped develop another take on ethnogenetic processes. In this dissertation, I have applied the idea of ethnic boundaries to the geographical analysis of ecological boundaries and cultural exchanges between different ethnic groups and showed how consideration of ethnic and cultural mixing fosters ethnogenesis.

Formation of Ethnic Identity

As a geographer, I deemed it important to incorporate spatial and environmental perspectives intrinsic in North American cultural and historical geography to this ethnogenetic study. I brought to my analysis of ethnogenesis of

the Yakuts the venerable concepts of *diffusion*, *cultural landscape*, and *homeland*. My idea was that to view this process from a geographic perspective, I would need to apply geographic tools. This proved to be especially useful in considering ethnic identity formation by using geographical concepts of homeland and cultural landscape.

The process of formation of ethnic and national identity is usually studied from the point of view of political, economic and social changes. Yet, as I argue in this dissertation, there are at least two powerful factors, that lie completely within the domain of geographical analysis and scope of interest. One of them is the importance of a *homeland* for fostering a strong feeling of national and ethnic identity. North American geographers studying ethnic homelands have linked together five qualities: place, people, attachment to the land, control, and time depth (Nostrand and Estaville 2001). To develop as a true homeland, a region must possess a specific physical environmental character and noteworthy size. It must be inhabited by a self-conscious people who achieve over time an emotional bonding to the land and exert some measure of social, economic, and/ or political control over it. These criteria, combined to define a homeland, equally list the requirements necessary for the ethnogenesis of a people. Homeland and ethnogenesis are inseparable, and through the study of homelands many new revelations on the origin and formation of a people can be identified.

Examples from diverse Siberian ethnic groups demonstrate how the centuries old attachment to a certain region creates the most distinctive ethnic identities. Anna Kerttula in her recent book proves the case by focusing on the Chukchi people whose attachment to harsh and fragile environment of boreal tundra provided a strong imperative for the survival of their traditional way of life (2000). Tuvans and Buryats, two peoples still living in their ancient homelands, are overwhelmingly Buddhist, despite decades of the Soviet militant atheism. At the same time, peoples who were deprived of homelands in the Soviet times suffered the decrease in national pride and underwent significant assimilation. The importance of creating a new homeland by the ancient Yakuts in a new environment over the period of six centuries appears to be a very significant factor in fostering their national identity and a powerful vehicle for their ethnogenesis.

Recently, an increasing number of studies analyzes the importance of a traditional *landscape* for the formation of ethnic identity. Again, what can be a more geographic perspective than a study of importance of a landscape for the molding of a unique culture? European geographers have applied the cultural landscape theme to the issue of Baltic ethno-regenesis and resurgence (Bunske 1999; Sörlin 1999). In doing so they showed how the new Baltic republics employ elements of the traditional folk landscape as symbols of their national cultures. In this way, landscape asserts ethnic identities. Outdoor folk museums, or skansen,

earlier served the cause of fostering ethnonationalism in northern Europe, in particular, Helsinki's Seurasaari and Oslo's Norsk Folkemuseum. Similarly, the Sakha government is sponsoring the creation of similar folk museums in different parts of central Yakutia. Chapter 8 discussed several such instances. Clearly, cultural landscape analysis is strongly linked to the ongoing process of ethnogenesis.

Using the Tools and Concepts Geographers Possess

In the process of contemplating various aspects of ethnogenesis, it became clear that not only are geographical factors among the most significant and influential in formation of ethnic groups and ethnic identity, they can be most adequately described and analyzed by applying traditional geographical concepts and methodologies. Geographers have used concepts, such as *diffusion*, *homeland*, *landscape*, *incremental change*, and *preadaption*, to name the most important. Used collectively, these tools can help achieve a holistic analysis of ethnogenesis.

To illustrate, cultural diffusion is an intrinsic element in changes that occur along a zone of cultural contact. Regrettably, most geographical studies of diffusion have so far focused on a single specific artifact, or element of a culture. The emphasis has been on the process of diffusion itself, rather than to seek the

roots and wider achievements of the people who participate in diffusion (Kniffen 1965). This seems to be true of both Berkeley school studies that emphasize humanistic aspects, and works of Hägerstrand and his followers who use quantitative models and evaluate diffusion (Blaut 1977).

Migration, a type of diffusion, often brings a people into a new physical and cultural habitat and can be instrumental in triggering ethnogenesis. In the case of the ancient Yakuts, migration involved a distance of more than 2,500 kilometers, departing Central Asian steppes, floating down the Lena River, and entering subarctic lands inhabited by tribes previously virtually unknown to them (Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov 2001, 38). As a result of that epic migration, the Yakuts began to form as a separate Turkic people in a new environment. Geographers often study migration, but usually to learn about the process itself, or, even, to suggest immutability of a transplanted community (Clark 1986; Ostergren 1988). One notable exception to this was the idea proposed by Cole Harris that European cultures became greatly simplified in the trans-Atlantic migration (1977).

Often, planned migrations bring peoples to physical habitats similar, though almost never identical, to the ones they left behind. In such cases, the concept of *preadaptation* becomes an important factor in ethnogenesis. Many old skills and knowledge that worked in the old homeland become useful for survival in a new home. This is very well illustrated by the proto-Yakuts. As they left the

grassy steppes of Central Asia and settled large ice-dam overflow grasslands along the mid-Lena and later on small, scattered interfluvial thermokarst prairies in the central Yakutian Lowlands. These periglacial prairies permitted them to perpetuate their traditional cattle and horse herding and dairying, though the harsher climate demanded many adjustments in their livelihood techniques.

Another geographical concept, *incremental change*, proposed by William Doolittle (1984), proved to be very useful in this study of Yakut ethnogenesis. Doolittle concluded, on the basis of extensive field research in Mexico, that complex irrigation systems can evolve over long periods of time, sometimes centuries, small, and inducing unpremeditated changes wrought by individual farmers. If applied to ethnogenesis, incremental change lends both time depth and an evolutionary aspect to the ethnogenetic process, somewhat in the manner of genetic or linguistic drift. This provides an alternative to Gumilev's (1968, 589) burst of activity/stability revolutionary model.

A Geographical Particularistic Theory of Ethnogenesis

Chapter 1 discussed the limitations of the anthropological perspective on ethnogenesis that come from the search for universal elements in developments of

ethnic groups. Anthropologists, along with geographer Leo Gumilev, presume that the main causes and circumstances that foster ethnogenetic processes are of a universal and predictable nature. There is no use to deny that many diverse groups share similar events or are influenced by similar forces, including modernization, urbanization, and certain demographic factors. Most cultural geographers adhere to a very different approach than that practiced by anthropologists. These humanists appreciate the uniqueness of places and regions. Therefore, to this school, the geographical approach to ethnogenesis is inherently particularistic. Indeed, one result of my bringing a specific people under close scrutiny demonstrated that ethnogenetic forces work in *a particularistic manner*, with accidents and unique cultural traits playing an important role.

A geographical particularistic theory of ethnogenesis could become a useful alternative to the search for universal laws when it comes to the study of human developments. Many examples could be used to illustrate how urbanization in different countries and regions of the world followed different paths and resulted in diverse, sometimes, contrasting urban scenes. Migrations of peoples, planned or forced, also influenced different ethnic groups in particularistic ways. Some migrations led to complete assimilation of ethnic groups, some resulted, as in the case of the Yakuts, in the formation of a separate Turkic people, with their particular unique culture.

There is no universal rule that people moving to a new habitat necessarily adjust to it successfully. The role of accidents and preadaptation, or lack of it, cannot be overestimated in such situations. This again speaks for the particular nature of any ethnogenesis.

Colonization of a group of people by a stronger and larger group can also have unpredictable results. The minority group can be completely assimilated as it happened with ancient Turkic Bulgars or certain Indian groups of Mexico under the Spanish conquest. Or, they can instead perpetuate their ethnic identity by resisting cultural and demographic influences imposed by the colonizers (Weir and Azary 2001, 54-55). The Yakuts not only did not lose their ethnic and cultural identity, but instead, strengthened it under Russian and Soviet rule. Colonization and modernization might bring the decline of the colonized population, or it may, through raising living standards, bring about a new blooming of an ethnic group, just as it happened in the Sakha republic. Self-image plays a major role in determining the fate of a colonized people, and it cannot be predicted (Nikonov 1984; Abramson 2002).

Thus, unpredictability of so many factors that determine ethnogenesis, the accidental character of certain processes, the unperceived consequences resulting from concrete decisions of an ethnic group – all this lends weight to the particularistic theory and validates its importance for geographic studies of ethnicity. This is geography's unique and valuable approach to the study of

ethnogenesis. No other discipline looks at the process in this way. The most proper vehicle for the formulation of a particularistic theory are the concepts employed in this dissertation – *diffusion*, *homeland*, *preadaptation*, *incremental change*, and *cultural landscape*. Application of this methodology should help researchers discover more truths about different groups, their origins and developments. In so doing, one must consider each group as formed under unique and particular circumstances. Such an approach will help explain the continuing diversity of ethnic groups on our planet.

Glossary

- Alas** – a Yakut word and periglacial term describing a small thermokarst depression covered with grasses and draining internally to a central lake.
- Balagan** – the traditional dwelling of the Yakuts, shaped like a truncated pyramid and consisting of walls made of beams set at a slant into the earth.
- Chukchi** – a native people of northeastern Siberia, closely akin to the Inuit, numbering about sixteen thousand. Several hundred Chukchi live in the northeastern most part of the Sakha Republic.
- Dolgan** – a small ethnic group in Sakha; in effect an Evenk or Even who has adopted the Yakut language; numbering approximately seven thousand.
- Even** – an ancient people of Sakha (Yakutia) of Mongol-Manchurian origin, today numbering only seventeen or eighteen thousand, related to the Evenks. In pre-Revolutionary Russia they were also referred to as **Lamuts**.
- Evenk** – an ancient people of northern and eastern Eurasia of Mongol-Manchurian origin, numbering about thirty-one thousand today, in czarist Russia referred to as **Tungus**.
- Khomus** – a Yakut variant of Jewish harp, the most popular traditional musical instrument among the Sakha people
- Kumyss** – fermented mare's milk, served in great quantities at the Yakut midsummer festival Ysyakh.
- Neotraditionalism** – a model of post-Soviet ethnic tendencies in which small groups living in Arctic Russia revert by dire necessity to their pre-Soviet and pre-modern ways of life; proposed by Russian ethnographer Aleksandr Pika and geographer Boris Prokhorov.
- Olonkho** – the name of the Sakha national folkloric epic, transcribed from the oral tradition in the twentieth century.

Periglacial – literally, “peripheral to glaciers”; the effects of glaciation on adjacent areas that did not lie beneath the ice sheet.

Permafrost – permanently frozen subsurface of the Earth, unaffected by the seasonal thaw of surface layers.

Shaman – a holy person, male or female, in the traditional region of the Sakhalar; intercedes to control and mitigate the harmful effects of evil spirits and the forces of Nature; either “white” (weak, benevolent) or “black” (strong and god or bad).

Thermokarst – the melting of a top portion of the permafrost, sufficient to cause subsidence and the development of enclosed depressions such as alases.

Ysyakh – a traditional Yakut festival, celebrating the beginning of the New Year that coincides with the summer solstice.

Yukagir – an indigenous Siberian people, a part of a larger Paleo-Asiatic group, residing in the northeast of Yakutia and numbering approximately twelve hundred. Their subsistence includes fishing, hunting, and to some extent, reindeer herding.

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Vita

Bella Bychkova Jordan was born Bella Borisovna Bychkova on December 10, 1961, in the ethnic Yakut village of Djarkhan, in the district of Suntar, part of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Her mother, Olga Danilovna Tikhonova, who was a prominent oral and plastic surgeon, rose to a high social status in the republic by hard work and rare dedication to her profession. Her father, Boris Mikhailovich Bychkov, has devoted his life and career to teaching German and English to schoolchildren. Bella Bychkova attended high school in the capital of the republic, the city of Yakutsk, which she graduated with honors in 1979. From 1979 to 1981 she studied economics at Moscow Technological Institute, after which she studied English philology and literature at The Yakut State University during the period of 1981-1986. She graduated from that University with honors and received the highest student prize in the former Soviet Union – the Lenin stipend.

In 1987-1991 Bella Bychkova attended a graduate school at The Moscow Linguistic University, where she studied English and American stylistics. During 1992-1994 she worked in several positions for the Ministry of Foreign Relations in the new government of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). In 1994 she came to study at The University of Texas, where her interests shifted from international

affairs to cultural geography. In 1997 she earned the Master of Arts degree in geography. Her thesis was later published by The University of Minnesota Press as *Siberian Village* (2001). She married Terry G. Jordan in 1997 and made Austin her new home. In 2001 Ms. Jordan was advanced to doctoral candidacy. She has taught several undergraduate courses in geography both at The University of Texas and Austin Community College. On January 17, 2003, she will be sworn in as a citizen of the United States of America.

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