

Ohuokhai: Sakhas' Unique Integration of Social Meaning and Movement

This article explores the forms and functions of Sakhas' ohuokhai circle dance. Historically, Sakha are Turkic-speaking agropastoralists inhabiting the subarctic Sakha Republic of Russia. Originating as the opening communal prayer during Sakhas' yhyakh festival, ohuokhai has both maintained an original sacred function and, over time, assumed others. This article defines ohuokhai origins and its evolving functions through the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet times and reveals that, despite continuing post-Soviet threats, ohuokhai continues because of the commitment and initiative of Viliui Sakha inhabitants.

Since 1991, when I began research in Sakha communities, I have remained mesmerized by the power of the *ohuokhai* circle dance to draw together and unite the Sakha via the circle dance leaders' improvisatory singing, as well as by Sakhas' accounts of *ohuokhai*: the vivid initial childhood recollections, the descriptions of nonstop seven-hour *ohuokhai* sessions, and their elaborations on the mystical, invigorating power of the dance. At the 2004 *yhyakh* festival, *ohuokhai* lingered on long after the scheduled activities had ended, deep into the white night and through to the dusky dawn.¹

Sakha² are Turkic-speaking agropastoralists inhabiting the Sakha Republic of north-eastern Siberia, Russia, who have bred cows and horses in the subarctic for centuries (Figure 1).³ Sakha maintain an ancient polytheistic nature-based belief system⁴ and a rich and diverse folklore, their best-known genre being the *olongkho*, an epic poem traditionally performed by a master storyteller over the course of several evenings. Sakha have two forms of improvisatory singing, *toiuk* (sung as solo) and that done in the context of the circle dance *ohuokhai*. Other Sakha folklore genres include *chabyrghakh*, a raplike composition that weaves together story and jokes, traditionally performed competitively to see which performer raps faster. The main traditional instrument of Sakha is the *khomus*, or Jew's harp, played largely with emphasis on rhythms and imitations of nature sounds. Finally, Sakha have a diverse number of traditional games, the most popular of which include *mas tardyhyy* (the stick pull), *kylyy*, *ystanga*, and *kuobakh* (three forms of hopping), *khapsaghai* (traditional wrestling), *khaamiska* (a game of dexterity with small wooden blocks played somewhat like jacks), and *oibonton uulaahyn* (a game of individual balance).

SUSAN A. CRATE is Assistant Professor of Human Ecology, Department of Environmental Science and Policy, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia

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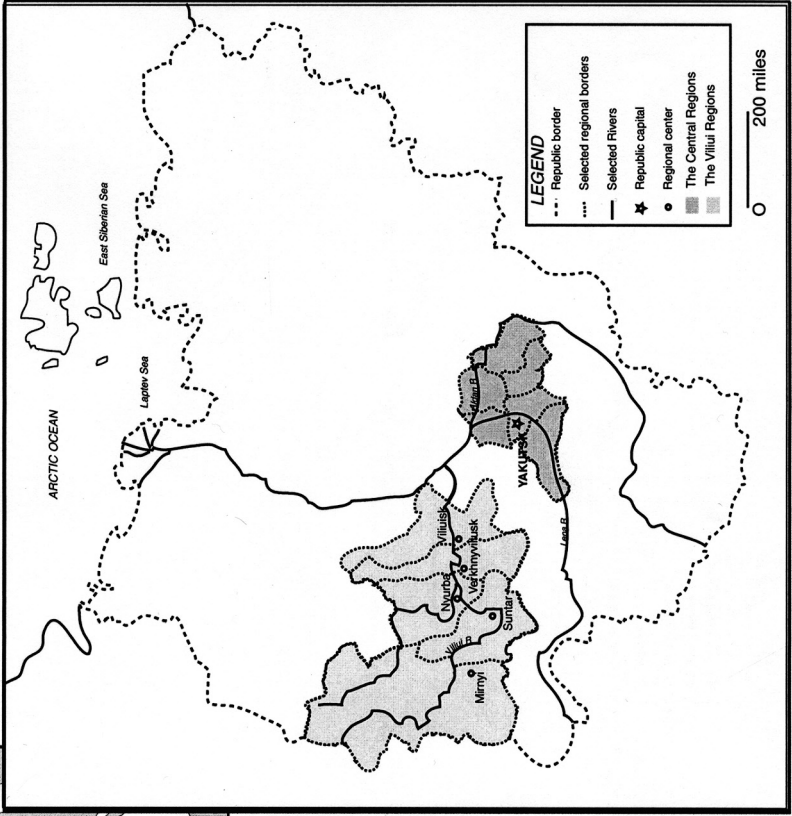
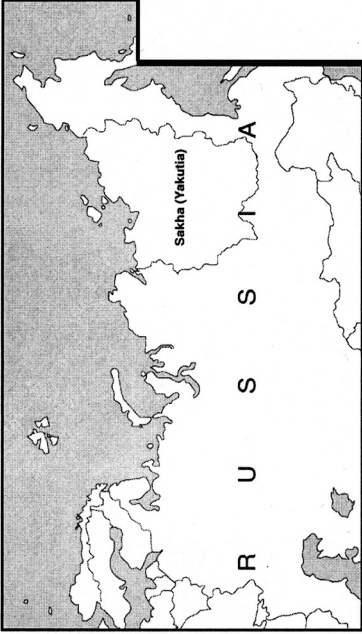


Figure 1: The Sakha Republic with selected areas shown including the Suntar, Nyurba, Verkhnyviliusk, Viliuisk and Mirnyi regions of the Viliui regions, the Central regions, and the Republic capital, Yakutsk.

Figure 1. The Sakha Republic with selected areas defined.

Sakha showcase most of these genres at the annual *yhyakh* festival, a transplant of Central Asian pastoralist *kymys* (fermented mare's milk) festivals that were first organized in the subarctic more than 500 years ago by Ellei, the great father and cultural hero (Okladnikov 1976:231; Ksenofontov 1975:11). The festival, which typically takes place outdoors in a lush *alaas* (hayfield surrounding a round lake bordered by birch and larch forests), is Sakhas' plea to the benevolent sky deities for all the right conditions of sun, rain, fertility, and warmth to bring about plentiful hay, herds, and foodstuffs. The *urung oiun* (white shaman),⁵ enacts the ceremony, offering *kymys* and other sacrificial foods to the sky deities and saying prayers that are echoed in the communal response of *ohuokhai* (Romanova 1994, 1987:15). The ceremony is followed by performances of *olongkho*, *toiuk*, and *chabyrghakh*, by traditional game competitions, and, in culmination, *at suu-ruute*, or horse races. *Ohuokhai* frames the *yhyakh*, beginning with the festival's opening ceremony, continuing throughout the daytime festivities, and extending to dawn.

Most contemporary Sakha claim that, if they do not attend the *yhyakh*, they will lack the necessary energy to complete the intense and all important work of the summer—harvesting sufficient hay (two tons per cow and new calf) to fodder their herds through another nine-month-long subarctic winter. Furthermore, Sakha gauge the overall success of the *yhyakh* festival on the quality and longevity of *ohuokhai* (Crate 1994). Perhaps it is the historically based mystical healing quality of the dance that accredits it such standing. “The *ohuokhai* is contact with the cosmos, the planetary connection,” explained Klim Pavlov, director of the Elgeei National School.⁶ “We [Sakha] have a connection with the cosmos and the revival of *ohuokhai* is part of that also” (Interview, June 12, 1992).

Ohuokhai is a circle dance (Figure 2). Participants step left foot forward and right foot back, moving in a clockwise direction with fingers interlocked. The song leader poetically weaves his or her thoughts into sung appeal, energizing the circle's rhythm with



Figure 2. Dancing *ohuokhai* at a contemporary *yhyakh* festival.

seven-syllable lines of improvised and/or ancient texts. One contemporary song leader described his craft to me: "The beginning part is slow. It prepares the voice and invites the people to dance. Then, in the second part, you and all those dancing have already gained your strength; all souls are pulled toward something which comes from the words the leader sings but it is as if someone else is singing them. . . . I sing a line, and while the people repeat, I should be ready with the next line, and that's how it goes, on its own momentum" (Interview, Dodokhov, July 8, 1992). Participants in the circle echo the leader's lines until that leader sings several summary lines signaling their song's end and cuing a new song leader within the circle to continue the verbal and rhythmic artistry.

Over the half millennium of historical change, including Russian colonization, sovietization and desovietization, *ohuokhai* has both maintained its original sacred meaning and evolved new functions. In Eric Hobsbawm's social-historical terms, *ohuokhai* is a tradition in many ways reinvented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:4). Ethnic awakenings and reformations, be they compelled by emigration, as is the case for Ukrainian Canadians (Nahachewsky 2002), or by political oppression, as with the northern plains powwow tradition (Mattern 1998:119–38), reveal patterns of continuity and change in a specific people's expressive dance forms. Similarly, those forms and the event of dancing provide the social space for constructing and representing notions of collective identity (Doi 2002:10).

In this article, I analyze the original, ongoing, and evolving forms and functions of *ohuokhai* to clarify its central role in contemporary Sakha ethnic revival. Exploring first the dance's origin and evolution over time (both in pre-Soviet and Soviet times), I analyze the dance in the contemporary post-Soviet context, highlighting the dance as both a central symbol of ethnic identity and an expressive form threatened due to disinterested youth, increasing exposure and access to mass media forms, indigenous language loss, and continuing economic, political, and environmental issues. In conclusion, I argue that, despite the challenges to *ohuokhai*, because of the commitment and initiative of Viliui Sakha inhabitants, *ohuokhai* continues to be Sakhas' unique expressive form of social meaning and movement and has emerged in the post-Soviet context as a powerful ethnic symbol.

Origins and History of Ohuokhai: The Circle Forms, Widens, and Narrows over Time

The great great grandfathers revived the festive dance,
The great parents remembered the dance,
Begin the beautiful circle dance!

Seven people the winged song lifts up,
Eight people the clean song washes over,
With nine, the triumphant song resounds. (Kulakovskii 1990: 233)⁷

Ohuokhai originated as the sacred collective form of the *urung oiun*'s ritual prayer during the *yhyakh* festival's opening ceremony. The *urung oiun* three times exclaimed the word "yhyakh" (to spray or sprinkle) as he threw sacrificial *kymys* to the heavens. The ritual participants echoed his prayer line by line. This collective exclamation formed the

seven syllable base of the *ohuokhai* song. Along with the appearance of this collective *algys* (prayer song) came a bowing dance movement.⁸ The dance provided rhythmic accompaniment to the song, as participants moved in a circle, one foot over the other, following the sun's path (Petrov 1990:7).⁹

Some scholars debate the precise beginnings of the *ohuokhai* tradition. Whereas Siberian historian Okladnikov asserts that Sakhas' Turkic ancestors brought the dance with them from their southern Central Asian home (Okladnikov 1976:229), others, like Sakha folklorist Georgi Ergis argue to the contrary, "More than likely, in the very beginning, the *yhyakh* was a simple ritual. Only in time did it grow into the fuller ritual with poems and dances, and become the creation celebration at the beginning of the summer year" (1974:154). Because of the lack of written historical records, the form and structure of early *yhyakhs* can only be approximated. It was not until the arrival of European explorers in the early 1600s that accounts of the *yhyakh* were written down. Even then, however, the archival record provides only scattered references to *ohuokhai*.

Izbrant Edess and Adam Brand, representatives of the 1692–1695 Russian Embassy Expedition, traveling from Moscow to Peking on governmental assignment, made the first recorded account of the *yhyakh*. Intrigued and fascinated by the "exotic" indigenous Siberian peoples, Edess and Brand kept extensive journals of their travels and jointly published them upon return to Moscow. They described the Sakha as "long-haired pagans who believe in a sky god who gives them food, wives and children." On the *yhyakh* festival, they wrote, "It is to this god that they present sacrifice of *kymys* in spring" (Kazanin 1967:287).

Yakov Lindenau, a Swede working as a scribe during the second Kamchatka expedition of 1733–1743, provided detailed portraits of the Siberian and Northeastern peoples. His journals offer the first extensive written descriptions of the Sakha. He attended the *yhyakh* festival and described in detail the ceremonial participation of the "shaman," who provided prayer and sacrificed *kymys* to the deities. Lindenau also alluded to the Sakha social structure, explaining that the host of the festival was a *toion* (a local clan head) and noting that "these families made up the masterful, cruel, and grasping Yakut aristocracy" (1983:36). Most notable for our purposes here, Lindenau made the first written record of *ohuokhai*:

The circle dances of the Yakut are danced during the time of *yhyakh* from May to the middle of June. All gather in the evenings in great crowds not only in the villages but also in the city of Yakutsk and dance all night through until morning, from day to day, without exception. Men, women, and girls gather and, holding hands, make a huge circle. All jump up and down and move towards the sun more than half an hour each time. (Okladnikov 1976:232)

Almost a century later, I. S. Shukin described the circle dance he witnessed in 1833: "Toward evening begin different games. Women, in their best clothes, stand in a circle, holding so fingers of one hand are woven thru the fingers of another. They go in the sun's direction and sing in a singing style like in a school when the pupils repeat what the teacher says" (1833:204).

The eighteenth-century explorer Johann Gmelin was the first to interpret *ohuokhai* song texts in their ritual context, basing his comments on the Sakha belief that *ohuokhai*

paved the way for contact with the sky deities. "In the prayers and in the round dance songs of yhyakh is sung, '*siel-namilgan-aartik*,' meaning 'pathway for the sky deities from the place of sunrise to the place of the yhyakh ritual.'" This reflected the Sakha belief that a congress of spirits occurs at the yhyakh (quoted in Ksenofontov 1923:9).

Ohuokhai: Original and Evolving Functions

From its original functions as both a vehicle for collective prayer and a time of communal contact with the spirits (Okladnikov 1976:238), ohuokhai served other functions in Sakha society. First, ohuokhai, which began in the context of the yhyakh's opening ceremony and continued during and after all scheduled yhyakh activities, framed the yhyakh festival. "The song texts illustrated that framing," explains Semen Ivanov, a senior resident of Viliuisk city. "With these kinds of words, they ended the yhyakh":

Let the cows go to pasture,
Let my *eterbes* [soft boots] be put away,
Ebe [grandmother] will save them,
We will make merry and let the ohuokhai go on. (Interview, May 9, 1992)

Second, the area inside the dance circle was a natural place for the teaching of the ohuokhai tradition to the younger generation. This childhood experience of ohuokhai nurtured an appreciation for Sakha verbal and kinetic artistry. As one collaborator recalled, "When ohuokhai started, we children went into the middle and watched how all the others danced. We danced *mukha* by making our own circle inside and trying to be like them" (Interview, Andrei Borisov, May 17, 1992). As children learned language, their verbal artistry developed in the context of ohuokhai's call and response form.

Third, ohuokhai implicitly functioned as a teacher of vernacular history to all ages. The majority of ohuokhai texts are improvised. The introductory and last lines, however, often include segments of standard texts and texts that reference the Sakha ancestors. Singers commonly begin their improvisation with two lines,

Ehiekh ehiekh ehiekhei,
*Ohuokh ohuokh ohuokhai.*¹⁰

These lines both reference ohuokhai's role in the yhyakh festival, because the verb *ehiekh* is synonymous to the word yhyakh, and set the seven-syllable rhythm for the remainder of the song (Petrov 1990:7). In addition, song leaders such as Zinaida Protasova often make important historical reference, for example to Ellei and Omoghoi, considered the first organizers of yhyakh and ohuokhai:

... From the time of Ellei
Ohuokhai has been organized
And is heard across great distances
The youth and middle ages
Lock thumbs and enter from the sides
With long notes holding
Making a huge circle

From the wealth of Omoghoi
 Was started the great ohuokhai
 And because of his organization
 Near and far relatives
 Circle and join in
 Circling round and round
 Walking in the circle
 In the summer yhyakh
 The ohuokhai begins. (quoted in Losotov 1994:93)

"There are words that were passed from generation to generation for the past six hundred years that our ancestors have been here," explains Semen Ivanov. "Those lines are from a long time ago. They sang about our heritage, that long ago, our ancestors sang these songs and so let's sing them also. Let's carry on our tradition" (Interview, May 9, 1992).

Fourth, ohuokhai functioned as a *de facto* courting dance. For pre-Soviet Sakha who lived scattered across the subarctic landscape, yhyakh was the single annual opportunity for social interaction. Ohuokhai was the perfect social environment for couples to meet. "A young man saw a pretty girl dancing and he would come into the circle next to her," explains Alexander Ivanov, administrative head of Sheia village. "Then they were arm in arm. Next they must plan a wedding or they won't see each other till the next year!" (Interview, June 5, 1992).

In addition, with yhyakh being the only time of social interaction, ohuokhai served as a public forum. Song leaders could freely speak their minds within the immediate social and ethical frame, and dialogue passed from one lead singer to the next. Song topics ranged from local lifestyle to major social events. "They sang about the goodness of life, and of working and building everything themselves," explains Semen Ivanov (Interview May 9, 1992).

Finally, Sakha attributed mystical healing properties to the dance. Intoxicated by the rhythm, poetic language, and collective pulse, participants could dance for hours on end without tiring. "Then ohuokhai began and I was amazed at the old women who would join in and jump along with the young people," explains Botulu resident Stepan Bayeskorov, reflecting on his childhood memories of the dance. "They were the same old women who, at home, hobbled and could barely walk" (Interview, May 28, 1992). Similar testimony comes from Samuil Ereemeev, native of the Suntar region who has attended the regional yhyakh festivals all his life: "When my mother was eighty and lay sick in bed, she would ask me to take her to ohuokhai, and so I did. She sat for a while, smoking her pipe, and then she went to join in. Once in the ohuokhai circle, she became like a young girl. She kept dancing and, later in the evening, she danced even better, as if she had completely forgotten that she was ill" (Interview June 11, 1992).

Sakha credit this mysterious, invigorating, healing effect of ohuokhai to the optimistic nature of the texts. Tamara Nikolaeva, whose father sang to her from an early age, remarks, "The songs of ohuokhai are optimistic and filled with a love for life, people, and all that is beautiful. That is how the mood of the people is lifted. Some sing for ten hours and don't tire. If you listen, their songs have such beautiful contents" (Interview, May 25, 1992). The texts that so successfully lift dancers' spirits are built upon long-standing oral

traditions, and the mystical healing quality of *ohuokhai* is considered inherent to the dance. In this context, the power attributed to *ohuokhai* is not only in the aerobic release, but also in the power of the language that, according to Sakha belief, has its own *ichchi* (spirit), referred to as *tyl ichchite* (word spirits): "Spoken words turn into a prophetic bird that flies according to the meaning of the words uttered and retells the original words" (Kulakovskii 1979:45). The act of speaking words gives them the power to fulfill their meaning.

In pre-Soviet Sakha society, therefore, *ohuokhai* implicitly functioned as a frame for the *yhyakh* festival, as a teacher of both Sakha traditions to the young and vernacular history to all, as a public forum, and as a time of mystical healing. *Ohuokhai* explicitly functioned as a courting dance and as a time of communal prayer and celebratory expression. In the Soviet period, many of these functions were transformed.

Ohuokhai and the Soviet Period: Something Lost, Something Gained

Lenin's regime in the early Soviet period supported the equality of all nationalities within the USSR with the 1923 introduction of *korenizatsiia* (nativization), which was designed to support ethnic diversity and diminish Russian elements, as well as other policies that promoted local language, education, and culture (Smith 1996:7). Every republic passed *korenizatsiia* decrees, some specific to the ethnicity involved. In Sakha (Iakutia) the decree took the form of *Iakutizatsiia* (Martin 2001:132). In this relatively supportive environment, *yhyakh* and *ohuokhai* continued.

Then in the spring of 1928, Stalin began the country's "Great Transformation," aimed at wiping out all backwardness and reminders of the past in an effort to "leap over centuries and catch up with Russia's perennial nemesis, the West." Key to this effort was the amalgamation of the diversity of cultures in the expansive USSR into one Soviet people. Folkloric and ethnographic research transformed into efforts to manipulate ethnic differences into a streamlined Soviet identity (Slezkine 1991:476). During Stalin's reign, authorities in the capital of Yakutsk and the central regions banned the *ohuokhai*. In the outlying regions, local authorities, most of whom were native Sakha, placed strict controls on the dance. *Ohuokhai* song texts, which traditionally addressed themes of history, nature, and topical subjects relevant to Sakha, now had to glorify new political allegiances to the Soviet regime, a protocol across the USSR at that time (Miller 1990). To reinforce these controls, the Soviet government introduced formal song competitions, limited to a scheduled time period at the *yhyakh* and requiring the juries to approve each song text in advance, to expurgate any themes incongruous with the Communist party line.¹¹ The late regional historian and war veteran Georgi Fyodorov, also a longtime member of the Sun-tar region *ohuokhai* competition jury, recalls, "In our era, they began to sing about the Party, the state and collective farm operations, and how we lived so well" (Interview, June 10, 1992). The Soviet song texts also had to emphasize the national and international themes touted by the party. "When it was the Soviet Union, *ohuokhai* songs had to praise the country, the life here, and the friendship of all peoples" (Interview, Semen Petrov, July 9, 1992). Such patronage is clear in song texts, such as this one by Serge Zverov:

The lesson of Lenin has taught us
 Like bright sun beams across the land,
 The working people stand up,
 And break the three layers of chains that hold us¹²
 Communist party teacher
 Great Lenin I glorify!

A lot of previously warring peoples
 Now live peacefully as one family,
 And show the road ahead,
 To the new generations of youth
 Who go by the green *chechir*¹³ path
 Great Lenin I glorify! (Omolloon 1971:237).

Instead of improvising their songs, *ohuokhai* singers had to submit written texts and, if approved, sing only those exact words. This censoring broke the traditional improvisational form of *ohuokhai*. The authorities further manipulated *ohuokhai* by offering prizes for the “best” song texts, determined by the degree to which the texts glorified Soviet ideology. Hence, traditional themes went the way of improvisation and began to disappear from *ohuokhai* tradition.

These bans and controls on *ohuokhai* text content and improvisational form most dramatically transformed its function as a public forum in which singers freely expressed their thoughts. Its role as a teacher of Sakha traditional culture to youth and vernacular history to all was also transformed. *Ohuokhai* texts continued to address issues relevant to Sakha, but the restrictions on how those issues could be portrayed is obvious from my collaborator's comments, like this one about the wartime *ohuokhai* texts:

I remember when I was five, they sang that there would soon be war. It was '39 when the USSR was fighting with the Finns. We had no radio but must have heard about it through the mail. They were preparing for it, and so they sang about it in *ohuokhai*. They sang that there would soon be a war with Germany. They tried to only sing about goodness so they sang in hope that there would be no war. Earlier there was a war with the Kirgiz, and they sang so that wouldn't be again. (Interview, Ivan Zakharov, May 8, 1992)

Soviet restrictions limiting *ohuokhai* to only the song competition period of the festival limited *ohuokhai*'s function as the festival frame, as well as its more spontaneous functions as a time of mystical healing, of scared communion, and as a courting dance.

Despite these strict controls, at the *hyakhs* in outlying provincial regions far from central authority's gaze, *ohuokhai* managed to live on, continuing all night, independent from the regimentation of the Soviet competitions. The regional area that provided *ohuokhai* safe shelter was the Viliui regions of western Sakha. Many native Sakha, like Gregori Popov, a teacher of Sakha folklore, recall their experiences: “I grew up in a northern region. When I moved to the Viliui regions, I was amazed to hear *ohuokhai* all night long. The people here have the national spirit which lives and breathes in these regions” (Interview, May 29, 1992).

It was in the geographic space¹⁴ of the Viliui regions that *ohuokhai* maintained its

improvisational form and, at the same time, gave local Sakha a welcome escape from the new, strictly scheduled format of the Soviet yhyakh festival: "In the Viliui regions, at the yhyakh everything went according to the program except ohuokhai," remembers Georgi Fyodorov. "We continued to dance as long as the spirit moved us, which went deep into the night. Some years, we went only at around 10 p.m. when ohuokhai started. Ohuokhai always continued; maybe because of its unique Sakha character" (1992). In times when Soviet authorities squelched Sakhas' national pride, the dance anchored Sakha in their ethnic identity. Hence, ohuokhai functioned as a central expression of defiance and ethnic solidarity.

The ongoing teaching and use of the Sakha language played a central role in maintaining ohuokhai tradition in the Viliui regions, and, conversely, the continued ohuokhai tradition helped to preserve the Sakha language. During Soviet times, the Russian language was taught as the first language in most Sakha schools. In the Viliui regions, however, inhabitants continued to teach and speak Sakha. The Russian inhabitants of these regions learned Sakha. "I studied in the Russian village and the people there didn't know Russian," recalls Ivan Dodokhov, an ethnic Sakha and ohuokhai enthusiast in the Nyurba region. "They only spoke Sakha. They sang ohuokhai and toiuk like they were Sakha" (Interview, July 8, 1992).

In stark contrast to the rest of Sakha territory, the Soviet period was a renaissance time for ohuokhai of the Viliui regions. During this period, ohuokhai evolved a range of local singing styles, which divided the Viliui regions into eight definable stylistic areas. Inhabitants of each area took great pride in their local style. Also in this renaissance, new forms evolved. In one such form, the cuckoo ohuokhai (the song leader) solicits the formation of a second and a third circle inside the main one. The song lead passes not only from person to person within the main circle, but also between the circles, resulting in an intensified "cuckoo" echo effect. Much of the integrity of the Soviet-period ohuokhai in the Viliui regions is also attributable to the organization and inspiration of local ohuokhai singers. Among the many legendary singers, undoubtedly the most renowned advocate was Serge Afanaseev Zverov.

Zverov and His Legacy

Zverov's legacy lives on for Sakha like Tamara Nikolaeva, whose father, also a legendary singer, reared her with a deep appreciation for Sakha traditions: "They danced a long time, from the rise to the fall of the sun. Zverov was such an improviser that he could sing for half a day about one birch tree and never repeat one phrase. He would rest a little and then sing the rest of the day" (Interview, May 25, 1992).

To this day, many credit the last great Soviet period yhyakhs, memorable for the vastness and duration of ohuokhai, to Zverov's artistry. "Then ohuokhai was so big that the leader could not even be heard across the circle," recalled Akim Kondratev, a writer and singer of the improvisational ohuokhai dance songs, "When Zverov sang, there were 1,000 to 1,500 people in the ohuokhai circle. It went on continuously for two days. We even slept there. Now ohuokhai is very small. Until 1972 it was good because there was Zverov. After his death the ohuokhai died. The last one he organized was amazing. Swans flew to that yhyakh, made a circle and flew away. Not long after that he died" (Interview, May 16, 1992).

In a period when Sakha culture was facing serious threats due to the religious and cultural oppression of the times, Zverov and his legacy carried on the *ohuokhai*. People tell about his charismatic ways and how he inspired them to learn *ohuokhai*. Zverov himself could neither read nor write, but his wife Fedora Fedorova was literate and brought his verbal mastery to the written page. She spent countless hours transcribing his song texts, a task that often involved chasing after her husband when, in a fit of inspiration, he ran to the woods to sing to a birch tree (Interview, June 5, 1992).

There were other *ohuokhai* enthusiasts at the time, like “Sakhardaakh Jona,” remembered by Semen Petrov, director of the Malakhai village *ohuokhai* association in the Nyurba region. “I heard him when he was seventy. He sang beautifully, as if telling a story with great contents in his poetry. When he sang, he held on and looked up at the sky as if someone there was telling him what to sing. I read Zverov’s memoirs, and he said he praised Sakhardaakh’s voice. Zverov traveled all throughout the regions and said he never heard anything like him” (Interview, July 9, 1992).

Inhabitants of the Viliui regions were particularly sensitive to the deterioration of *ohuokhai*. Ekaterina Zakharova, a renowned singer of *ohuokhai*, remembers how it used to be: “Earlier, *ohuokhai* went for two, three hours and even an entire day. One person would sing, and that singer would begin his improvisation from far away. . . . And he had great rhythm, words and melody. All day he would sing; he described the world with great poetic talent. The words were not repeated. He had a great stock of words” (Interview, June 23, 1992).

The strict controls on *ohuokhai* during the Soviet period, in combination with the emerging functions of *ohuokhai* in the Viliui regions symbolizing solidarity in defiance of that control, set the stage for the dance’s fullest emergence as a key expression of ethnic identity in the 1990s revival.

Ohuokhai during Perestroika and the 1990s Revival: The Circle Rediscovered and Made Anew

In the mid-1980s, Gorbachev’s sweeping democratic reforms, among other things, allowed all inhabitants of the Soviet Union to revive, relearn, and practice their ethnic traditions. The result was the growth of nativist movements among more than a hundred nationalities of the USSR that were widely variable from one region to another, depending on local, political, cultural, and demographic characteristics. In August 1991, six years after perestroika, the Soviet Union fell, and new sweeping economic reforms and decentralization efforts thrust issues of native solidarity into the limelight.

As one of the few Sakha cultural traditions continuously maintained and commonly shared, *ohuokhai* in the early 1990s served a variety of functions. Some extended from the past, whereas others boasted more recent origins. The most significant of the new functions was *ohuokhai*’s central role in the revival of Sakha traditional culture and ethnic identity. At the *yhyakh* festivals shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, *ohuokhai* functioned as Sakhas’ main expression of ethnic solidarity and hope (Figure 3). Numerous consultants confirmed this. For example, in the early 1990s, when asked which traditional Sakha rituals have lasted to this day, most



Figure 3. An ohuokhai master singer weaving his artistry.

native Sakha informants answered “yhyakh,” and, when asked which attributes determine the success of the yhyakh, most answered “ohuokhai” (Crate 1994). Many of the confirmations came unsolicited, like Tamara Nikolaeva’s testimony, “From the old yhyakh almost nothing remained. Only ohuokhai—that always remained” (Interview, May 25, 1992).

In addition, after decades of political and ethnic oppression in the central regions and in the safe haven of the Viliui regions, ohuokhai emerged as a mode of teaching Sakha traditional culture to the younger generations and vernacular history to all, and as a public forum to address the host of political, economic, and environmental issues for Sakha in the early 1990s. In this context, ohuokhai assumed an increasingly pragmatic form, to promote awareness of these shared interests and stimulate collaborative efforts to address them, similar to other cases of “acting in concert” (Mattern 1998:30–2).

The more than seventy years of Soviet control, however, left their mark on ohuokhai as they did on other aspects of Sakha life. The Soviet regime discouraged personal initiative, a key element in the improvisational mastery of song leading in ohuokhai. Standardizing and totalizing plans became the order of the day. Soviet citizens were forced to follow the state rules to earn their livelihoods, and individual originality and prowess, once the hallmark of success, were rendered obsolete. Many Sakha speak of the pervasive sense of passivity, a spirit of disinterest that bled into all aspects of Sakha life, including ohuokhai. For example, at early 1990s yhyakhs, organizers had to solicit people to join the ohuokhai. Earlier this would have been unthinkable.

Some Sakha attributed the lack of enthusiasm for ohuokhai not only to the Soviet legacy, but also to the growing influence of mass media and western culture. Stepan Bayeskorov comments, “Ohuokhai was better when everyone actively participated.

Interest is less lately because we started having radio and TV. [Ohuokhai] lost its communicative power. Also, the youth are more interested in rock music and the disco" (Interview, May 28, 1992).

Despite these forces working against the reemergence of ohuokhai, there was a dedicated group of ohuokhai enthusiasts who organized regular dance gatherings and other activities to revive the dance. Now I will discuss the roles that ohuokhai played in early 1990s Sakha society, the challenges the dance faced and continues to face in revival context, and the future prospects of ohuokhai.

Ongoing and Emergent Functions of Ohuokhai

Some of the most compelling accounts I heard while researching ohuokhai in the early 1990s were those that built upon childhood memories of ohuokhai. These deep, sensual, childhood impressions underpin Sakhas' commitment to ohuokhai and fuel the post-Soviet ethnic revival. Sakha consultants repeatedly elaborated on their initial encounters, using vivid imagery that suggested a sense of ethnic valuation: "We played in the center of ohuokhai and it seemed like around us was a rainbow. It was as if some kind of miracle danced around us" (Interview, Nikolai Petrov, May 16, 1992); "The songs of ohuokhai still sound in my ears from my first yhyakh" (Interview, Vavara Grigorieva, June 2, 1992); and "When I was five years old, I first went to the yhyakh and the best memory from that was ohuokhai. It gave me the impression that the whole earth danced. It gave strength and pride" (Interview, Vera Petrova, June 4, 1992). This sense went beyond generational nostalgia to link with the distant past. "I learned the singing of ohuokhai as a child," explains Ivan Zakharov, a ninth-generation Sakha blacksmith and ohuokhai enthusiast. "It connects me with my ancestors and I know how they lived" (Interview, May 8, 1992).

In the revival context, ohuokhai informs the reconstruction of traditional belief via these ancestral connections. The majority of Sakha never fully abandoned their traditional polytheistic nature-based belief system, despite attempts by Russian colonizer to convert Sakha to Orthodoxy and the atheistic doctrines of the Soviet period. Sakha belief recognizes many animals as totems that symbolize ancestral presence. In the contemporary ethnic revival, this belief emerges anew yet links ohuokhai to that ancient belief. For example, at the 1992 Elgeei yhyakh, four swans flew overhead as ohuokhai began. Local participants explained that they were not only attracted to ohuokhai but, more important, verified ancestral presence at the festival.

Ohuokhai has reemerged as a teacher of Sakha traditions to the young. One major vehicle for renewing interest in ohuokhai among youth is the national school movement, an effort begun in the early 1990s to design curricula based on Sakha cultural traditions (Vinokurova 1992:87). For the most part, the new bearers of the tradition are schoolteachers eager to pass on what they missed in their early years. "Those of us who are forty or fifty—we were cut off from our traditions," explains Klim Pavlov, director of the Elgeei School. "When we studied in school, they didn't teach them. Our age people can't create the words of ohuokhai and that is why in our school we are teaching them" (Interview, June 12, 1992). The national school movement also teaches Sakha belief systems, apparent in one of the many murals in the school's

classrooms that depicts *yhyakh*, detailing *ohuokhai* with Zverov appearing in spirit form, guiding the dance's upward connection with the cosmos and spirit world, the original function of *ohuokhai* (Figure 4).

The national school efforts appear to be working. Within the communities that have adopted the new school initiative, people often remark on how well the children are picking up *ohuokhai*. Children dance more and more frequently in *ohuokhai* circles, and children's *ohuokhai* competitions are gaining popularity at the *yhyakh* festivals.

In the post-Soviet revival, most Sakha consider the healing power of *ohuokhai* essential to accomplishing the physically demanding work of summer. The majority of rural Sakha spend the short subarctic summer months following the *yhyakh* festival and cutting hay to fodder their herds through the nine-month-long winter. *Ohuokhai* is considered by many as part of the physical training for hay making. It gives a charge for the year. The body receives a great surge of energy during *ohuokhai*, giving a moral as well as a physical boost. Matryona Zakharova, an eighty-two-year-old resident of Elgeei, said, "[Without *ohuokhai*], people will not work. They will have no attitude to work. They will work only if they sing songs, if they are joyful, and if their mood is lifted up. Without that they will have no attitude to work" (Interview, May 31, 1992). Comments like these are reinforced by the improvised words of the dance.

See the larch tree, how it grows,
Hear how the cuckoo sings, "kere,"
And the lark, how it sings,
And all the other bird songs,
To the green pasture,



Figure 4. The mural in the Elgeei National School.

All who have come to the yhyakh are invited,
 Before the hard summer work, all must dance,
 Why do you stand there and watch?
 LET'S DANCE!

If you ask me where I come from,
 I come from Verkhnyviliuisk
 From a young age, I began to sing
 I waited a long time for yhyakh
 And finally I have come,
 LET'S DANCE!

We have perestroika
 It is hard now with the market system,
 But anyway, we will dance and live through it,
 Don't be afraid,
 Dance and be happy!

See the huge *serge* [horse-hitching post], *aal luuk mas* [sacred tree],
 Remember Serken Sehen, the elder storyteller,
 And how we meet the sunrise,
 And of what a good day it was,
 How the summer will be a good harvest,
 And for that all must dance. (Shamaev 1992)

Anastasia Ignatieva, a ninety-one-year-old Tolon resident, underlines this optimistic spirit as well by describing the dance as "*algys* [a blessing song], wishing the people joy and a good harvest" (Interview, June 28, 1992).

Another aspect of the post-Soviet revival for Sakha has been the reemergence of contemporary vernacular healing practices.¹⁵ Many Sakha interpret the healing power of *ohuokhai* as one of these practices. Explains Rosa Markova, a thirty-year-old Sakha healer, "*Ohuokhai* releases and takes away stress." Markova considers the Sakha language's connection with nature as the key to *ohuokhai*'s healing power: "My head feels the power of the language, the *ohuokhai* language—Sakha—and how it is alive and directly connected with nature and helps the meditation to come on as it connects people with nature" (Interview, June 29, 1992). The power attributed to *ohuokhai* lies in the words, their repetition, and the messages they convey, which celebrate the beauty and abundance of nature.

But celebration is not blind to reality, and with *ohuokhai*'s function as a public forum, one of its strongest components in the post-Soviet revival is addressing Sakhas' most pressing concern, that of environmental desecration. Although many Sakha knew that the ecology of the Viliui was declining because of Soviet industrialization, it was only in the post-Soviet period that specific information about the extensive environmental degradation of their regions confirmed their fears (Crate 2002a). Beginning in the early 1990s, *ohuokhai* texts increasingly emerged as vehicles for expressing concerns about ecology. Nina Nikolaeva, a teacher at the Elgeei School, describes how singer-improvisers wove their texts at the 1992 yhyakh:

All the singers sang about the wonder of the beautiful nature we have, how fast the summer goes and how long the winter will be. Then they sang about how they want

the nature to be unpolluted and that it is up to the people to protect it. The construction of the hydroelectric dam, the search for diamonds and gold, and greed are spoiling our nature. Many sing about that and how beautiful our river was—full of water and fish of all kinds. Now the dam holds all the water. They sang an immediate improvisation about how the Viliui River was earlier and how now, after the construction of GES [a hydro-electric station], [it] is polluted and sick. (Interview, June 27, 1992)

Take, for example, these nine lines of a 900-line ohuokhai text that details the cultural, natural, and historical importance of the river and its recent environmental desecration, entitled “Our River, Viliui”:

Viliui GES commanders
 Of their all-powerful company
 The cleaning of the sea’s waters
 Is most necessary work
 And it needs to be done right now
 Ten million cubic meters of water
 Has been spoiled
 The sea’s waters are poisoned
 The taiga wood needs to be taken out . . . (Petrov 1994:75)

Referring to issues of ecology was even recognized in the formal ohuokhai competitions. At the 1992 regional yhyakh in Verkhnyviliuisk, the jury awarded singers who improvised texts about ecological issues. One award-winning ohuokhai singer commented, “I sang about ecology at Verkhnyviliuisk—4000 rubles they gave me. I sang about the Viliui River and how it begins to die, or maybe it is already dead with all the phenols in it and such” (Interview, Ivan Dodokhov, July 8, 1992). In this context, ohuokhai functioned as a powerful vehicle for speaking out and teaching others about Sakhas’ common environmental plight.

Another pressing issue frequently addressed in ohuokhai texts of the early 1990s was the economy. “They sang about our life today, about how to play and take part in ohuokhai and about the prices,” explains Vasili Akimov, resident of Dalir village in the Viliui regions. “They sing what they think, and many sing about how life is now difficult with the prices continuously rising” (Interview, July 1, 1992). Addressing economic issues in ohuokhai and encouraging dialogue from lead singer to lead singer reinforced the dance’s pragmatic function as a public forum.

In the post-Soviet context, ohuokhai no longer functions as a courting dance for young couples. Youth, if they do attend the festival, come only to participate in the late-night disco, where couples form in the context of western dances.¹⁶ The alienation of youth from village life and the infiltration of western consumer culture are not phenomena unique to the experience of Viliui Sakha, but are common trends in rural post-Soviet societies of the twenty-first century. Some scholars argue that alienation among post-Soviet youth can be resolved, in part, by working out a relationship between the past and the future which is not toxic but nourishing (Vitebsky 2002:192). The national school efforts to teach Sakha traditional culture and the ohuokhai are aimed at instilling such hope and pride in the coming generations.

In the immediate post-Soviet revival context of the early 1990s, *ohuokhai* emerged as a vital ethnic symbol, continuing its many functions in pre-Soviet Sakha society. But how has this initial revival energy fared in the context of continuing economic and political instability of the past decade? At the five *yhyakh* festivals I attended in the summer of 2003, Sakha continued to hold their main congregations at the *ohuokhai* area, dancing in the circle or sitting nearby and observing. I also recognized many of the same children, who were just learning *ohuokhai* in the national school program and/or in the context of the children's *ohuokhai* competitions of the early 1990s, now taking the lead roles as improvisatory singers in the 2003 *ohuokhai* circles.

However, interviews with local residents and specialists also clarified that as Sakha move into the twenty-first century, all is not well with *ohuokhai*. The efforts to preserve and perpetuate interest in *ohuokhai* face an array of challenges, including an increasingly disinterested youth population, a lack of singers competent in the improvisational form of *ohuokhai* song texts, and the unrelenting economic crisis that leaves little time or resources for preservation efforts.

One major challenge is to instill an appreciation for ethnic traditions and *ohuokhai* in the next generation. Today's youth are not carrying on the *ohuokhai* tradition. Oksana Petrova, a student researching the contemporary state of the dance in the Viliui regions said, "They don't have *ohuokhai* in their soul. They don't have the spirit of that singing, of that beautiful circle dance tradition. Another problem is that youth are very interested in life progress and they associate *ohuokhai* with old ways that are backwards; they watch a lot of TV and want to be western so *ohuokhai* holds little interest. Connected with this, before there were no tape recorders and so people had to create their own words and depend on their own mental capacity and creativity more—now this is gone" (Interview, July 29, 2003).

This does not mean that Sakha youth do not dance. They are interested in dancing at the disco. Paradoxically, the move to the disco to dance, at least in the Viliui regions, suggests that the youth have not completely lost interest in *ohuokhai*. "During the time of the disco, they definitely dance *ohuokhai*," explains Yegor Nikolaev, *ohuokhai* teacher at the Elgeeii School. "They may mix the parts a bit and dance more of the faster part, but when they take a break from the disco dancing, they dance *ohuokhai*" (Interview, June 27, 2003).

Perhaps the major challenge facing the teachers of *ohuokhai* is reviving the dance's improvisational text form. Most classroom teachers, like thirty-nine-year-old Maria Afanaseeva of Kutana village, know little of the art of improvisation. "We teach the texts to sing. We don't create like the elders because we don't have the rich words like they do. We weren't taught at an early age" (Interview, June 27, 2003). Only time will tell if *ohuokhai*'s improvisational form will reemerge.

Central to that reemergence is relearning the old Sakha language. Georgi Fyodorov suggested in 1992 that the move back to speaking the native Sakha will help to instill the old character to *ohuokhai*: "If our people relearn the old Sakha language, there will be a change in the language of *ohuokhai* also" (Interview, July 20, 1992). But a return to the old Sakha language, however feasible, is only one of the many steps necessary to safeguard *ohuokhai*.

Another challenge facing *ohuokhai* is the continuing economic crisis. For most contemporary Sakha, the demands of day-to-day survival leave little, if any, time for preser-

vation efforts. Although the revival movement has resulted in a successful effort to teach the children *ohuokhai* tradition, there has been insufficient attention directed toward documenting the older *ohuokhai* singer-improvisers. During my 2003 fieldwork, I heard countless complaints about the failure to record the older singers before they passed away, yet those still living and singing remain largely undocumented. Considering the wealth of cultural heritage they possess, these elders could serve as natural teachers in the school revival efforts. Those I met expressed readiness to participate, but the necessary coordination was lacking.

This issue is exacerbated by the decline in health due to environmental issues in the Viliui regions. "In Suntar [one of the Viliui regions], the best singers are dying from cancer," Andrei Zakharov explained. "All the most talented people are dying from diseases that didn't exist before. The elders, who always danced the most energetically, now have no strength. They want to dance but now they tire too quickly" (Interview, June 21, 2003).

The Viliui regions, as they did in the past, continue to act as a safe haven of Sakha cultural traditions. It is critical to safeguard the cultural resources that inform that revival. Overcoming the challenges facing *ohuokhai* requires a continued, concerted effort by Sakha. In the Viliui regions, local schools are teaching *ohuokhai* and holding regular competitions in an effort to ensure *ohuokhai*'s ongoing vitality.

In historical context, *ohuokhai* represents for Sakha a unique integration of social meaning and movement, fueled by improvised and ancient song texts and serving a variety of historically based and evolving functions. Today *ohuokhai* is most powerful as a public forum for pressing economic and environmental issues and, as a vehicle for ethnic and cultural revival, has emerged as a powerful post-Soviet ethnic symbol.

The contemporary world of Sakha, not unlike the worlds of their post-Soviet counterparts, continues to undergo environmental, economic, and political change. Despite the continuing post-Soviet threats to *ohuokhai*—including disinterested youth, increasing exposure and access to mass media forms, indigenous language loss, and continuing economic, political, and environmental stresses—*ohuokhai* continues because of the commitment and initiative of Viliui Sakha inhabitants. Contemporary Sakha of the Viliui regions who are making concerted efforts to preserve and perpetuate the dance testify that without *ohuokhai* there would be no Sakha. "It is one of Sakhas' main folkloric genres and to the extent that it is gone, is the extent our ethnicity is gone" (Interview, Lena Yegorova, July 29, 2003). Combined with other testimony, it can be argued that *ohuokhai* is for Sakha one key to cultural survival: "Without the Sakha, there would be no *ohuokhai*."

Notes

My master's project and ongoing research of the last fourteen years in the Sakha Republic, Russia, would not have been possible without the generous help of the inhabitants of the Viliui Sakha people. For sharing their memories and opinions about the *yhyakh* festival and the *ohuokhai* dance, I particularly want to thank the eighty-five Sakha I interviewed, inhabitants of the Suntar, Nyurba, Verkhnyviliuisk, and Viliuisk regions. I also extend thanks to the Institute of Humanistic Research (Institut Gumanitarnykh Issledovaniy) in Yakutsk, especially Dr. Ekaterina Romanova for her extensive consultation during my 1992 research on the *yhyakh* and the *ohuokhai*, and Dr. Vasili Ivanov, director, for ongoing

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1. The ethnography of musical performance and the representation and analysis of that expressive form is a particular challenge to researchers, which can be addressed, in part, through a focus on experiential methods (Kisliuk 1997:23). The research and analysis of the *ohuokhai* documented in this article is based on both my master's thesis research conducted February through August of 1992, during which time I attended five festivals and conducted detailed interviews with eighty-five Sakha consultants, and on participant observation and informal interviews at the *hyakh* festival from 1991 through 2004.

2. Tungus, the original inhabitants of the Viliui and Lena river watershed, called Sakha "Yeket." It was this name that Russians heard when first coming to the area in the 1600s—hence the centuries-old designation for Sakha as "Yakut" (Forsyth 1992:55).

3. For further reading on Sakha, see Marjorie Balzer (1991), Balzer and Uliana Vinokurova (1996), Bella Bychkova and Terry Jordan-Bychkova (2001), Susan Crate (2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004a, 2004b), John Tichotsky (2000), and Piers Vitebsky (1996, 1995a, 1995b). For information on the arctic and its inhabitants, see Vitebsky's documents (2005) at <http://www.thearctic.is/articles/overviews/homeland/enska/index.htm>.

4. The Sakha belief system divides the world into three parts: upper, middle, and lower. The upper world, *Khallaan*, is home to the *aiyy*, the pantheon of sky deities. *Khallaan* is nine-tiered, with each level a home to one or more deity protectors. The highest place is held by "Urung Aiyy Toion," the "Great Lord Master," creator of all the universe. All the deities below him are manifestations of his essential power, leading some to conclude they are actually his different forms. The major deities recognized in ritual include "Urung Aiyy Toion" (the highest and creator of all), "Juhugui" (the horse deity), and "Aan Alakhchyn" (the deity of spring and fertility).

5. The shaman, or *oiuun*, a person born with or indoctrinated into possessing supernatural powers, played a central role in Sakha daily life and ritual. With these powers, the *oiuun* can enter the lower and upper worlds; the *oiuun* serves as mediator for humans with the spirit world. The Sakha *oiuun* are either *urung* (white) *oiuun* (who have powers limited to the realms of goodness and fertility), or *khara* (black) *oiuun* (who can utilize the powers of both good and evil). Throughout Sakha history, a *khara oiuun* is summoned to combat hardship and illness. The *oiuun* knows which *abaahy* (evil spirits) are the source of the malady, and his or her soul travels between the three worlds to fight that source. This travel involves riding the *oiuun's* "spirit horse," whose rhythmic canter is personified by the *oiuun's* beating of the ritual *dungur* (drum) along with the *oiuun's* spoken and sung prayers (Alekseev 1975:162). In the upper world, the *oiuun* appeals to the benevolent deities. Reaching the lower world, the *oiuun* chases the particular *abaahy* away, and thereby heals the ailing person. According to the historical record, the *khara oiuun* traditionally conducted the annual fall blood sacrifice to the *abaahy*, a ritual event no longer practiced (Troshchanskii 1902:130). In contrast to the *khara oiuun*, the main "business" of the *urung oiuun* focuses on goodness and fertility. The *urung oiuun's* central role is praying to the sky deities and making bloodless offerings at the *kymys* fertility festival, *hyakh*.

6. During the first few years of the early 1990s, in the spirit of ethnic revival, the Sakha established a national school system in the Sakha Republic, with many schools basing their entire school curricula on the Sakha worldview and traditional belief system. The Elgeei National School, at that time, was considered to be on the cutting edge of this movement.

7. This is an excerpt from a long poem by Aleksei Kulakovskii, written in 1924 and entitled *Prazdnik v ches' nastupleniia leta* ("The Holiday in Honor of the Arrival of Summer") (Kulakovskii 1990:233).

8. It is interesting to note that the Yakut word for dance, *ungkuu*, has its root in the verb meaning prayer/bowing (Petrov 1990:7).

9. The Sakha dance *ohuokhai* in the direction symbolizing the path of the sun. "All the goodness of life comes from the sun," explained Vladimir Nikolaev, representative of the Sakha ethnic movement called "Sakha Omuk." "That's why, since the beginning, all the circle dances follow the sun's path and the songs praise it" (Interview, June 29, 1992). Perhaps this sun-wise orientation is a remnant of the Sakha ancestors' sky-sun cult (Okladnikov 1976:237).

10. The word "*ohuokhai*" is the combination of three words: "os," "yokh," and "ai," which mean "words," "energy," and "create," respectively.

11. Such transformations of folkloric and ethnographic expression to promote the blending of folk cultures of various nationalities continued beyond Stalin's period. Most notably were the "new socialist, nonreligious rituals" introduced in the late 1950s. In this context, formal concerts became a focused medium for cultural expression. The stage offered a neutral platform for Soviet performance, embracing all peoples and blurring national differences (Sadomskaya 1990:94). In addition, the indigenous ritual regulation of agricultural time was shattered by the Soviet production sequence and socialist competitions. The new Soviet rituals, however, never fully replaced the previous systems rooted in indigenous culture and agricultural rhythms (Humphrey 1998:373).

12. The three layers of chain symbolize (1) Russian colonization and imposition of fur tribute, (2) local bureaucratic powers, and (3) local *kulaki* (wealthy landowners).

13. *Chechir* are small birch branches that are stood in the ground by the ceremonial area at *hyakh* and symbolize the new generations.

14. It is worth mentioning that recent research is critiquing Soviet planners' policies of developing cold Siberian spaces. In the post-Soviet context, landscapes are decidedly Soviet, because collectivization worked to transform indigenous survival and settlement patterns from subsistence-based farming that was extensive across the landscape to production-based agriculture consolidated around a central state farm operation (Campbell 2003; Hill and Gaddy 2003). Private ownership was replaced first with collective, then state ownership. These farm operations often supplied foodstuffs for adjacent industrial complexes that in turn generated a variety of environmental casualties to local systems. In the post-Soviet context, Soviet landscapes characterized by centralized settlements and environmental degradation persist, but inhabitants are left without employment, access to consumer goods, health care, and other social services. For more remote communities, the geography has been advantageous because it provided marginal protection from some of the colonial and Soviet influences detailed above. Geographic isolation, although never allowing for complete immunity to these effects, did facilitate retention of kin interdependence, cultural expression, spirituality, and indigenous ecological knowledge, all key elements of post-Soviet survival.

15. The contemporary existence of practicing *oiuuns* is a question much debated by scholars of Sakha culture. For the most part, the gift of healing now belongs to a new generation and involves a combination of traditional Sakha methods and more contemporary practices like "extra sense" (a rather amorphous concept, encompassing extra-sensory perception and the manipulation of personal energy fields), herbal remedies, and pressure point work.

16. Sakha is one of the most significant sites in non-European parts of the former Soviet Union for the development of "ethnic pop." Several well-known Sakha rock ensembles draw extensively on traditional expressive culture in their performances, in particular, shamanic chanting and drumming, *khomus*, and the *ohuokhai* circle dance, which has also taken on new life in pop festivals such as the Tabyk festival, where musical accompaniment is provided by rock musicians and hundreds of young people participate in *ohuokhai* in a contemporary version of trance-dance. For a westerner's view of the Tabyk festival see Lu Edmonds (1997).

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