

Whose Steeple is Higher? Religious Competition in Siberia*¹

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In the summer of 2003 one of the most revered elder prayer-singers of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia), the former actor Afanasi Fedorov, described in glowing terms the new Sakha temple called 'House of Purification' (*'Archie Dieté'*) in central Yakutsk. It had opened the previous autumn with much ritual fanfare among the Sakha (Yakut) intelligentsia.

The *Archie Dieté* is turning into a really special, hallowed place. It has been open less than one year and already it is becoming the kind of place we dreamed of, where we can do different rituals for the different seasons. Plus, our wedding ceremonies are becoming more and more popular. We are not doing any funerals – yet.

Afanasi chuckled warmly, and continued:

Do not misunderstand me – I do not think we are going to be doing funerals for quite a while, although this has been discussed. Probably funerals should be left to other places. The *Archie Dieté* is a hallowed pure space devoted to joy and life, not death. Let death be taken care of by the Russian Orthodox Church.

In Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) deep inside the Federation of Rossiya (Russia), the early 1990s postsocialist political cacophony of declarations of sovereignty by non-Russian peoples has given way to more complex and potentially far-reaching cultural experimentation. Culture and politics continue to be intertwined in sometimes unexpected ways, making appropriate Arjun Appadurai's suggestion we use the adjectival form 'cultural' rather than reifying the 'Culture' of any one particular people or group (compare Appadurai, 1996; Balzer, 1999; Balzer, Petro and Robertson, 2001; and Brown, 2003). Until September 2002 Yakutsk had never had a 'temple' devoted to the practice of traditional shamanic beliefs. Indeed the whole concept that a building could contain or represent the beliefs, values and rituals of the Sakha people was new, and highly controversial. Some of the themes of that controversy are captured in Afanasi Fedorov's statement. Many Sakha have admitted to me privately over the past several years that the very idea of having a temple was

*This paper was first presented in the panel 'Religion, Power, Political Economy: Postsocialist Views' at the Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, 2003.

copied from Christian churches. It derived from a powerfully felt need to create a sacred urban space of their own. The idea had been mulled since at least the early 1990s. This article analyses the context and some of the debates surrounding the creation of the urban Sakha temple.

Missionary competition for followers and recent laws on religion in the Russian Federation have helped create conditions for diverse kinds of nationalism. In the Sakha Republic of the Far East, some Sakha have responded with a rekindling of shamanic 'traditions' in new forms. Others, both Sakha and Russians (the dominant groups in the republic), have become Baha'is, Baptists, Buddhists, Lutherans, Catholics or Russian Orthodox, to name a few of the main denominations.² Many of those probing new religious options, especially Protestantism, are urban children of mixed ethnic marriages, loosened from the moorings of specific indigenous beliefs. Meanwhile a new mosque, built in 2002 on the edge of a run-down part of town, has become the social and spiritual centre of a burgeoning community that consists predominantly of recent migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Most are already Muslims, joined by a few Sakha converts.

By autumn 2002 the centrally located, unprecedented shamanic 'House of Purification' had opened in the republican capital down the road from a gleaming new Russian Orthodox church and a recently built Protestant church. Organisers in the Sakha intelligentsia, hoping to attract young and old, touted the temple as an indigenous answer to westernising Christian missionaries as well as to the russifying Orthodox establishment. Public dispute included the insistence of the Russian Orthodox archbishop of Yakutia that the Sakha had no right to build a temple higher than the golden cupolas of the nearby Russian Orthodox church.

I argue here that religion has become an idiom through which competing definitions of homeland and national pride are being shaped. This competition is characterised by and stimulates rival symbols, multilevel proselytising and spiritual experimentation. I examine interrelated, shifting perceptions concerning 'world religions', 'shamanic belief systems' and the legitimacy of missionary activity. Focus is on shamanic activity and expression of beliefs, as Sakha communities and individuals feel increasingly threatened by pressures from Christian missionaries. While once shamans had no need ambitiously to convert others or proselytise in rural or urban contexts, today postsoviet indigenous spiritual leaders are attempting to revitalise their communities and reharmonise ill and bewildered followers on the basis of selected nature-oriented shamanic cosmology and ritual practices. My multiethnic data are based predominantly on intermittent fieldwork in the Sakha Republic since 1986, including most summers of the 1990s, and the summers of 2000, 2002 and 2003. My methodology extends beyond formal interviews or stilted 'participant observation' to ritual participation, community involvement, and lifelong ocean-transcending friendships.

The House of Purification

The *Archie Dieté* is a wood, glass and metal wonder composed of three gigantic interlinked and rotund tipi-like pentagons with skylights, rising grandly on the bank of the Lena River. At its entrance is a plaque: 'The intelligentsia of the city of Yakutsk express their gratitude to the head of administration of Yakutsk, I. F. Mikhailchuk, for this priceless gift enhancing the spiritual growth of the Sakha people'. While some wanted diplomatically to thank the republic president as well, an officially anonymous (yet widely known) group of Sakha founder-organisers, speaking for the 'intelligen-

tsia', decided that since funding had come only from the mayor's office, only the elected Russian mayor would be recognised.

Elegant wooden doors carved with Sakha symbols of fertility and well-being open onto a reception area, where visitors are admonished to wear slippers or shoe covers to protect the polished wood floors. But temple custodians have already given up on this. As many as 500 people come to the *Archie Dieté* on Sundays to dance traditional Sakha circle dances, *okhuokhai*. The dances are done to improvisational poetic chants, on customary and current themes. They last for hours as various chant leaders, both men and women, take turns showing off their considerable skills. Many participants believe the poetry is derived from spirit(ual) inspiration. While these sacred dances were once considered appropriate only during the long light-filled days of summer, especially the summer solstice festival (*yhyakh*), urban adaptability has led to weekly *okhuokhai* sessions, including in the winter, and to occasional evening waltzes.

The building faces east, toward the sunrise and onto the beautiful Lena marsh. The recently appointed (by the mayor) temple director Nadezhda Tolbonova enthusiastically explained that its orientation to the sun was planned to highlight Sakha spiritual values, especially respect for ecological balance. Three main inner rooms constitute interrelated circular pods of the architecture. A smaller upper balcony room, where student classes on Sakha rituals, family values and the Sakha language are held, overlooks the marsh.

The main meeting space is rimmed with carved wood benches and is reminiscent in shape and size of the grand summer birch tents (*urasa*) of semi-nomadic Sakha horse breeders. This room has an old-fashioned fireplace-stove (*chuval*) in one of its nine (a sacred number) wall niches. Numerous lovely wooden round tables with horse hoof legs, carved in Sakha folk style, are set up with stools, providing a flexible venue for conferences, feasts and dances. On the walls are fantasy carvings, huge sculptures of benevolent spirits (*aiyy*) and bird figures. They are grouped in ensembles, made to look shamanic without repeating the nine bird sequences of a traditional shaman's spirit post. The well-known Sakha artists Vilyam Yakovlev (who is also an ethnographer) and Fedor Markov outdid themselves in depicting whimsical, spirited spirits far from the serious tone of Russian icons.

An additional circular room, used for large-scale ritual purifications, weddings and naming ceremonies, has an open ceremonial hearth slightly off-centre, creating a focal point for the frequently kindled fires that constitute the mediating heart of Sakha communication with spirits. Prayers (*algys*) are sung to various figures of Sakha cosmology through the fire spirit. This room has a balcony rimming its vaulted ceiling, and an elaborate clear glass skylight of multiple panes. Indeed, light pours through every room, creating a spacious sense of flowing harmony usually absent from Yakutsk buildings. Capturing the sun's every ray is a value well understood by northern peoples used to long dark winters.

My first visit to the temple was on a symbolically significant and politically fraught occasion. In June 2003 events were planned to honour one of the founders of the early twentieth-century Sakha sovereignty movement, Platon Oyunsky (Sleptsov), a complex revolutionary nationalist whose penname (from the Sakha word *oyun*) means 'shaman'. On the 110th anniversary of Oyunsky's birth, his reputation was being reconfigured as more nationalist than Bolshevik. However, the process was self-consciously awkward, made especially difficult by a recent serialised newspaper feature (by a young Russian named V. Skripin) attacking Oyunsky as a 'false prophet' (Skripin, 2003; Oyunsky, 1975). An eclectic guest list, including representatives of diverse non-Sakha ethnically based cultural groups in the city, was invited to air

reactions to the articles and the anniversary. Organisers, including Nadezhda Tolbonova and former Sakha parliamentarian Ul'yana Vinokurova, hoped to 'save Oyunsky's reputation' by issuing a public statement praising his legacy. (A press statement was indeed issued and the meeting-cum-ritual was covered on the evening television news.)

Between the fascinating two-hour debate on Oyunsky's chequered past and a ceremonial book presentation promoting a French translation of Oyunsky's version of the Sakha epic (*olonkho*) *Kulun Kudangsa*, participants gathered for a ritual of purification in the largest pod. The room is dominated at its centre by a huge tree, carved with soaring branches tipped with wooden leaf points, suggestive of a natural tree, reaching to the distant skylight. This is an *al luk maas*, symbolising the sacred shamanic 'world tree'. We formed a moving line around the tree, within the large carved posts that buttress the room. Aleksandr Gorokhov, an angular-featured young prayer-singer (*algys-chit*) from the distant northern town of Verkhoyansk, performed our blessing and purification. Trained at Afanasi Fedorov's College of Culture (*Kolledzh Kul'tury*), with a love since childhood for Sakha language and poetry, he has a deep resonating voice and charismatic presence. Dressed in a white, fur-trimmed robe, he waved his horse-hair wand (also a convenient mosquito chaser during outdoor ceremonies) over each of us as we passed by him. We then gathered around the fire area as he sang an address to the fire spirit to accept his offerings of white horse hairs, Sakha pancakes (*alady*) and generous dollops of butter. Smoke from the small fire curled up to the chimneyless ceiling and swirled around to our group. Then Aleksandr lit two sticks and circled the room of people, smiling and blessing each of us personally with the smoke from the very flammable wands. A few sparks fell dangerously near several women's coiffed hair, but no one seemed to mind. Afterwards, we crowded around the fire embers and waved more purifying smoke onto ourselves. One striking 72-year-old elder with a large white moustache humorously used his tall embroidered white felt Kyrgyz hat to scoop more smoke and put it smartly on his head.

Debates about Ritual and Spiritual Life

Certain members of the Sakha intelligentsia express resentment that the new 'House of Purification', *Archie Dieté*, is not a 'true *Aiyy Dieté*', literally a 'House of Spirits'. They complain that established bureaucrat-intellectuals have hijacked their idea to create a Sakha temple in the city. Calling the *Archie Dieté* more a club than a temple, a few have boycotted its events and ceremonies. They are particularly upset that the initial site for the temple, directly opposite the new white and gold Russian Orthodox church, was switched to a less provocative place down the road. They have threatened to build their own spiritual centre near a lake at the edge of town, although they have no funding for this, and certainly no official support. The geography of the capital has become a symbolic battleground, with multiple sides and agendas competing for presidential and mayoral favour in a republic where both the president and the mayor are currently Russians.

While I personally view the *Archie Dieté* as an elegant addition to the spiritual architecture of Yakutsk, I have been struck by the passions that have accompanied its birth. In summer 2002 the Russian Orthodox Archbishop German told me heatedly that 'Sakha nationalists' wanted to build the spire of their 'pagan temple' higher than the golden cupolas of his new Church of the Transfiguration (*Preobrazhensky Sobor*), and that 'it was this that was unacceptable'. Archbishop German is said to have

pressured the mayor to at least provide a different site for the ‘pagans’ so that the church and the temple were not blatantly opposite each other. In his 2002 interview with me, held in St Nicholas Cathedral in Yakutsk, the archbishop expressed pride that increased numbers of Sakha were attending Russian Orthodox services since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Religiosity had become fashionable, he admitted, and many who attended services were not baptised. He confessed that deeply spiritual and active Sakha church members were far fewer than his ideal, and that at least some Sakha were annoyingly prone to feed the fire spirits while still professing an Orthodox identity.

One of the initial *Aiyy Dieté* advocates, the journalist Ukhkhan (Ivan Nikolayev), explained in 2002 and 2003 that he feared that the whole project had trivialised rather than elevated Sakha sacred traditions.³ He and the linguist Tëris (Lazar Afanas'yev) at first requested that they be given one of the rooms of the building to create their own spiritual revitalisation programme, with emphasis on young people. *Archie Dieté* organisers rejected their programme as too focused on ‘one right way’ to perform Sakha rituals, too exclusively oriented to the Sakha people, and too preoccupied with the purity of the Sakha language. In short, the ‘purist’ critics were perceived as Sakha fundamentalists.

The director of the *Archie Dieté*, Nadezhda Tolbonova, defends its approach as ‘providing a place where Sakha can feel comfortable with their own cultural values . . . a place where people who are not baptised [in the Russian Orthodox Church] can have weddings, birth and naming celebrations and memorials imbued with Sakha spirituality’. ‘It is time we had our own place in the city’, she explains. Yet she also adds: ‘it should be a place where non-Sakha can feel welcome and can learn something about Sakha traditions’. Nadezhda Tolbonova spends many of her working days at the temple giving guided tours to visitors from all parts of the republic and beyond, Sakha and non-Sakha alike.

As Afanasi Fedorov mentioned, the temple calendar features monthly rituals honouring the traditionally defined Sakha moons. For example in March, the month named after the horse, a pregnant mare was brought to the ceremonial horse post just outside the temple (and near its parking lot). More impromptu, unplanned rituals, such as shamanic curing seances, have thus far been discouraged. Sakha affiliated with the temple have explained that the featured shamanic traditions are those associated with ‘white shamanic’ or priestly traditions. The term ‘white’ in this sense refers to shamans who communicate with benevolent, light-filled ‘*aiyy*’ spirits, rather than with the more capricious, ‘evil’, spirits called ‘*abaahy*’. In this controversial terminology, shamans willing to deal with *abaahy* are ‘black shamans’, even when they produce effective cures.

A related, ongoing debate centres on the role of the annual *yhyakh* festival/ceremony in the ritual, spiritual and public-political life of the Sakha Republic. The *Archie Dieté* has taken over the function of organising this festival for the city of Yakutsk. *Yhyakh* was officially made a ‘state holiday’ in 1991, but organisers, participants and bystanders perceive its significance variously. Positive opinions stress its recovery of sacred ‘white shamanic’ (*aiyy oyun*) priestly traditions, or, in contrast, its importance as a jubilant but secularised summer festival at village, *ulus* (district), municipal and republic levels. Negative reviews mention its waste of public funds or, worse, its potential danger in symbolically polarising the main ethnic groups of the republic, Russians and Sakha. To counteract perception of the *yhyakh* as an exclusively national Sakha festival, the 2002 summer ceremonies all over the republic honoured the Sakha writer Aleksei Yeliseyevich Kulakovskiy and simultaneously

incorporated dance theatre during their opening ceremonies that pointedly portrayed the peaceful incorporation of Yakutia into the Russian Empire in the seventeenth century. Both former and current republic presidents Mikhail Nikolayev (a Sakha) and Vyacheslav Shtyrov (a Russian) have supported this 'brotherhood of the peoples' ritualised version of history. In contrast, the 2003 summer ceremonies were dedicated to the Sakha nationalist-revolutionary Oyunsky mentioned above.

Some critics, such as Térés (Lazar Afanas'yev), founder of the social-religious group *Kut-Siur* (Heart-Soul-Mind), maintain that the sacred meaning of *yhyakh*, celebrating the summer solstice, fermented mare's milk (*kumiss*) and fertility among all living beings, is getting lost in national-level politicisation (Afanas'ev (Térés), 2002, 1993; Romanova, 1994). Defenders of the festival, such as minister of culture Andrei Borisov, point to the power and beauty of opening improvisational prayers (*algys*) as affirmations of much-needed annual purification, of renewal at both the personal and the Sakha national cultural levels. Organisers such as Afanasi Fedorov and Vilyam Yakovlev take the spiritual aspects of the ceremonies quite seriously. They are justifiably proud of having wrested *yhyakh* from the deadening propaganda speeches made during the openings of some festivals in the Soviet period (when and where they were allowed).

The peak of the *yhyakh* festivals held at Us Khatyn (Three Birches) near Yakutsk in 2002 and 2003 was a sunrise ceremony featuring inspirational prayers (*algys*) and attended by hundreds of worshippers of all generations, who broke into more than ten huge exuberant dance circles of *okhuokhai* for its conclusion. The ceremony was held on a hill facing east, centred on an aligned set of sacred horse posts (*sergé*), one of which, a huge, glistening copper-sheathed *Altan Sergé*, was created in 2002 on the basis of *olonkho* epic poetry (Yakovlev, 1992; Oyunsky, 1975). Indicative of changing shamanic traditions, the deeply rhythmic dancing was done to a combination of drumming and improvisational chanted poetry, unconventionally broadcast through a microphone. The three drummers, associated with Afanasi Fedorov's College of Culture, were themselves transported through beat and chant into states that radiated ecstasy. In 2002, after hours of intensive festival participation, their faces came as close to deep trance as anything I have seen in over 25 years of periodic fieldwork in Siberia. Their joy was contagious, for as I glanced through the crowd, I saw some of the most serious Sakha critics of the festival grinning from ear to ear. Nearly the same scene was repeated in 2003.

The issue of teaching and sustaining sacred traditions led to a programme sponsored by the Sakha Republic Ministry of Education in the early 1990s called '*aiyy yeurekhé*' or 'benevolent spirit teaching'. It probably crossed the controversial border between description of religious history and socialisation (inculcation) of religion in the schools. Subsequently, government and Russian Orthodox authorities criticised it as non-secular and encouraged its removal from recent school curricula. Some of the teaching programmes of the *Archie Diété* are expected to fill the perceived gap. Even while it was operating, the programme's resonance was uneven, for its effectiveness ranged widely, depending on the enthusiasm of particular teachers for this clear reversal of years of Soviet atheist propaganda.

One aspect of the complex programme was its explanation of traditional Sakha shamanic cosmology, including an impressive range of 12 deities and heavens derived from Turkic epic sources. Debating the need for *aiyy yeurekhé* to be taught in schools, scholarly ethnographers like Anatoli Gogolev have questioned its main advocate, linguist-believer Térés, regarding specific details of Sakha religious tradition.⁴ While Térés perceives a great deal of organisation in Sakha religion, with emphasis on a

hierarchical priestly tradition, Anatoli Gogolev argues for a degree of eclecticism, a looser shamanic system without temples or rigid gospel. Recalling the debate, Anatoli Gogolev (2002) explained that he had once asked Térés where he was getting his information. Térés replied that his sources were spiritual: 'I have a white bearded old man-spirit who tells me what to write'. Contradicting Térés' claim that he has knowledge of 'pure' Sakha tradition, Anatoli Gogolev identifies aspects of Buddhism and Christianity that have crept into Térés' *aiyy yeurekhé*.

A further debate concerning what should be taught in schools, homes and the new temple touches on a classic clash of tradition and modernity. How much should parents and teachers emphasise the dark world of dangers, threats, oaths and curses behind much of 'traditional' Sakha belief in *abaahy*, loosely glossed, possibly inaccurately, as evil spirits? Were/are *abaahy* more capricious than evil – more like human beings? Do contemporary parents need to scare children into respect for Nature (*Aiyylgha*, derived from *aiyy*, spirits), and into ethical behaviour? Or were the archaic shamanic spirit world balances of *abaahy* (underground spirits), *ichchi* (middle world spirits), *aiyy* and *tängeri* (upper world spirits) distorted beyond contemporary recognition, first by Christian proselytising and then by Soviet propaganda? (Compare Kolesnikov, 2000; Ksenofontov, 1992; Sleptsov, 1989.)

The elderly dean of Sakha letters Suoron Ommollon (Dmitri Sivtsev) has condemned traditional Sakha religion as primarily worship of *abaahy*, a 'pagan', 'dark' and 'superstitious' faith transcended by Russian Orthodoxy.⁵ His renewed faith affirms his Russian Orthodox baptism over 90 years ago, while that of many other Sakha turns toward pragmatic appeal to benevolent *aiyy* spirits over *abaahy*. The revered linguist of toponyms Bagdaryn Syul'bé commented sadly in 2002: 'Suoron Ommollon could have been such a marvellous example of an elder statesman for the revival of selective Sakha moral and spiritual traditions. Instead, he has rejected it all and hurt us all.'

How Does it Add Up? Why Should It?

Behind many of these debates is the question of whether 'shamanism', as a complex combination of spiritual and medical beliefs and actions, can or should be revived in the twenty-first century. Many of my Sakha interlocutors, both rural and urban, are concerned that the debates have become too polarising, too oriented toward claims about history that we may never be able to solve. However, debates themselves can be a healthy part of reprocessing cultural values. Temples like the *Archie Dieté*, including a few smaller models in outlying villages and towns of the republic, can be the catalyst for such reprocessing and revitalisation. The Sakha ethnosociologist and former Sakha Republic parliament (*Il Tumen*) deputy Ul'yana Vinokurova makes an important distinction between learning to reconstruct the past and understanding how to use the past to construct a new national identity.⁶ Despite her reputation as a moderate Sakha nationalist, she worries about too much homogenisation and standardisation of Sakha ceremonies. The reformulation of Sakha traditions has become shifting ground for uncertainty and hope, acrimony and solidarity.

Religious gatekeepers are constantly trying to maintain purity, define fundamentals, and make judgments about the validity or loyalty of their followers. Such a Weberian routinisation of religion appears to be partially underway in newly institutionalised contexts generated by the multinational competitions of diverse religious representatives (cf. Weber, 1947). In the postsoviet Sakha Republic context, the charisma of traditional shamanic healers may be less valued than the consistency of monthly

seasonal rituals and regular special training for prayer-singers. One of the most significant events the *Archie Dieté* sponsored in its first year was a 'creative laboratory' for budding prayer-singers from all over the republic. This workshop, lasting several days, discussed the delicate balance of learned skills, inherited talent and spiritual inspiration required by the prayer-singers' calling. 'The people spoke' by asking for the workshop, organisers explained. Yet self-appointed Sakha fundamentalists, such as the founders of the group *Kut-Siur*, kept themselves beyond the gates of the new temple when they realised that they could not take over its programme in the name of divine inspiration. In a revealing process for theorists of religion, different degrees and kinds of gatekeeping are developing here (cf. Van der Veer, 2000, on varieties of fundamentalism).

In sum, the tension between eclectic urban adaptation, represented by the *Archie Dieté*, and insistence on Sakha gospel, represented by the *Kut-Siur* group, is being played out on the site of newly defined sacred ground for a constantly redefined Sakha people. Do the debates of the Sakha intelligentsia energise or enervate? Answers depend on whom you talk to. For me, the success of projects like the *Archie Dieté* temple depends on how well cultural, including spiritual, vitalisation can coincide with a liberal, nonjudgmental, tolerant nationalism. The 'House of Purification' could not be named the 'House of Spirits' because that would be too religious a name for public funding, according to its founders. They are aware that the demands of secularisation in a modernising, postsocialist world may place some restrictions on permissible increased religiosity (cf. Ingelhart, 1997). This tension, albeit involving much less violence, is reminiscent of the kinds of debate concerning Buddhism, christianisation and secularisation that have wracked Sri Lanka's torn elites, described by David Scott (2000). In Sri Lanka, postcolonial conditions opened up a renewal and formalisation of Buddhism in response to increased Christian missionary activity and secular pressures.

It is no coincidence that the *Archie Dieté* was built and sponsored by a city government trying to please numerous ethno-religious constituencies at precisely the same time that many Sakha were expressing mixed emotions concerning the recent flood of Christian missionaries into the republic from elsewhere in Russia and from abroad. 'Why', Ul'yana Vinokurova asked me plaintively in the mid-1990s, 'do western Protestant missionaries perceive a spiritual vacuum in our republic?' My response was that the boom in interest in religion in the late 1980s and the postsoviet period presented a target of opportunity few missionaries could resist. The ironic ramification of missionary activity, however, has been to strengthen the resolve of many Sakha to make their own spiritual traditions more like a 'world religion', with more structure, more theology and more impetus to 'spread the word', at least among their own people. A few Protestant missionaries are admired in local Sakha communities, particularly those who have shown commitment by buying a house or staying for over two years, as has one American couple in Vilyuisk. However, admiration rarely extends to conversion and when Sakha Protestants try to convert others within their own families, they are usually rebuffed and sometimes ridiculed.

As each generation remakes and rethinks its traditions, concepts that once may have been localised, flexible or situational, such as the differences between the *aiyy oyun* (white shaman) and the *abaahy oyun* (often glossed as 'black shaman'), have sometimes hardened. An historical, prestigious priestly shamanic class has become important for those, like the ethnographer Yekaterina Romanova (1997), who are making contemporary claims for an early, coherent national identity based on an archaic Turkic Sakha civilisation. This kind of pride was behind the creation of the *Archie Dieté*, as well as of the group *Kut-Siur*.

Reassessments of history also play into debates about the effectiveness of shamanic curing: at its most basic, whether shamans are healers or charlatans. Both characterisations, among many others, have been and are appropriate. As a Sakha doctor recalled in Suntar in 2000, 'There were suddenly lots of healers after *glasnost*'. Every other person. But the bad ones got weeded out, and far fewer are practicing today.⁷ Sakha equivalents of healers who are called in Russia and Ukraine 'ekstrasens' have active practices. However, they usually do not aspire to being shamanic 'mediators among human and spirit worlds', genuine carriers of deeply esoteric, nearly lost knowledge. Most, but not all, such mediators live outside the capital. A male shaman is called, with reverence and occasionally with fear, *oyun*, while a female shaman is termed *udagan*. As in the past, their reputations must warrant these terms and it is inappropriate for healers to call themselves by these names. Debates in the Sakha Republic about the effectiveness of shamanic curing have led to the drafting and then withdrawal of a law regulating folk healing and have resulted in changing the name of the Centre for Traditional Medicine to the Centre for Prophylactic Medicine and Sports Medicine.⁸ A split has developed between those who stress the healing aspects of shamanic practice (or shamanhood) and those who stress its potential as a more priestly, organised religion. However, a prominent practitioner of both is the urban shaman and former historian Vladimir Kondakov, founder of the Association of Folk Medicine (Kondakov, 1997, 1999; Balzer, 1996).

Shamans can be the trickster spirits behind cultural transformation and creativity, suggests Louis Hyde (1998), who studies the nexus between shamanic and artistic traditions. He would be fascinated by the dynamic, synergistic use of prayer, mime, modern dance and taped music during *yhyakh* opening ceremonies. After the prayers, the ceremony at Us Khatyn in 2002 became a cross between the epic *Niurgun Bootur* and Soviet-style propaganda about the 'brotherhood of peoples'. How far can the transformation go, of individual shamans, their rituals and their societies, before shamanic traditions become unrecognisable? Are shamans and 'shamanhood' relevant in postsoviet Siberian society?⁹

While attempts to turn 'shamanism' into a coherent national creed, a generalisable set of gospels, may fall flat, belief in shamanic cures, profound and humble prayers to spirits, offerings to the fire, attention to dreams and intuition, and respect for spirit-imbued Nature are all part of the everyday life of many Sakha and some local Russians. At a community level, a few charismatic shamanic leaders have attracted groups of followers, which again reveals a striving for collective spiritual experience. While their popularity has ebbed and flowed, they help shape potentially important cultural construction and transformation relevant to addressing the stresses of urban (city and town) life. Among them are Vladimir Kondakov, Aleksandra Chirkova, Yed'ei (Elder Sister) Dora Kobeikova, Kyta Baaly (Anatoli Mikhailov) and Saiyyna (Klavdiya Maksimova). Literate, articulate and well-travelled (in multiple senses), they are far from crude stereotypes of 'primitive' shamans.¹⁰ A few, such as Aleksandra Chirkova and Dora Kobeikova, have supported and participated in activities of the *Archie Dieté*, but most have formed their own spiritual healing and community-building centres. Sakha and others ask: 'Can they be effective without becoming cults?'

Striving for collective spiritual solidarity and pride at a national Sakha level has imbued projects like the *yhyakh* revival and the Yakutsk *Archie Dieté* with meaning transcending political symbolism, although this alone can be a powerful force not to be underestimated. Whether called shamanism, neoshamanism, urban shamanism, shamanic, White Spirit Teaching, Nature worship, animism, purification or something

else entirely, rekindled religiosity links indigenous Siberian peoples with combined spiritual and ethnonational revitalisation trends throughout the world (cf. Balzer, 1997; Niezen, 2000; Humphrey, 1999; Kendall, 1996; Lester, 2002).

The ethnonational interaction story I have told resonates well with theories concerning the ongoing constructedness of nationalism (Anderson, 1991); its often intelligentsia-based stimulation (Hroch, 1996); and the social-psychological significance of combining national and religious identities (Romannuci-Ross and de Vos, 1995). The nuanced, interactionist theories of historian Prasenjit Duara (1996) also apply, concerning the situational hardening, softening and possible rehardening of national boundaries, on the basis of multiple and multi-levelled 'us-and-us – them-and-them' definitions and interrelations over long periods.

'Political construction sites', to borrow Pål Kolstø's (2000) felicitous term, can occur at many levels of active creation of group identities. The literal construction of churches, a mosque and a temple in the capital of the Sakha Republic affords insights into the ways that religions are competing for both individual and group loyalties. *Archie Dieté* activists in particular are trying at once to capture and to stimulate an elusive national spirit of and for the Sakha people. Although passions run high in the process, the relevant boundaries are subtle and soft, not hard and intransigent, as in violent competition over temple turf and history in India. Friends in the Sakha intelligentsia often admit to being attracted to the aesthetics and spirituality of the Russian Orthodox Church, without wanting baptism. A close friend, representing moderate Sakha nationalist trends, accompanied me one Sunday morning to the new Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration and the nearby *Archie Dieté*. 'Notice', she said, 'the trees planted in the courtyards of each sacred space. The evergreens at the church symbolise to Sakha people life after death. We are used to seeing them near Sakha graves. However, the Russian Orthodox priests probably do not realise what signal they are sending. At the temple, the trees are white birches, symbolising natural renewal, fertility and life in this world.'

Notes

- ¹ I am indebted to Georgetown University, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Yakutsk University, the Academy of Sciences Institute of Languages, Literature and History in Yakutsk (AN IYaLI, *Akademiya Nauk, Institut Yazyki, Literaturny i Istorii*, now the Humanities Studies Institute, *Institut Gumanitarnykh Issledovaniy*), the Sakha Republic Ministry of Culture, and the Kennan Institute of the Smithsonian's Wilson Center for support for fieldwork and/or research. Fieldwork relevant to this paper was begun in 1986 and 1987, continuing periodically from 1991–2003. I am deeply thankful to my Sakha language teacher, Klara Belkin, with whom I began studying in 1983, and to many Sakha friends and colleagues, especially Zinaida Ivanova and the late Vladimir Ivanov for sharing their home, and Anatoli I. Gogolev for bravely hosting me in 1986 and 2003, and guiding me in Vilyuisk in 2002. My fieldwork includes formal and informal ritual participation as well as interviews with rural and urban Sakha, and with Russians of the republic. Friends, colleagues and innocent bystanders of both genders and diverse occupations have generously enabled me to have hundreds of productive conversations since 1986. For more on my approaches, see Balzer, 1996, 2001.
- ² Demographic data from the 2002 census indicate that the Sakha constitute a plurality of about 40 per cent of the population of the republic, with Russians the second-largest group. Unfortunately, accurate data on religious affiliation were not collected in this census.
- ³ See Nikolayev (Ukhkhan), 2001, which includes a letter written by Archbishop German to Mayor Mikhail'chuk (and published without permission).

- ⁴ See Gogolev, 1983, 1993, 2000; Gogolev *et al.*, 1992; Alekseyev, 1984; Afanas'yev (Téris), 1993; and Saiyyna, 2000. My perspective on the *aiyy yeurekhé* programme in the schools comes from fieldwork in several regions, including Srednyaya Kolyma (1994), Abyi (1994, 2000), Kangalas (1997, 2002) and Megino-Kangalas (1993, 1997, 1999). I am grateful to both Anatoli Gogolev and Lazar' Afanas'yev for many conversations. For comparison, see Shnirelman, 1996, on arguments among members of the Volga region intelligentsia.
- ⁵ My perspective on Dmitri Konovich Sivtsev (Suoron Ommollon) comes from conversations with him in 1986 and the early 1990s, as well as discussions with his son, Aisen Doidu, in 2002. For a classic Russian Orthodox view of shamanism, see Troshchansky, 1903; cf. Znamenski, 1999.
- ⁶ The optimistically named Sakha parliament, *Il Tumen*, glosses as 'meeting for agreement'. See also Vinokurova, 1994. For theoretical perspectives on changing politically salient cultural values, see Smith, 1986; Ingelhart, 1997; Chatterjee, 1993; Chatterjee and Jeganathan, 2000; Balzer, Petro and Robertson, 2001.
- ⁷ The quote is from Vera Zvereva-Danilova, a daughter of the renowned epic singer, dancer and showman Sergei Zverev.
- ⁸ In Russian, these centres are *Tsentr traditsionnoi meditsiny* and *Tsentr profilakticheskoi meditsiny i meditsiny sporta*, respectively. The Sakha centre director presiding over this change was a medical doctor, Yuri Prokop'yev, who I interviewed just prior to the change, in 2000. At least two relevant Russian Federation laws superseded legislation passed in the Sakha Republic (*Il Tumen*): the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (*Federal'ny zakon o svobode sovesti i o religioznykh ob'yedineniyakh*), which privileges four 'traditional' religions of Russia, Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism; and a subsequent law on medical practices, which outlaws folk healing without medical education and certification (Aleksandra Konstantinovna Chirkova, personal communication, 2002). See also Chirkova, 2002.
- ⁹ Among the many relevant theorists, compare Hyde, 1998; Lindquist, 2002; Narby and Huxley, 2001; Pentikainen, 1997; Carter, 1996; Siikala and Hoppál, 1992.
- ¹⁰ See Shirokogoroff, 1935. Compare Protopopova, 1999, on Yed'ei (Elder Sister) Dora Kobeikova, and writings of Sakha curers, Kondakov, 1997, 1999; Saiyyna, 2000; Chirkova, 2002.

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