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How words make the world: language materialities and the circulation of the Sakha algys

https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2020-0075
Received April 30, 2020; accepted March 1, 2021;
published online March 19, 2021

Abstract: This article investigates contemporary uses of the Sakha language algys (blessing poems) and reveals the "old" and "new" types of language materiality present in this genre of ritual poetry. Focusing primarily on one example of algys shared online in 2018, I discuss how performing algys has always involved close interconnection between language and the material world and present the changing contexts and forms of algys transmission that highlight both fixity and fluidity in the way speakers conceive of language and materiality. Despite the new mobilities and technologies that build upon the previously established written textual forms of this poetry—and contribute to its continued circulation and transmission—certain elements of traditional algys remains salient for speakers, reinforced by ideologies or ontologies of language that foreground the power of the (spoken) word. This is connected to the production of qualia and the invocation of chronotopes. Thus, while textual forms further enable processes of citationality as they are circulated online; the written words alone do not constitute an algys. Rather, here the importance of embodied, spoken language materiality is at the fore.

Keywords: language materiality; language revitalization; ontologies of language; ritual poetry; Sakha language; verbal art

1 Introduction

Shivering in the 3am chill of the subarctic white night, my friend Noya and I stood in a grassy field waiting for the *kün körsüüte*—the meeting of the sun—to begin. We were there for the Yhyakh, a Sakha 'new year' festival, celebrated around the

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summer solstice to mark the fertility of the Earth and the height of the sun's powers. Several thousand people (and a few horses) milled around with us as a fire was prepared, and as sunrise approached, the *algyschyt* (the blessing maker) began to speak. We felt his words reverberate, aided by a loudspeaker, as the golden disc of the sun crept back up over the horizon: "*Aghys ileekh-saghalaakh ataanaakh-möghüöneekh aan ije dojdum ichchilere*…" They spilled over us as the warmth came back into our faces, and we reached our palms outward to absorb both the words and the returning light. A few days later, as we talked about how my research was going, my friend said, "did you feel it, during the a*lgys* the other night? I really felt his words, what he was saying about our future. The words were like a balm (*kak bal'zam*), they were so calm, and so powerful."

Algys (plural: *algystar*) is often translated as 'blessing'—the Sakha verb stem, '*alghaa-*' usually simply means 'bless'—also carries connotations of "well wishes, blessings, prayers, spells, incantations, [or] hymns" (Alekseev et al. 2003: 16).[1] Spontaneous definitions given by Sakha speakers I have discussed them with tend to focus on how they are conduits for goodwill—they are meant to "put good things into the world." In other words, they shape the world according to a speaker's positive vision. Thus, spurred by friends' comments on their experiences of algys and suggestions to study them further, I also found inspiration from Shankar and Cavanaugh's (2017) approach to "language materiality," an investigation which combines the sensory qualities of language (the affective and the aesthetic) with that of the political economy. In this, I aim to expand the discussion of language materiality by highlighting its chronotopic aspect in relation to the expression of Sakha cosmologies, and engage with the fixity and fluidity that is part of this genre; I also engage with the issues connected to Sakha language revitalization, and the role algystar—and what I call their "old" and "new" materialities—play within this movement.

Over the past several decades since the end of the Soviet era, increased use of Sakha in media (especially popular music and film) as well as the linguistic landscape of the city of Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha Republic has contributed to the revitalized presence of Sakha among speakers in the urban areas as well (see Ferguson 2016, 2019; Ferguson and Sidorova 2018). Nevertheless, for many speakers some anxiety remains concerning the future vitality of the language, especially among recent arrivals from the villages to Yakutsk who often compare the perceived lack of the language in the city to its more vibrant presence in rural spaces, and express stances of concern over the language's future. Recent debates (in 2018) at the Federal level about Sakha language teaching (and whether it can be

1 Efimova (2013) provides a comprehensive overview of the poetics and stylistics of the algys genre.

kept compulsory in the Republics of the Russian Federation) have also had an impact on the perceived persistence and continued renewal of prestige for the language in the city as well; that year many Sakha speakers organized in attempt to convince the Republic's government from supporting "Federal Law No. FZ-273 – On Education in the Russian Federation" as drafted in April 2018.[2] Thus, it is essential to the creation of algys to speak to sociopolitical issues surrounding the presence of Sakha language, which speakers managed to maintain despite the increasing Russification of the Soviet period which devalued the language in many public domains. The reemergence of algys comes as part of revival of Sakha forms of spirituality and new iterations of Sakha identity performance, leading to the intersection of the use of new (material) technologies as part of the written transmission of the genre.

These emergent transformations of Indigenous and minority language into new forms and new media also raise the question of how speakers (re-) negotiate language ideologies, or ontologies of language—beliefs surrounding what language is, and does, in the world (Ferguson 2019)—as entwined with the broader worldviews of their speakers. The agency conferred to the spoken word by many Sakha speakers connects to why it is particularly compelling to look at Indigenous[3] languages and materiality; with many of these languages, even those that have standardized orthographies and decades of written tradition, still primarily being used orally, the question takes on particularly innovative dimensions concerning what these new written and visual modalities mean for the possible futures of these languages. It is not just algys being maintained here, but the Sakha language as a whole; similarly, we see this transformative power of writing and sharing in Faudree's (2013, 2017) work on the transcription and circulation of Mazatec-language Día de los Muertos songs in Oaxaca, Mexico as these acts of both writing (and singing) reify both a musical tradition, and through it, the Mazatec language.

2 The public protests in Yakutsk are discussed here: http://vestiregion.ru/2018/06/08/v-yakutii-vystupili-v-zashhitu-yakutskogo-yazyka/.

3 As Graber (2020: 30) reminds us, "Indigeneity is a vexing concept in Siberia." There are many groups in the Russian Federation who are indigenous to their regions—in the sense of having lived there prior to Russian colonization. However, due to the complexity of historical discourses and also the requirements of being 'small-numbered' (*malochislennyei*) under Russian law to be recognized as Indigenous (*korennye)*, it is not always an identification all Sakha—designated as an 'nationality' will claim for themselves. Sidorova and Rice (2020) discuss the ways in which Sakha people were able to preserve their culture and language under Soviet rule, and that they have engaged in "Indigenous resurgence," though not in those terms, while Hicks (2011) also discusses the ways that discourses of global Indigeneity exist alongside other ethnic identity discourses for many Sakha.

As I argue, the transformation of algys from solely oral to existing in print versions (both on paper and online) is an important support for its vitality within contemporary Sakha-speaking spaces, as textualized versions ensure interpersonal (and critically, intergenerational) transmission of the form. Use of algys in these spheres then contributes to the revitalization and revalorization of Sakha language, affecting the positioning of Sakha speakers and allowing them to reclaim space and reiterate their presence (and the culture that their words index) both online and offline. In other words, the citational power (cf. Nakassis 2012, 2013) of algys is magnified through its circulation in text form—perhaps the most obvious positive consequence of this 'new' language materiality. Nevertheless, it is the oral (*re*)citation of algys that is seen as ultimately essential to its reiteration.[4] By engaging with Harkness's (2015) discussion of the pragmatics of qualia, I reveal connections between the 'old' materiality of a spoken algys and the vital experience of the cosmological chronotopes it may evoke.

The chronotope (Bakhtin 1981), then, is "created across events that occur in different places at different times" (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014: 52), and this is essential for understanding what an algys is, and does, in the world for Sakha speakers. As I will discuss, the chronotopic nature of the spoken algys helps link the past and present to the future that the words envision and aim to bring about in the world; through textual fixity, too, we also see a new chronotope produced within the context of new historical revitalization. I argue that this occurs through the especially citational nature of algys words; citationality, as Nakassis (2012: 626) defines it, is "the property of iterability, the reproducibility of a form, and the norm that governs its intelligibility and producibility, over distinct discursive time–spaces." However, it is that (*re)*citation, in the sense of speaking) over time-space that empowers the performativity of the algys, which resonates as well with Sakha ontologies of language.[5] Through creating somatic poetry (Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy 2012), algys evoke powerful sensory experiences—thus linking the production of qualia to the creation of language materiality. Before delving into the theoretical frameworks further, however, it is important to contextualize the Sakha algys within broader Indigenous and minority language movements in Siberia and Central Asia.

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4 I use the term (re)citation to link this to citationality as discussed by Nakassis (2012, 2013) and the idea of 'citing again', but also to connect to the spoken iterations, or recitations, of algys.

5 Here, I use "ontology of language" as an understanding of how language fits into situated understandings of existence and being in the world (cf. Ferguson 2019). Here "ontology" is, following Watts (2013), a way of thinking that seeks to help us understand how we relate to others as emplaced beings in a relational world. This is also reflected in Hauck and Heurich (2018)'s discussion of multiple 'linguistic natures' rooted in specific cultural contexts encompassing both the human and other-than-human.

1.1 Contextualizing algys revitalization

The revival of the algys genre of ritual poetry is part of a broader project of Sakha spiritual reclamation in the Sakha Republic, in the Russian Federation's Far Northeastern Federal District (see, among others, Balzer 2005, 2012; Peers 2015; Zola 2012, 2017). Movements surrounding the revitalization and maintenance of Sakha language as well as spiritual practices and other cultural traditions that had declined during the Soviet years emerged in the late 1980s and began to take off vigorously in the early 2000s. Sakha, which is currently spoken by as many as 450,000 people primarily in the far northeastern parts of Russia, has a relatively stable speaker population in comparison to the other languages indigenous to the region (e.g. those designated as belonging to northern minority groups, or *korennye malochislennye narody Severa*: Chukchi, Dolgan, Even, Evenki, and Yukaghir) (Vserossiiskii Perepis' Naseleniia 2010). Sakha is still being widely transmitted to children in the home; it is used as the primary language of the public sphere in rural settlements, and has a literary tradition dating back to the first part of the 20th century.

The projects of Sovietization in the former Yakut A.S.S.R. (Argounova-Low 2012; Ferguson 2019; Sidorova and Rice 2020; see also Graber 2020 for a discussion of very similar processes among Buryat speakers) led to the restriction (and at times, outright repression) of Sakha linguistic and cultural practice, which makes the revival of Sakha language—and specific oral genres like algys—of key interest. As Hirsch (2005) and İğmen (2012) have explained, ethnic groups or "nations" within the U.S.S.R. were to be recognized on one hand, but their cultural practices were to ultimately be transformed into vessels for Soviet ideologies and the Russian language. However, in discussing the situation in Kazakhstan, Dubuisson (2017: 13–14) notes that paradoxically, the Soviet focus on the "nation" laid the foundation for a strong post-Soviet nation-building movement; this is also reflective of what is seen in the Sakha case. The re-emergence of the algys genre—as with other Sakha-language poetic forms, like the Olonkho, or epic poem—is part of a broader cultural revival, as mentioned in the introduction. Like those discussed in Turkic-speaking Central Asia, the Olonkho epos has come to be a central symbol of Sakha cultural revitalization, as a way to self-define and revalourize Sakha traditions and history; its recognition as a part of UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2005 solidified its role—both symbolically and practically—in this contemporary process (Andreev 2017; Harris 2017).[6]

6 See Rawut and Anderson (2016) for a discussion of the Uyghur Dastan epic, and Van der Heide (2015) on the Kyrgyz Manas as vehicles for cultural revitalization and symbols of national and/or ethnic revival and pride in other parts of Central Asia.

The Olonkho had indeed been preserved more vigorously throughout the Soviet period than algys and other oral genres as it was reframed to fit the ideological goals of the regime; as Andreev (2017: 21) notes, the complexity and prowess associated with the epic made it a good candidate for "the crowning cultural achievement of the Sakha" which would legitimize Sakha people as a worthy "nation" that could contribute to the art and literature of the U.S.S.R. At that time, the dynamism of the practice decreased as the focus shifted to the documentation and collection of recordings and written texts, rather than as a living oral tradition (Sidorova and Rice 2020). This then led to a new resurgence in the performance of Olonkho in the post-Soviet era and much discussion about the tensions between "authenticity" and popular appeal, and whether a "modern" Olonkho could be created at all and still be Olonkho (Andreev 2017: 43–44). Some of this debate also surfaces around algys as well, as will be discussed later on.

As in Levin's (2019: 35–36) discussion of Tuvan practices of songs and blessings in animate landscapes, the algys as a blessing and offering resonates with many similar practices in other Turkic cultures to the south, w. Similar to Dubuisson's (2017) discussion of how renewed interest and engagement in Kazakh genres such as *aitys* (improvised poetry) and *bata* (blessing wishes) are both about creating national identity as well as engaging with ones' ancestors—and Quijada's (2019) discussion of Buryat shamanistic ritual practice and ancestral reconnection —the algys bridges the public project of ethnic renewal with more intimate practices of engaging with being Sakha. While algys does not invoke personal genealogies as a way to legitimize an ethnic group or state as in Kazakhstan (Dubuisson 2017: 6), it invokes the revalorization of an "ancient" speech genre through instances of re(citation) (cf. Nakassis 2012, 2013).Thus, alongside use of written Sakha, speech genres such as algys, the aforementioned Olonkho as well as *ohuokhai* (round dance; see Crate 2006), are nevertheless essentially interwoven with the politics and practices of both the spiritual and linguistic threads of Sakha cultural revitalization. They also present a key case for understanding the dynamics of how language materiality figures into these social projects of cultural recreation and innovation.

1.1.1 Methodologies

The ethnographic fieldwork for this paper was conducted by the author primarily in 2015 and 2017, in the Republic's capital city of Yakutsk, as well as in the town of Amga and a small settlement in Churapcha *ulus*, in the central region of the Sakha Republic in *Ilin Enger* (the eastern bank, opposite Yakutsk). Semi-structured interviews with six *algyschyt*s ('professional' *algys* ritual specialists) as well as interviews and more informal conversations with 10 other Sakha speakers (none of

them public *algyschyt*s, but those who do perform or create *algys* in less public or professional settings) contributed to the material informing this paper. Since 2010, I had been noticing increased occurrences of *algys* being performed in public spaces in Yakutsk, outside of the expected ritual contexts of *Yhyakh*, the summer solstice celebration and Sakha 'new year' where the blessings have a focal role in the progression of the event. Many friends and research participants in the Sakha Republic confirmed the rising popularity of *algys* and suggested that the aesthetic and affective powers of *algys* made them particularly important to study and document ethnographically, while noting their important role in the revitalization of spiritual practice—and its political implications as well (cf. Balzer 2005). Participant observation in various public performances of *algys (*often at Yhyakh ceremonies, public events in Yakutsk as well as seminars and workshops with *algyschyt*s in Yakutsk, during which listeners were lectured on the form and function of blessings) also shaped this research. Research was also conducted between 2017 and 2020 on various social media spaces frequented by Sakha speakers (primarily forums associated with Ykt.Ru and Dnevnik.Ru, YouTube, Twitter, as well as pages and threads within my own social networks on Vk.com, Facebook and WhatsApp), and online news sites (e.g. the Sakha-language newspaper Kyym, and SakhaLife, an online-only source with articles in both Sakha and Russian). As I am not a native speaker of Sakha, the translation of the *algys* presented in this paper was aided at times by first-language speakers.

1.2 Theorizing language materiality and Sakha accounts of 'spirited' language

The concept of language materiality has been developed through the theorizing of Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014), and Shankar and Cavanaugh (2012, 2017) in particular; they focus on the ways 'words' and 'things' co-exist, and mutually reinforce the power of the other. This body of theory and ethnography has highlighted how power and authenticity in the political economy are linked to language; language interacts with the material realm in that it can come to engage with material circumstances of speakers, add value to other practices and domains, and also be transmitted in new ways through material practices. The case of the algys is a powerful illustration of numerous aspects of language materiality. As a linguistic genre, they certainly are conduits for the ontological power of words, but also may gain further power through associated material processes; here, that power is sociopolitical. While the economic aspects of materiality are not the direct focus of this article, I do examine how the linguistic-material aspects of algys are

linked to power both affectively and in terms of promoting the continued transmission of the genre, as well as Sakha language as a whole.

In discussing language materiality, it is crucial to remember that we are physical and material beings engaged in the production of language (cf. Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy 2012 on 'somatic poetry'); even spoken language, while invisible and seemingly ephemeral, still produces reverberations that echo within our physical reality. This happens literally, of course, in the sense of sound waves, but also figuratively, due to the (less tangible but no less crucial) ontological and ideological powers speakers attribute to words. In many different understandings of the world, without that human voicing, words remain inchoate.[7] It is essential to consider these phenomenological accounts in language materiality: we must account for the physicality or materiality of the speaker and hearer (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017). There is also the question of how language is embodied—through the breath, which becomes a conduit for power, carrying it outward where it can act on all listening beings as well as recursively back upon the speaker (see Faudree 2013, 2017; Siragusa et al. 2020). Voice can manifest in material forms through recordings, texts, etc. but also through the rituals themselves—produced by physical bodies and reverberating out into a space filled with other presences wherein sounds bring about their effects.

Many Sakha speakers talk about a belief in the power of words to create and influence shared worlds due to language being *ichchileekh*, animate or 'with a spirit' (see Ferguson 2016; 2019). Many Sakha speakers mentioned to me in interviews that some words are more *ichchileekh* than others (for example, *kes tyl* – magic words, which can be found in *algys*, the blessing poems discussed here, and in shamanic utterances and songs). Nevertheless, all spoken words possess *ichchi* to some degree; paradoxically, it is that spiritual quality of language that also links it with materiality. Understanding the power afforded words in a speaker's ontology of language is crucial, because of the fact that materiality and power are so closely linked (cf. Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014, 2017)—and the Sakha conception of words and their agency often challenges the notion that the written version of an algys alone confers its power.

Here, then, Harkness's (2015: 574) approach to the pragmatics of qualia can help us make the link concepts of somatic poetry and the power of words. they are "indexes that materialize phenomenally in human activity as sign vehicles reflexively taken to be sensuous instances of abstract qualities." Harkness stresses the intersubjective force of qualia, and here too I want to focus on what speakers and hearers recognize together through their material bodies as they align with a

7 See Course (2012) about similar Mapuche ideas on the power of words; see also Hauck and Heurich (2018).

specific place and time, or chronotopes, that the words evoke. As Harkness (2015: 580) also writes, "qualia can serve as sensuous pivot points in practical human activity," giving Hirschkind's (2006) example of the aural qualia in the Muslim sermons broadcast in Cairo as transmitters of moral and ethical ideals. It is in this way, too, that the words of the algys function when spoken. As words that essentially 'make the world,' they are the nexus, that "pivot point"—at which qualia are produced, allowing the listener to engage with cosmological chronotopes. As Noya mentioned in the conversation introduced at the beginning of the paper, algys can make a "balm"; others I spoke with discussed "lightness" and "brightness," which too are sensory descriptors that capture positive moral qualities as well. A further discussion of these chronotopes will be presented within the context of a specific algys in the next section, after discussing the ritual elements of algys and their contributions to the production of qualia.

2 Defining and situating *algys* and materiality

Algystar (*-tar* being the plural marker) are spoken to honor and receive favor from deities for human and non-human animals, to acknowledge *ichchi* (spirits) of elements and places, and to engage in respectful relationships with these beings while expressing a vision for a peaceful world where relations are harmonious, all receive good fortune, where everything is in its right place.[8] The *algys* is often characterized by Sakha scholars as the one of the most "steady and conservative artistic forms" both in structure and function among all Sakha literary genres (Alekseev et al. 2003: 35; see also Vasil'ev 1965). However, while some of the syntactical structure tends to be quite fixed and use of other literary features like parallelism and verbal formulae are quite common, a good *algys* is created by the speaker, not memorized from a previous text. Some *algyschyt*s, like Gosha,[9] who I met at a small settlement's Yhyakh festivities in Churapcha *ulus*, say their words come to them from *ajylgha* ('nature', literally 'in-creation') which they are merely an interconnected part: a conduit with a voice box. Their human, material form thus gives voice to something more intangible or ephemeral already in existence.

Algys have traditionally been used in rituals marking moments in the life of the individual or the collective more broadly, moments both singular as well as cyclical, both the ceremonial and the everyday. They tend to be associated most

8 In many ways, they strongly resemble the Kazakh *bata*, a blessing described as "a cultural wish, supposed by God, for the younger generation" (Dubuisson 2017:33) that relies upon being spoken and heard by others to fufill its power.

9 All given names are pseudonyms unless otherwise specified.

commonly with rituals at Yhyakh in which the words of the algyschyt or *ürüng oyuun* ('white shaman') in the ritual of meeting/greeting the sunrise (*kün körsüü*), in appeals to the *aan doidu ichchite* (spirit of the place/land), in the blessings to various other deities (Iejiekhsit, etc.) or spirits like *uot ichchite* (fire spirit). There are words to bless the horse herds and their patron deity, D'öhögöj, and the hard work of summer hay-making (*ot ulete*). There are blessings for wedding couples and guests, for births, for the first green grass and leaves on trees in May, for hunters and fishers going into the taiga, and for moving houses, but also for smaller moments of gratitude and asking in daily life—for luck in travel, etc. which are often less explicitly 'religious' than those involving deities. Today in Yakutsk if a new building is being dedicated or a commemorative ornamental serge (horse-hitching post) is being placed in the ground, an algyschyt is more and more likely to be present too; in recent years, I have also witnessed an algys to open an academic conference on epic poetry at the North Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, and an algys to bless a crowd gathering to protest the building of a chemical factory on the banks of the Lena River.

In terms of situating algys socio-politically, it is important to note that Yhyakh was not performed publicly in Yakutsk or large urban centers during the Soviet period (see Crate 2006) though the practice did indeed persist in some of the more remote rural areas.[10] Algys were not experienced very often in public domains due to its spiritual connections and connotations. Nevertheless, many Sakha who grew up during that era mentioned them being spoken by a grandparent or other elder during private familial moments—making an offering to Bajaanaj, the spirit-deity of the hunt before setting off into the taiga or feeding the spirit of fire or the hearth (*uot ichichite*) in the kitchen before a big meal. "It's just something my grandmother did, she'd go over and give the first *alaad'y* (pancake) to the fire, and say a few words, a short algys, but she never drew attention to it," one of my interviewees, Noya, told me. Others reported learning about them in school, but not in an active, performative sense; rather they were presented in the context of belonging to a folkloric genre, which connoted a link to past times, rather than the progressive Soviet present. Certainly, numerous algys were collected by ethnographers during the Soviet era, as evidenced in Alekseev et al.'s (2003) compilation. However, we do not know if they were performed in situ or elicited from their composers out of context. Through folklorization, they became less dynamic—something to learn about or maybe memorize but not actually engage with in more explicitly spiritual ways, at least not in public. Perhaps this was in part due to the fact that the words were indeed seen as powerful, not just for what they refer to, or index

10 One prominent exception to this were the *Yhyakh Sargy* or Victory Yhyakhs held in 1945 to mark the end of the Second World War (Romanova and Ignat'eva 2012).

(a cosmological order, other-than-human forces and beings) but also because despite official Soviet atheism many Sakha still held words themselves to be symbolically potent. They symbolized another ontological order—another fundamentally different understanding of the world—and thus it was something for keeping quiet.

2.1 How algys work upon—and 'make'—the world

Algys is a fairly democratic and accessible genre, in that anyone can compose and voice them; however, algyschyts are the gifted ones who make algys on behalf of the collective, in front of others. It was often stressed to me that while anyone can say an algys—there are some people who are thought to have a particular linguistic talent combined with spiritual power that affords them the position to create and perform them at public events and gatherings. As Kulan, a Sakha *ojuun* (male shaman) explained, while Sakha words themselves hold intrinsic power by virtue of possessing ichchi (spirit), the amount of spiritual power held by the speaker also matters as well.

It is vital here that algys *tyllar* (*algys* words) are related to physical, concrete situations. As they are (re)cited, they also intersect with materiality in that are usually accompanied by a tangible, physical offering.[11] Through the ritual process, words are rhematized (Gal 2013); they become iconized as offerings. Rhematization is what imbues the algys with its power; while involving very different elements than what Calder (2019) discusses regarding linguistic and visual transformations together in creating personae, the process here is similar in that it takes spoken language together with tangible objects, which become more alike each other—as offerings—when presented in concert with one another.

During an algys, *kymys* (fermented mare's milk), *alaad'y* (pancakes) or *salamat* (porridge)—are sprinkled or laid on the Earth with a tendril of white horsehair dipped in butter or offered to the fire, and often accompanied by the burning of herbs and grasses (usually *boghoruoskai ot*, wild thyme, or *üore oto*, mugwort) to produce a fragrant smoke. Traces of these offerings are often encountered by other passersby as they are slowly accepted into the Earth. In terms of qualic similarity, their characteristics are not always obvious, but words all arise from the natural world (*ajylgha*). As Gosha the algyschyt noted, that is the source of algys words, too. The words of an algys, often described as being 'like balm', or affecting brightness, and light, mirror the qualia found in the light airiness of smoke, the

11 For more on words and song as offerings to spirits, see also Levin (2019: 35–37) in the Tuvan context.

bright white colour of kymys, and the mellow golden discs of alaad'y reflecting the sun. And so we see a process of reciprocal indexicality here, as the spoken words along with kymys or alaad'y become not just words or just foods, but offerings; food becomes algys and words become algys when evoked together, reinforcing language materiality. We might say here that words help make the world, but the world also helps to make—or rhematize—those words.

This whole process can be as simple as wandering over to a tree or riverbank and placing your offering with a few whispered words of an algys or burning the herbs on the edge of a hotplate when you have your first meal in your summer kitchen—or as dramatic as those performed at Yhyakh. There, at the rituals marking the height of summer solstice, an algyschyt is preceded by attendants on horseback and accompanied by eight young girls (to represent the eight-sided middle world, or *Orto Doidu*) and 9 young boys (to represent the 9 levels of the upper world, *Üöhee Doidu*) carrying horsehair whips and birch branches. The attendants thus become living manifestations of spirits present within the world. The algyschyt offers food to a crackling bonfire, and sprinkles the ground with kymys, returning a product that originates in the fertility of the land and its beings back to the Earth (Figure 1). By the sprinkling of kymys (accompanied by the offering of words) on the Earth, the speaker engages in another form of reciprocity, working towards creating harmonious material conditions, beautifying and renewing the world.

Figure 1: An algyschyt speaks the words of an algys while feeding the fire, Toloj-Diring, Churapcha ulus, Sakha Republic. June 2015.

In this way, we see how algys is a form of embodied "somatic poetry" or "multimodal art created by listening, feeling, smelling, seeing, and tasting of natural subjectivities, not just those emanating from human speech" (Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy 2012: 23; see also Uzendoski 2008). An algys relies not only the human voice, but also with the engagement of multiple other forces and beings, and their multisensory products: the kymys (and the mares that produced it), the herbs and their bitter-sweet smoke, the firewood and its flames, the attendants with their horsehair whips and birch switches. As in the conception of Amazonian somatic poetry that Uzendoski and Calapucha-Tapuy (2012: 23) develop, in which the words possess "powers [that] are internal rather than external to the art," many Sakha speakers, as the ojuun Kulan stated as quoted above, see language as powerful because within their ontologies of language, words can affect the material world.

As Tambiah (1968: 184) famously wrote when discussing the concept of force, "words exist and are […] agents themselves which establish connections between both man and man and man and the world, and are capable of 'acting' upon them." This is not to assume a particular causal relationship between words and the world, necessarily: like Keane (2005: 433) reminds us, the key to understanding any kind of ritual speech is linking it with performativity. Material aspects of the ritual (such as the food offerings and smoke) serve to bolster the force of the words, and also act as physical transformations or extensions of the iconized words themselves. This all helps speakers to engage with their present physical environment and experience a sense of "cosmological communitas," which allows "people to cross normal social boundaries and emotions and feel a sense of shared connectedness to the subjectivities of their cosmological world" (Uzendowski and Calapacha-Tapuy 2012: 174). Again, this can be linked the intersubjectivity of qualia, and how they are produced through the words of algys. We can explore this further through a close look at the text in the second below.

2.2 Okoneshnikov's algys

Denis Okoneshnikov, a 4th-year veterinary student at the Yakutsk State Agricultural Academy (*Yakutskaia gosudarstvennaia selskokhozaistvennaia akademiia*). Okoneshniko, composed and spoke an algys in honor of his classmates on the Day of Sakha Language and Literature in early 2018, wishing them a smooth and successful trip to Kazakhstan where they would spend a semester on exchange. This text was then published in an online news source, SakhaLife, where it continued to circulate; as of the time of this article's resubmission (February 2021)

it remains on the Internet.[12] The implications of this circulation will be discussed, after a brief analysis of the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of the text in and of itself to examine how the algys's words anchor the speaker and hearer to both the material and metaphysical worlds in which they live. I have provided the original Sakha along with my rough translation into English below:[13]

1	Аҕыс иилээх-саҕалаах	My eight rimmed, eight-sided
2	Атааннаах-мөҥүөннээх	world of strife and worry,
3	Араҕас далбардаах	My sun-yellow hospitable
4	Аан ийэ дойдум	Mother land where
5	Аналлаах туонатыгар	In the very center of the Earth
6	Аҕыс сардаҥалаах	Our eight radiant
7	Аламай маҥан күммүт	Shining white suns
8	Арылыйа тахсыыта	Rise clearly,
9	Устар ууну сомоҕолуур,	Melt ice to water –
10	Утаппыты ханнарар,	It satisfies our thirst,
11	Уостубуту төнүннэрэр,	Refreshes our lips
12	Уолбуту толорор	And fills our boy
13	Уран-уус тылбынан	With an exquisite word
14	Уһун суолга айанныыр	For the long road travelled:
15	Үтүө доҕотторбун	My good friends
16	Үмүөрүччү тутан	Standing brightly,
17	Үтүө тылынан	With a good word
18	Алҕаатаҕым буоллун!	Let me bless you!
19	Сылдьар сырыыгыт	Let your trip
20	Ситиһиилээх буоллун,	Be lucky/fortunate,
21	Айанныыр суолгут	Let the path of your journey
22	Алгыстаах буоллун,	Be blessed,
23	Көтөр кэмҥит	Let your flight
24	Көмүскэллээх буоллун,	Be secure,
25	Тиийэр сиргит	Let your landings
26	Табыллыылаах буолун,	Be successful,
27	Илиҥ өттүгүт	From your front
28	Ибири билбэтин,	You will not know hindrance,

12 The original article can be found here: https://sakhalife.ru/student-yagsha-sochinil-algyis-blagoslovenie/.

13 At the time of submission at the end of April 2020, a native speaker was still checking this translation; it is thus subject to change should it be published! If creating a literary translation, the lines would likely be rearranged in the English but they are provided here in the order they occur in Sakha. Punctuation in the translation has been changed to adhere to English-language conventions.

(continued)

29	Кэлиҥ өттүгүт	From your back
30	Кэбири билбэтин,	You will not know misfortune,
31	Сэттэ Иэйэхсиккит сэргэстэстин	You will go together with our seven Iejekhsits
32	Аҕыс Айыыһыккыт аргыстастыҥ,	You will be accompanied by our eight Ajyyhyts,
33	Санааҕытынан сандааран	With your thoughts you are shining,
34	Ситиһиигитинэн кынаттанан,	With your successes you are flying,
35	Саха буолан сандаарыҥ	Sakha people will beam
36	Ураанхай буолан улуутуйун!	Uraangkhai people will be proud!
37	Дом!	Make it so!

It was not specified in the article where this algys took place, though there is a photo accompanying it of students in the airport; despite a lot of detective work, I was unable to get in contact with Okoneshnikov himself to confirm the details. However, one might assume there was no burning of herbs or horsehair in that environment, and it is hard to know if other (food) offerings were involved—the sound of the words, though, were present.

This algys, despite being very recent, is also very 'classical' algys, in that we can easily trace intertextual references entextualized herein to many older algys as well as other Sakha oral literature (cf. Briggs and Bauman 1992). The first seven lines (Аҕыс иилээх-саҕалаах / Атааннаах-мөҥүөннээх / Айгыр-силик айылгылаах / Арыынан аллар / Араҕас далбардаах / Аан ийэ дойдум / Аналлаах туонатыгар… or *Aghys iileekh-saghalaakh / Ataannaakh-möngüönneekh / Ajgyr-silik ajylgylaakh / Aryynan allar / Araghas dalbardaakh / Aan ije dojdum / Anallaakh tuonatygar* …, 'My eight-rimmed, eight-sided world of worry / Sun-yellow, hospitable motherland / In the very center of the Earth…' use lexical items (common epithets) to position the speaker in a location (their motherland, or homeland, *ije dojdu*) as well as a within a metaphorical and metaphysical understanding of the world. These idioms are circulated through many algys in Olonkho, the Sakha epic poetry genre, and index that Sakha cosmological understanding of space; the words themselves thus index a certain kind of materiality in their links to space and time. The eight-sided world may be metaphorical, but the connection to the sun and Earth are very real and felt by listeners; the 'spirited' words, rhematized (Gal 2013) offerings, are spoken by the algyschyt and manifest the qualia of the cosmological chronotope—emplacing the past in present.

Grammatically, we also see the intersubjectivity of the algys comes through in its deictic references. The speaker and hearers are sometimes united; in lines 7–16, the speaker uses the first-person plural forms; for instance, this can be seen in lines 8–9 "Аҕыс сардаҥалаах / Аламай маҥан күм**мүт** or *Aghys sardangalaakh /*

*Alamaj mangan **kümmüt***" ('Our eight radiant shining suns').[14] These kinds of lines, like the poetic epithets described above, works to establish shared space in a shared physical world. In line 16, the speaker directly addresses the group who is travelling, stating: "Үтүө доҕотторбун" (*Ütüö doghottorbun*, 'my good friends'), and then switches to the second person plural 'you' to direct the rest of his words to his listeners. the use of deictics, with all verbs referring to 'you' (the second person plural), the hearer, presented in active voice. In lines 29–32, "Илиҥ өттүгүт / Ибири билбэтин / Кэлиҥ өттүгүт / Кэбири билбэтин or *Ili**ng** öttügüt / Ibiri bilbet**in** / Keli**ng** öttügüt / Kebiri bilbet**in***" ('From your front / You will not know hindrance / From your back you will not know misfortune') the bodies of the listeners and the space they occupy are sanctified as well, as they "go together" forward on their journey.

Okoneshnikov thus presents the Middle World—full of strife and mortality—as also a space of order and beauty, reflecting how the words of an algys are meant to restore some of the harmony to this fraught space: the repetition of "буоллун" (*buollun* – 'may/let it be'), in the even-numbered lines between 18 and 26, literally 'speak' to attempts to shape a future world and bring it into being—to make a world. It is key that there is a temporal dimension as well, merging with the invocation of spaces to create that chronotope that simultaneously allows the envisioning of the continuity of past and future. The mentions of the "Sakha" people in line 37 index the present and future, while their past is indexed in line 38 through the invocation of the Uraangkhai, a name often given to ancestors of Sakha who lived far to the south near Lake Baikal, thought to be the early homeland of some of their predecessors (Ksenofontov 1992).

Movement arises thus in the spheres of both time and space through these references, emplacing those to whom the algys is directed in a long lineage of algys-listeners (and creators); as mentioned, Okoneshnikov's use of these formulae reveal intertextual connection to other algystar, as well as other pieces of Sakha literature throughout time. Thus, the repetition of these lines reifies a shared metaphorical vision of the world and links speakers and listeners to the continuity of these genres, sealing intertextual gaps and establishing the authenticity and power of the algyschyt and their words—while also invoking the material history in which these texts exist.[15]

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14 This likely references the eight traveling students.

15 The intertextuality here also signals a link to other prestigious (material) texts, such as algystar produced by well-known oral and literary composers. For instance, almost the very same phrasing from this algys also opens "The fishermen's algys" (*Balyksyttar algystara*) attributed to *algyschyt* Semyon P. Sivtsev, Srednekolymskii *ulus* (district), and transcribed in 1946 (Alekseev et al. 2003: 178–180).

3 Writing down the algys

Perhaps it is misleading to call the written forms of algys that are emerging today "new" as algys have been documented in written form long before the Internet facilitated their circulation. Many can be found in the archival materials collected during Sakha ethnologists' research expeditions in the Soviet period; a selection of these algystar also show up in a famous blue book in the well-known series '*Pamyatniki fol'klora narodov sibiri i dal'nego vostoka'* [Collections of Folklore of the Peoples of Siberia and the Far East], entitled "Obriadovaia poeziia Sakha," [Sakha ritual poetry] (Alekseev et al. 2003). Copies of this book show up on many bookshelves in Sakha homes, as within the broader movement to revitalize Sakha *iteghele* (spiritual beliefs) and their accompanying rituals; such collections have also been valuable sources providing glimpses of past practices from over a century ago.

As mentioned, we now find algys produced for new sorts of events and situations, and many more of these algys end up recorded in some fashion to be later transcribed as texts. During my fieldwork in 2015 and 2017 in particular, I saw more available books of algys, as well as algys in magazines, on bus stop advertisements, and even on refrigerator magnets in souvenir shops, but perhaps most significantly online. They are shared in forums, on social media sites from Facebook and VK to Twitter and Instagram, and shared through WhatsApp groups as well. Some of these sites—see, for instance, a page called 'Algys Tyllar' (Algys words) active in 2017 on VK – https://vk.com/publicalgus_tullar – are meant to be solely for sharing algys. Ongoing posts are made by the local Yakutsk men's algys group, "Üs Tümsüü (https://www.instagram.com/ys3_tymsyy/), which organizes weekly meetings for group algys recitation while also maintaining an active social media presence.[16] Figure 2 depicts a post from Üs Tümsüü depicting a Yakutsk bus stop advertisement sponsored by the group that showcases a fragment of an algys. On Instagram, the group's moderators post pictures and videoclips of their rituals and often their texts as well, which are easy to save and circulate across other social media platforms as well as via text messaging and WhatsApp groups.

Searching Sakha Republic-based news sites turns up articles that mention how an algys was made to accompany the opening of new buildings and organizations, or spoken in honour of individuals and their accomplishments; these too often then circulate on social media extensively audiovisual recordings and/or written texts on both official news sources (like Okoneshnikov's on a local news site) as

16 A social organization established in 2017, it focuses on encouraging members' physical, spiritual and psychological health through engaging in sports, eschewing drugs and alcohol, and gathering to recite algystar.

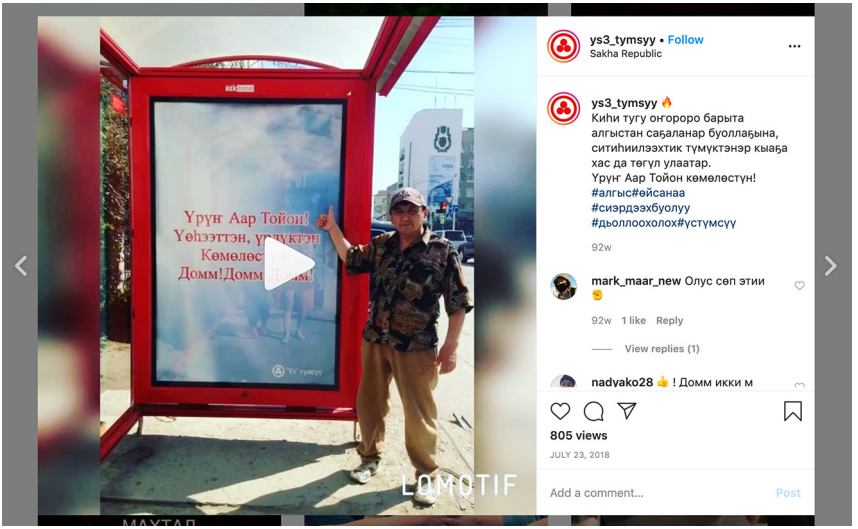

Figure 2: Screenshot of @ys3_tymsyy's post from July 23, 2018, captured on April 21, 2020.

well as on social media. For instance, in 2013, the Olympic torch relay in Russia was met with an algys in Yakutsk, organized by city officials and featuring the words of a well-known algyschyt, accompanied by youths just as at the Yhyakh algys. It was an algys to the spirit (*uot ichchite*) of fire (the torch itself) and also for victory. This piece was publicized first by online news and circulated widely on YouTube and social media. Again, in a sporting related occurrence, an algys spoken by a local citizen—not an algyschyt—gained online popularity and was also broadcast on local news channels. In a video uploaded to YouTube, a well-known local theatre actor, Innokentiy Lukovtsev, offers an algys on the banks of the Lena River; he dedicates the algys to all Sakha athletes competing in the 2016 Summer Olympics.[17] Interestingly, while these video recordings are fairly widely circulated, text-based algys seem to predominate. This seems to be primarily for pragmatic reasons; despite increasing availability of high-speed Internet connections throughout at least the central, more urbanized parts of the Sakha Republic, it is really through cellular phones that many access these photos and texts. Sharing text and smaller images bypasses those potentially expensive hassles of streaming video, and also the expense and logistics of locating purchasing materials.

While there are many highly publicized algys like those circulated by news media, and many groups dedicated exclusively to their sharing and transmission,

17 As of April 2020, a video was no longer publicly available.

you are just as likely to encounter them elsewhere, shared by individuals through the various local forums of Ykt.Ru, or often simply posted on personal accounts as well in amongst selfies and personal photos, and other posts detailing the poster's and their social circle's daily events. WhatsApp groups seemed particularly popular for daily circulation among many people I spoke with over the course of my research; sometimes the algys circulated within these private groups also made their way onto other more public Internet sources, such as one shared by a user I have dubbed Masha; pictured below (see Figure 3) is a screenshot of an algys that her grandmother had originally sent to her on WhatsApp in honour of her grandchild's birthday. The user wrote a caption alongside the image, which was posted in April 2020: "Today I want to brag about my grandmother. She writes an algys every day, but this one is just awesome. What an amazing woman she is, and she loves me so much!"

Reflections from those I interviewed reiterated the recent proliferation of not only the *algys*, but the *algyschyt*: one man I spoke with, Kirill, intended to live his municipal office position to be a full-time *algyschyt,* as he saw rising demand: people were needed to provide *algystar* for weddings and births and anniversaries and public dedications, and of course for every village that hosted their own Yhyakh, too. Yhyakh was noted by many of those I spoke with to be the 'source' for the public revalorization of algys, that really catalyzed its popularity. It inspired many people to start saying them at other major events (weddings, births, etc.), including people who might not have grown up hearing them spoken too often (this was especially true among those who grew up in Yakutsk). Their reappearance in the public sphere was essential to their rising popularity, as many who did not hear them from older relatives and friends growing up were exposed to them there first. Experiencing an *algys* in person—on both the public and private scale—left many people I spoke with affected, moved by experiencing their (re)citational power. However, while there are now multiple public events during which people can be exposed to the algys through their oral, somatic performances, and thus learn firsthand about how they should be composed and performed, their increased written circulation has become undeniably significant in their transmission. As evidenced in the Twitter post from the anonymous user above, many people, like the writer's grandmother, simply make the composing of algys a ritual in their daily lives.

3.1 The power and politics of print

Numerous other scholars have discussed the potency of writing and the written word for ritual and religious purposes (Bacigalupo 2014; Bell 1988, 2009;

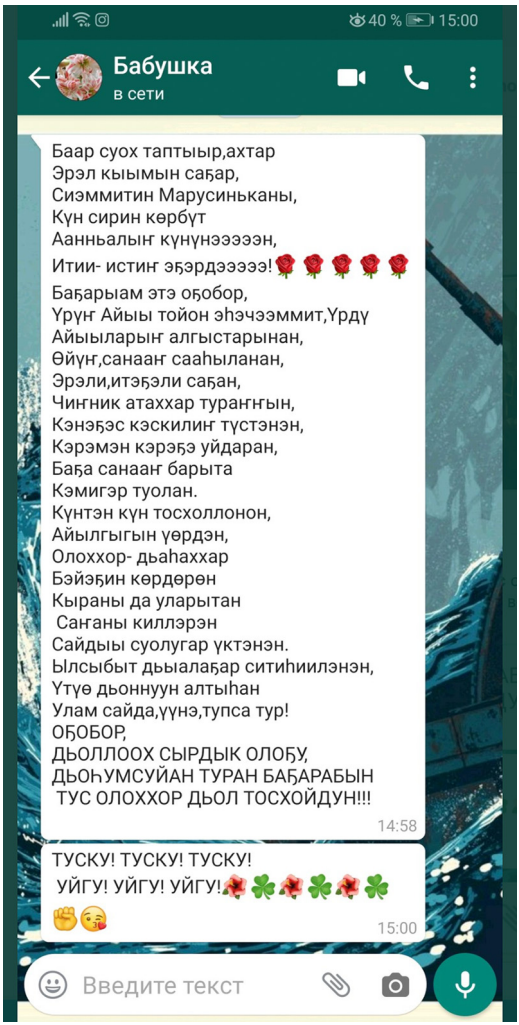

Figure 3: Masha's grandmother's algys, sent via WhatsApp. Screenshot taken April 30, 2020.

Frankfurter 1994; Keane 2013; Knowlton 2015); analyses have focused on the act or process of writing within ritual (see Knowlton 2015 on act of writing votive offerings of text-artefacts to a Guatemalan saint) whereas others focus on the texts, or written products and the power with which they are imbued. As Keane (2013) writes of a process he calls semiotic transduction, "Once divine words are rendered into script, they possess a distinctively material quality and form. They appear on some physical medium, and so are both durable and potentially

destructible." The power of these texts may extend beyond the religious context and into other sociopolitical domains; in Bacigalupo (2014), for instance, she discusses the importance of texts for Mapuche shamans, providing the case study of a shamanic "bible" she was tasked with producing for a woman *machi*. This bible, in being a performative object, would "store and textualize her power, circulate it through time and space, heal, and enable communication between the living and the dead" (Bacigalupo 2014: 648). Despite the fact that the *machi* in question, Francisca Kolipi, was not literate herself, she recognized the power of literacy and how it might be afforded her should she have her 'bible', her oral history of her shamanic life, textualized/written down. Sakha speakers are in a different situation in that virtually all Sakha are literate, in Russian at least if not to the same degree in Sakha (depending on their generation and education – some older (i.e. past middle age) urban Sakha generally not have had as many opportunities to study Sakha literary language, etc. Due to campaigns beginning in the 1920s, literacy became widespread early on during the Soviet period, and thus the written word is much more egalitarian and accessible to all; at present, the literacy rate in the Russian Federation is close to 99.7% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018).

Thus, despite the fact that it is much more commonplace, Sakha discourses about the power of the written word still play into conversations about the value of language. The force of the written word is not necessarily lesser than that of spoken language—rather it is assessed and valued according to other criteria. Some of these discourses are part of the more general and globally prevalent prestige of literacy over orality, and many Sakha indigenize and thus authenticate the history of the written word to pre-Russian times (e.g. to the Old Turkic runic system).[18] Others bypass discussions of runes and stress the fact that even though the Cyrillic alphabet is used, the orthographical innovations adapting it to Sakha phonology were created by a Sakha scholar, Semyon Novgorodov, who vastly improved the earlier Cyrillic version that had been the primary script in use up until the 1920s and 1930s. All this to note that writing is not powerful because it is uncommon in Sakha speakers' lives, but rather it is powerful for what it can do within the global sphere, partly in terms of bestowing prestige and legitimacy on the language and also what it can do for easing the continuous transmission of not only the Sakha language in general but for oral literary genres like *algys*. Thus, the power of a textualized algys is not in the production of the text nor the text itself, but in the durability produced through its "semiotic transduction" (cf. Keane 2013) and its

18 There is much popular debate about whether, or for how long, the ancestors of contemporary Sakha speakers ever used the Old Turkic runes. This reveals remnants of influence from Soviet ideologies about the hierarchies of language and culture (see Grenoble 2003).

new potentialities for reproduction and transmission. In other words, writing permits the furthered citationality (Nakassis 2012, 2013)—it enables the performative algys to once again be (re)cited.

While we do not see the fetishization of the written word with algys, older textual sources of algys do seem to carry a certain cachet of cultural and sociolinguistic authenticity (see Coupland 2003) that perhaps newer algys that circulate online do not always have. Several professional *algyschyt*s I spoke with stressed the importance of going to the "oldest sources"—the written texts dating to the late 1800s—if one were seriously going to learn to write their own algys, especially if they planned to speak them publicly. The question of appropriateness was also necessarily brought up in the context of sharing. A private algys, for example, would be more inappropriate to share (and record in the first place), because those words were being directed more specifically to those people's personal concerns; however, sharing the messages for Sakha athletic victory or sentiments for the greater living world at Yhyakh should, by nature of their subject matter, be disseminated widely so as to let the words reverberate further and more frequently and "spread the message." Sharing an algys to a spirit (e.g. Bajanaj, or uot ichchite) was seen by the majority as helpful because of the didactic aspect of reminding and instructing people how they might engage with algys—and creating them—on their daily lives.

Many recently developed resources are meant to teach or socialize the reader into the algys ritual; the Sakha-language publishing house Bichik (Petrov and Stepanova 2016), for instance, has produced an algys "kit" entitled "Algystan, archylan!" or 'Bless, purify!' with a subtitle "*Olokh, bary tügenneriger*" ('For all moments in life') (see Figure 4). In a small box of reinforced cardboard emblazoned with a birchbark pattern, one finds seven tiny books with collections of algys (drawing upon numerous previously published blessings from the 1890s onward) dedicated to all manner of commemorations and moods: Yhyakh, Weddings (*Uruu*), Well-wishing (*Syrdyk Sanaa*), (Hunting (*Bult-alt*), For Youth (*Oghogho-Ychchakka)*, Everyday Life (*Olokh-d'ahakh*) and Various Rituals and Customs (*Siertuom*). Inside the box one also finds a small pinewood bowl in which a tiny bag of various dried herbs and strands of horsehair are nestled, so that all necessary supplies for properly making an *algys* are easily at hand—thus underscoring the importance of engaging with other material objects in the act of speaking an algys.

From those I interviewed, different perspectives on if, or how, a word retained its power when written also arose, entwined with discussions of authenticity and appropriateness, as well as metaphysical and ontological discussions about the nature of language. The "new" materiality of written algys was not condemned outright by anyone I spoke with—neither public/professional algyschyts, nor listeners or creating them for use in their daily lives and to share within their social

Figure 4: Photo of algys box set published by Bichik (Petrov and Stepanova 2016).

networks. Furthermore, as mentioned by some algyschyts, there is certainly a kind of prestige vested in written algys, as those that are commonly published on paper or entextualized online are often by well-known contemporary algyschyts or are very old—thus having the authenticating power of antiquity (see Coupland 2003). Thus, fixity was a valued characteristic in some aspects.

This "newer" written materiality didn't necessarily make the algys less powerful—it simply afforded them a novel kind of power, in that it collected them for posterity but allowed them to travel through the world in a new form and reach new listeners. In short, the books of algys and their authors don't necessarily take on the power themselves, becoming bolsters for speakers' authority (see Keane 1997)—rather their real power lies in the way that they enable the circulation of the algys form. The texts are not offerings, but rather foster the further citationality of the words within them, a means but not an end. Their power is pedagogical—the more algys a person encounters and reads, or hears, the more familiar they become with the nuances form, and the more likely they are to develop the ability to compose their own, ensuring the continuity of the tradition through (re)citation.

As several algyschyttar I spoke with emphasized, texts of algystar are not for memorization but rather for inspiration for the speaker—in short, they are only part of the algys. Ultimately, as the algyschyt, Gosha, remarked, one needs to connect with ajylgha (nature, creation) itself to make a "real" algys. This link, channeled through the material ritual actions of making offerings both physically and verbally, is a way of transforming the materiality of creation into words, and back again. As another interviewee mentioned, a person could certainly read out an

algys from a book; even better, they could do while burning the included wild thyme and/or offering salamat from the wooden dish from their Bichik algys kit, but ideally, it was anticipated they would learn from the published algys to then compose. The power of printed algys then lay primarily in their expediency to help you shape your own words so that you too, might channel your own immaterial inspiration (words and thoughts from ajylgha) into algys form—and shape the way you then share them with the world.

The language materiality of written algys allows for posterity, and might allow an algys to move further, faster, and find new life beyond its original performed context—however, in gaining this "new" materiality, the language materiality produced through the act of offering one's words also temporarily silenced. Being written and possessing that associated materiality might not strip words of all their power, but it does also remove the immediacy (and the full 'animacy') of their sounds—and the spirit (ichchi) of language embodied within them—that is developed in the 'traditional' ritual contexts that feature this somatic poetry. Thus, the power of these circulated written *algystar* is not necessarily authoritative in and of itself, even if writing is viewed as prestigious. Writing here is powerful in that it is pragmatic, but it does not contain the fullness of the (re)cited word, nor can it produce the qualia that words offer.

4 Concluding thoughts

By tracing the words of Okoneshnikov's algys, we have seen how algys tyllar—these rhematic offerings and their multisensory somatic poetry—conjure the qualia of cosmological chronotopes: a palpable sense of warm balm, of brightness, of lightness. Within the algys ritual, words and objects together become iconized as offerings, manifesting language materiality; they anchor the speaker and hearers in time and place, linking past and present (re)citations, while also seeking to affect the materiality of the future. This, I argue, is a compelling reminder to incorporate such notions of pragmatics of qualia (Harkness 2015) and rhematicization (Calder 2019; Gal 2013) into understanding how Indigenous oral language materialities come to be conceptualized—especially since they resonate well here with Sakha ontologies of language as spirited, agentive, and entwined with the material world.

It is also essential to acknowledge the ways that the words of an algys gain another layer of materiality through processes of transcription and circulation; this may solidify and increase their power in that this is an essential step in the continuation of the genre and its transmission to others in a highly literate, globalizing society. Nevertheless, deeply held ontologies about the intrinsic power

of the spoken word and its spirit of language, tyl ichchite, seem to ensure for many Sakha speakers that the associated multisensory practice of speaking algystar will not be abandoned anytime soon, and that many will take inspiration from existing algystar in order to make offerings and use their words to open up these positive future worlds. Therefore, the 'new' materialities of the written algys—which positively affects the political economy of language within the linguistic ecologies that inform Sakha language usage—can coexist with the 'old' materialities of the spoken word that also continuing to link speakers and hearers to those cosmological chronotopes and their associated sense of belonging.

To conclude I present a text-based tweet, in which a user I am calling Sardana recalls a conversation with her mother (see Figure 5).[19] To summarize, she mentions that her mother brought up that her friend was an algyschyt, and Sardana reports that she replied something to the effect of "cool, let's go to the city together to see her." Her mother then responded that her friend had already done the algys for her using the WhatsApp voice feature, and Sardana laughs, marveling at this technological shortcut: "fuck, it's the 21st century, [look] at what can you do!" She then follows it with another tweet, noting that her mother had asked her the night before to take a photo of her from the front and back, so that her algyschyt friend could look at her while saying the algys, directing herbal smoke toward her and "purify her through the photo." Neither Sardana (nor her mother) specified why the algys could not be done via video synchronously, but nevertheless, Sardana (and I) were fascinated and amused by the approximation of presence that was being produced here, and the ways in which the mobile phone app was being used to go beyond sharing the written text and incorporate the essential (re)citation of the words and partially transmit the multisensory experience into this novel iteration of experiencing algys.

It is yet another reminder of how words and their power are endlessly fluid, transformable and transformative. We see "new" forms of materiality can produce new value for a language, while also revalorize older meanings and assessments of language. The real-time enactions of making an algys via photo proxy on WhatsApp is perhaps a perfect example of the "emergent vitalities" (Perley 2011, 2013; see also Davis 2018) of a minority language, and a promising sign of its continuing transmission and existence in the world. Together with the oral poetry of other post-Soviet societies (see Dubuisson 2017; Van der Heide 2015, among others), algys is a nexus for the reiterations and (re)citations of a shared identity that draws upon past and present negotiations of these genres. In these ways, the words of an algys can be seen to shape the world, both as spoken offerings but also through the

19 In a final example, I want to draw attention to an example unearthed in a routine search for "algys", "algystar" and "algyschyt" on Twitter (see Figure 5).

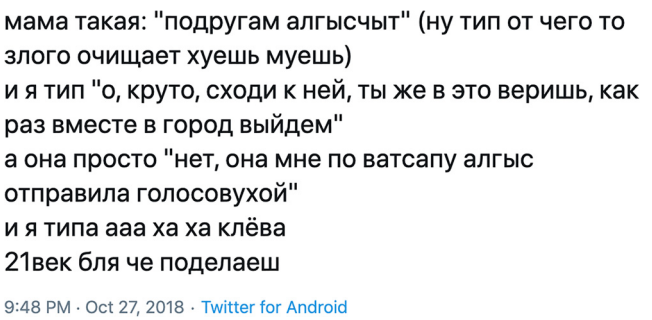

Figure 5: Screenshot of a Tweet discussing a "virtual" algys on WhatsApp, taken by author April 2020.

material media of their new transmission, which reinforce some of the means enabling language survivance (Vizenor 2008; Wyman 2012). In turn, this may also contribute to language revalorization and the revitalization of both Sakha language and culture, thus fulfilling the words of many of these algys that call for a brighter future for Sakha speakers.

Acknowledgments: I am deeply grateful to all of my Sakha-speaking friends and research consultants, many of whom have helped me not only with Sakha language study but have also encouraged me to study algys and understand the role that they play in the Sakha culture currently. In particular, I thank Lena Sidorova and Oleg Sidorov for their thoughts and support on this project and for sharing many useful references and introducing me to many algyschyts, who I also thank for their time and willingness to reflect on their creative and spiritual practices. Many thanks to Laura Siragusa for the invitation to speak at the seminar "The Materiality of Indigenous Languages: Co-Creating Landscapes" in Helsinki in June 2018 and for her helpful comments on early drafts; comments and questions from seminar participants also helped to shape the development of this article. I also sincerely thank the anonymous reviewer(s) who provided generous encouragement to push my arguments further and excellent suggestions on further literature to better situate the ideas I present here.

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