

Checking in on Sakha Studies

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In going over submissions to *Sibirica* at the beginning of 2021, I found several articles related to culture and history in the Sakha Republic. Naturally, I thought it would be illuminating to bring them together to see how they might complement each other. Although this is not a typical special issue with a planned overarching theme, I found that these articles are not only geographically united but subtly reflective of broad underlying concerns—the revitalization and continuity of culture, and the agency of minoritized and indigenous peoples in striving for self-definition and survival. This issue is a way of “checking in” on the state of some of the diverse scholarly work happening in and on Sakha (Yakutia) in recent months and years—from the perspectives of researchers in anthropology, literary studies, history, and art history and criticism.

The issue opens with the article by Zoia Tarasova, who seeks to interrogate two key anthropological concerns—issues of gender ideologies and roles alongside those of migration, which are highly relevant across the Circumpolar region. She engages with the so-called post-Soviet masculinity crisis through research with Sakha men regarding their anxieties and insecurities over contemporary gender roles and ideologies in their communities. These concerns are spurred on by the men’s own comparisons of themselves and their cultural ideologies and practices to those of incoming migrants to the Sakha Republic, primarily those from Central Asia. In response to this, many Sakha men are turning to culturally specific images of “warrior” masculinity and revitalizing both physical and spiritual practices to negotiate these concerns of self-actualization. This article, in its sensitive approach to these anxieties, is a valuable ethnographic and theoretical contribution to work on shifting interpretations of gender in an understudied region and broadly adds to our understanding of the revitalization and reclamation processes ongoing in Sakha culture.

Aleksandr Korobeinikov and Egor Antonov’s piece—still engaging with issues central to culture and agency—takes us back in time to reflect on the work of Sakha intellectuals in articulating regional autonomy in



the early years of the USSR at the critical postimperial moment. As the authors argue, it was not only the Bolsheviks who contributed to the development of regional autonomy in the postrevolution years but also local intelligentsia who set many of these processes in motion. In the late days of the Russian Empire, a group of Sakha political actors consolidated over concerns around land and lack of representation in the political sphere, as well as cultural and linguistic continuity of the Sakha people. Many of the names mentioned here (Aleksei Kulakovskii, Gavriil Ksenofontov, Nikiforov-Kulumnur, among others) will be familiar to anyone who researches politics, history, and culture in the Sakha Republic. In addition, this article provides a comprehensive overview of these individuals' work for those unfamiliar with the Sakha regional context and argues for their central role in constructing local autonomy.

Natalya Khokholova brings us back to the present with her article on being "lost and found," which highlights the narratives of two girls—Karina Chikitova and Kerecheene Tuprina—whose stories captured the attention and imagination of many citizens of the region (and of the world) in the last seven years. These stories, Khokholova argues, are not only indicative of personal tragedy and triumph but illuminate many of the societal and infrastructural shortcomings that citizens, particularly members of the *korennyye malochislennyye narody Severa* (indigenous minority peoples of the North) face in their communities across Siberia. The author also addresses the power of the state by connecting these narratives of lost and found children in the Republic of Sakha (Iakutiia) to concerns about the metaphorical positioning of the region as a "neglected child" of the Russian federal government. Alluding to colonial discourses around civilizing "wild" lands and peoples, she reveals the ways these ideas continue to marginalize individuals and their communities, leading to individuals being "lost" on multiple levels. Perhaps, most compellingly, she reveals the importance of these stories as modern myths that demonstrate resilience and resistance with their happy endings, connecting these girls to their indigenous heritage in a positive way and allowing those who hear the stories to better grasp the hardships and actualities of northern indigenous lives.

We end the issue with an extended report on the historical development and current practices of Sakha bone and ivory carving. Little has been written detailing the specific origins and evolution of styles of the mammoth tusk (and other animal bone and antler) carving in English, and so this piece by Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova and Liubov Alekseeva is a valuable contribution for art historians. The use of mammoth tusk in particular as a carving material is not as ancient as often presumed,

as folklore around mythic ideas of the mammoth in many regions of Siberia (in Sakha: *uu oghuha*; lit. the “bull of icy waters”) discouraged people from taking the mammoth remains for use. Attitudes shifted around two hundred years ago, and Sakha carving styles, first practiced on the bones of cattle and horses, were applied to mammoth ivory. Influences in carving styles came from various regions of North Russia, yet over time developed under various pressures and circumstances into a uniquely Sakha style. Accompanied by striking images that capture the styles and trends discussed in the piece, Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva detail the longevity and dynamism of folk art styles and the ways different artists have shaped what is seen today in the Sakha carving world.

Whether through artistic creation, storytelling, political movements, or the ideologies of gender in everyday life, we can see here multiple similar threads of transformation and negotiation woven into the case studies in the articles in this volume. Each is a small piece that helps us better grasp the ways people in the Sakha Republic have been defining—and seeking to redefine—their agency and both individual and cultural personhood in the face of dynamic influences relevant to Siberia and the Circumpolar North as a whole.