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The Social and Symbolic Construction of Alaas Landscapes in the Siberian Forest among the Sakha

TAKAKURA Hiroki

Introduction

The issue of land in a sociocultural context is still an important enigma in Siberian anthropological studies. It is certain that the private property system was legally established following the collapse of the Soviet socialist regime, but land, particularly production land including forests and fields, remains somehow under the former ways of the regime. It enables local administrations to treat various matters at their own discretion. Oil and gas development launched more than a decade ago through state sponsorship strengthens this tendency. These institutional settings rather create these underlying complex social factors. The most important social space among the Siberian indigenous peoples overlaps these spheres of production land and mining, being strongly associated with their traditional cultures, economies, and identities. Here, I would like to examine the land property issue of the Siberian indigenous peoples in terms of the sociocultural context. My intention is to show the cultural richness in how the people relate with and manage their land or ordinary Siberian forest and grassland despite drastic institutional changes.

As the word "property" in an anthropological sense indicates "the symbolic as well as the material contexts within which things are recognized and personal as well as collective identities made,"[1] what we have to do is to view past privatization through this conceptual framework of property, and to uncover the hidden social and cultural processes between people. As a matter of fact, land is not a simple commodity, and one should take special note of it separately from other objects of privatization. Anthropologist Chris Hann states that under the rule of the collective/state farm system, land in rural areas was held collectively or owned legally by the government; however, "households had a guaranteed right to a private plot for subsistence production." They had the right to the exclusive use of plots but not to the sale of crops grown there. "The collective farm, in addition to functioning as an institution of state power, also served as the vehicle of an older moral community."[2] From the above, we can fix the question of land property relations as an issue of privatization,

1 Chris Hann, "Introduction: The Embeddedness of Property," in Chris Hann, ed., *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5.

2 Hann, "Introduction," p. 19.

that is, how it transformed the combination of private use rights for subsistence while ownership remained in the hands of the collective or state farm that served as a moral community. While I present institutional changes at the macro and micro levels, I would like to explore the relationships between people and land that I have observed firsthand.

Recent anthropological discussions on landscape hint at the concept of land being more complex than it appears, and that we must accept it in both symbolic and material contexts for a better understanding. They have stressed the dynamic and historical nature of "landscape" as a cultural construct. Many scholars now combine studies of the character of the physical environment from more socially and symbolically oriented perspectives in order to explore the role of subjectivity and practical involvement in constructing and transforming cultural landscapes.[3] Ingold explained the concept of "task" embedded in land.

> I shall adopt the term "task" defined as any practical operation, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment...Every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together...It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer to by the concept of taskscape.[4]

He continues by explaining that this "taskscape exists not just as activity but as interactivity" and that the domain of interactivity is not confined to human beings.[5] What we can do is to present some perspectives of inquiry to understand the relationship between land and people: the ensemble of tasks performed on the land and the interactivity between people or humans and non-humans (spirits and animals).

This paper will develop a historical focus on the material and symbolic contexts in which land is recognized and personal/collective identities are made. I will take the case of the small Sakha rural community in Central Yakutia, particularly their collective hay making and various ways of categorizing the land, to consider the changing relations with the land, taking account of the historical context of their sociocultural transformation.[6]

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3 Eric Hirsch, "Landscape: Between Place and Space," in Eric Hirsch, and Michael O'Hanlon, eds., *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1–30; Barbara Bender, "Time and Landscape," *Current Anthropology* 43 (supplement) (2002), pp. 103–112; P. Jordan, *Material Culture and Sacred Landscape: The Anthropology of the Siberian Khanty* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2003).

4 Tim Ingold, "The Temporality of the Landscape," *World Archaeology* 25:2 (1993), p. 158.

5 Ingold, "The Temporality," p. 163.

6 The ethnographic field data, which I use in this paper, was observed and gathered in some villages of the Megin-Khangalas and Khangalas districts in the Sakha Republic in the Russian Federation during 1999–2006.

Sakha Society and the Alaas Landscape

The Sakha are the northernmost Turkic people and their ethnohistorical origins are rooted in the southern steppe region. They gradually migrated north into their current geographical distribution from the ninth and tenth centuries, which was relatively later than the movement of other indigenous peoples in Eastern Siberia. A long-continued, close sociocultural relationship with the local populations and the environment caused the Sakha culture to transform so that it became similar to other local cultures. Their traditional worldview and beliefs are shamanist like other Tungusic, Mongolian, and Turkic peoples in Siberia and Central Eurasia. The northern Sakha also adopted reindeer husbandry from the neighboring peoples such as the Evenkis, Evens, and Yukaghirs.

On the other hand, the ethnohistorical background of the Sakha culture makes it remarkably different from those of the neighboring peoples. One of the prominent differences is in their subsistence economies: horse and cattle husbandry and their related hay making.[7] The patrilineal clan is the traditional social organization, which is also seen in other local groups, but the difference lies in the hierarchical relations, ranging from prince (*Toyon*) to slave, that were embedded in the social structure before Russian colonization.[8]

The geographical area of the Sakha Republic or Yakutia is well known for its severe continental climate and long winters. The average monthly temperature of Yakutsk, the capital city of the Sakha Republic, during December and January is around minus forty degrees centigrade. It is relatively dry in all seasons as seen from the average 236.9 mm of annual precipitation. In particular, it has very low rainfall in winter. More than 40 percent of the territory of the Sakha Republic is in the Arctic Circle, and almost all parts are covered with permafrost. Even though there is only a small amount of annual precipitation (about the same as that of Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia — a typical dry steppe climate), the permafrost makes it possible for approximately 80 percent of Yakutia to be covered in taiga, a coniferous forest zone in which larch and white birch grow. In addition, there are more than a thousand kilometers of great rivers such as the Lena, the Vilyui, and the Kolyma.

One unusual feature of the land can easily be recognized if one looks down through the window of a plane onto the middle basin of the Lena River or Central Yakutia. From there, one can see a myriad of depressions in the surface of the forest known as *alaas*, or thermokarst topography in geological terms. More concretely, an alaas, a typical landform feature in the central part of Yakutia, is a small lake surrounded by a circular meadow enclosed by forest

7 This feature is typically seen in the middle basin of Lena river or Central Yakutia. The traditional subsistence activity of Sakha people varies according to the ecological and historical conditions.

8 A. A. Borisov, *Iakutskie ulusy v epokhy Tygyna* (Yakutsk: Bichik, 1997), Chap. 1.

Photo 1. Typical landscape of the alaas [near the Abaga village in Amga District, 29 July 1999]

(photo 1). Alaas topography starts to form when the surface ground increases in temperature due to, for example, the decay of fallen trees, causing the surrounding permafrost to melt.[9] One of the Sakha's traditional proverbs narrates the importance of the alaas, with their lakes, for their livelihood: "We have lakes as there are stars in the sky; the lakes satisfy everyone." The grasslands and lakes bring affluence to the people.[10] The Sakha people depend on these alaas, other river terraces, and valleys[11] for their settlements and livelihood, which is mainly horse and cattle husbandry requiring the alaas grasslands for pasture.

The Sakha are a semi-nomadic people who travel between permanent housing (*yal*) at summer settlements and winter settlements. The distance between the summer settlements (*saiylyk*) and the winter settlements (*kystyk*) ranges from a few to ten or more kilometers. The summer settlement has a higher population than the winter one. The former consists of five or six homesteads (*d'ie*), while the latter consists of only a few homesteads. The scattered

9 Shinji Saito, *Tsundora to taiga no sekai: siberia no sizen to genshibunka* [World of Tundra and Taiga: Siberian nature and primitive culture] (Kyoto: Tsizinsyobo, 1985); Bella B Jordan and Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *Siberian Village: Land and Life in the Sakha Republic* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 30–31; Susan Crate, *Cows, Kin, and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability* (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2006), pp. 9–11.

10 M. V. Khabarova, *Narodnoe iskustvo iakutii*, (Yakutsk: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhnik RSFSR," 1981), p. 5.

11 There are three well-known large river valleys in Central Yakutia: Enseli in the Nam district, Erkeeni in the Khangal district, and Tuimaada in Yakutsk. The Tuimaada Valley is associated with the myths of Sakha's ethnic origin.

nature of the settlements is due to ecological and subsistence constraints. The reason for the higher population in the summer settlements may be explained by the necessity of a collective workforce for hay making. The members of the patrilineal clan (*agga-uuha*) tend to live together in the same settlements.[12]

The alaas or rivers mark off the settlements and the areas of livelihood. There is a myriad of alaas depressions in the forest, and each has grassland that can be used for settlement, pasture, meadow or, more recently, agriculture. The population engages in fishing the lake within the alaas and sometimes embarks on hunting outside the grassland in the forest. The grassland with its surrounding forest offers the population the possibility of multiple resources. Logically, when a settlement group uses one alaas for residence, it would use the next alaas through the forest for pasture and another nearby alaas as meadowland.[13] According to a land survey in 1917, the proportion of cultivated land to meadow for hay making in Yakutia was 18 to 82.[14] This figure shows the importance of hay making in their life.

Mr. N. S. Borisov, who was born in 1894 and lived in a winter settlement called Aryylaakh in the Megin Ulus (District), offers us a historical case of the settlement pattern of a Sakha person in the early twentieth century. He had a meadow plot for hay making enclosed by a fence (*kürüö*), which was located close to the Aryylaakh alaas. He also had two other meadows, one located 0.25 km away and the other 13 km from the winter settlement. His summer settlement was approximately 3 km from the winter one. There was another field for agriculture called Kiutiu-Kel'. The Borisov family usually moved their summer homestead in early June to engage in hay making from the middle of June to the end of August, and then went back to the winter settlement in early September. The hay was stored as hayricks in each alaas and, according to necessity, they brought it into the winter settlement.[15] In principle, the people used hay to feed the cattle in winter, but sometimes they also fed it to dams and calves/foals after birth and to riding horses. A basic homestead consisted of a house (*balaggan*), cattle shed (*khoton*), and a pen. The Sakha raised cattle inside the homestead but horses were raised in a different way: they were managed under the annual free-range system.[16]

12 S. Tokarev, and I. Gurvich, "The Yakuts," in M. G. Levin, and L. P. Potapov, eds., *The Peoples of Siberia* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 243–304; F. M. Zykov, *Poseleniia zhilishcha i khoziaistvennye postroiki iakutov* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1986), p. 13–18.

13 E. N. Fedorova, *Naselenie Iakutii: proshloe i nastoiashchee* (Novosibirsk: Nauka,1998), p. 31.

14 T. A. Torgovkina, ed., *Yakutiia XX vek v zerkale statistike: ofitsial'noe izdanie* (Yakutsk: Sakhapoligrafizdat, 2001), p. 125.

15 Zykov, *Poseleniia zhilishcha*, pp. 13–14.

16 Hiroki Takakura, "An Institutionalised Human-animal Relationship and the Aftermath: a Reproduction Process of Horse-bands and Husbandry in Northern Yakutia, Siberia," *Human Ecology* 30:1 (2002), pp. 1–19; H. Takakura, "Horse Husbandry and Absentee Livestock Ownership in the Sakha: Horse Trust Relationship and the Current Socioeconomic Transitions," in Hiroki Takakura, ed., *Indigenous Ecological Practices and Cultural Tradi-*

Hay Making in Historical and Political Contexts

I will now focus on the changing relationships with the land over a three-hundred-year period that saw the transformation from a horse-based economy to one based on cattle. In the seventeenth century, the Sakha are described as "horse people" but by the end of the nineteenth century, they kept more cattle than horses. However, the horse never lost its symbolic value: the Sakha still retain the idea of the horse as a symbol of wealth and of religious belief:[17] "In the old days, the Sakha did not work, nor did they mow hay; instead they all wandered from place to place in order to look for feed for the horse herds."[18]

In order to understand the switch to cattle husbandry as the major subsistence activity, we need to explore the changing role of hay making in the ethnohistory of the Sakha. Whilst horses can range freely and require little human intervention, cattle are more dependent in these landscapes and require stores of fodder in order to survive the severe winters. Tracking these general economic changes — particularly the changing role of hay making — illuminates the profound changes in the social and symbolic relationships linking Sakha communities and the landscape.

Increased keeping of cattle required more hay and larger plots, but also reduction in mobility. There is no description of large-scale hay making in the Russian records from the seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries,[19] and it is certain that the rise of hay making was part of a more general transformation in social organization and land ownership relations at a time of increasing Sakha entanglement in Russian colonial administrative policies.

The changing role of hay making can be contextualized within wider changes in land-holding policies in Yakutia. In 1649, the tsarist government declared that all land in Siberia belonged to the government and banned any transactions between in-comer Russians and natives (who were obliged to pay *yasak* (fur tax)). After a century, the government tried again to ban any land transactions and to establish communal rights to meadows for the indigenous populations in a legal sense. The first yasak committee promoted these policies during the 1760s and the committee even compiled a list of meadows.[20]

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tions in Yakutia: History, Ethnography and Politics (Northeast Asian Studies Series 6, Sendai: CNEAS, Tohoku University, 2003), pp. 121–148; Hiroki Takakura, "The Concept of Manhood in Post-Socialist Siberia: The Sakha Father as a Wise Hunter and a Pastoralist," *Siberica* 8:1(2009), pp. 45–67.

17 Emilie Maj, "The Horse of Sakha: Ethnic Symbol in Post-Communist Sakha Republic (Yakutiia)," *Sibirica* 8:1(2009), pp. 68–74; V. L. Seroshevskii, *Iakuty: opyty etnograficheskogo issledovaniia* (Moskva: POSSPEN, 1993 [1896]), pp. 251–261; Tokarev and Gurvich, "The Yakuts," p. 248.

18 Seroshevskii, *Iakuty,* p. 258.

19 Seroshevskii, *Iakuty*, pp. 261–264; Tokarev and Gurvich, "The Yakuts," p. 248.

20 V. F. Ivanov, *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie otnosheniia v Iakutii, konets XVII-nachalo XIX v.* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1992), pp. 52–67; IYaA, *Istoriia Iakutskoi ASSR, tom II, Iakutsiia ot 1630-kh do 1917 g.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1957), p. 92.

The yasak committee, further, introduced the system of land distribution according to the fur tax. This system had each Sakha community (*nasleg*) allot meadowland to any person more than eighteen years old who paid the fur tax. When a person became too old to hunt and pay the fur tax, his name was deleted from the list of taxpayers and his meadowland was redistributed to others. This periodic redistribution system of meadows started from the end of the eighteenth century. The *Toyon*, who were connected to the colonial administration, enforced this distribution arrangement, which resulted in their holding meadowland superior both in quality and in quantity. Later, the government tried to stop this tendency through policies such as the Speransky Siberian administrative reforms and a second yasak committee during the early nineteenth century, but they could not overturn it.[21]

It is interesting that this periodic redistribution system was embedded into their sociocultural context from the early nineteenth century. The Sakha people evaluated the plot (*ölbüge*) according to its production ability and the number of haystacks (*kürüö*) that could be accumulated from a given plot, which varied from ten to sixty cartloads. The number of haystacks came to reflect the wealth and status of the plot owners. The *Toyon* usually had good-quality meadows. An interesting custom functioned as an equalizing mechanism in the redistribution of wealth among the rural communities from the latter half of the nineteenth century. This custom was called *bebierke* (in an etymological sense, this word is derived from the Russian word *poverka*, that is, "adjustment"). Under this custom, an elected person whose role was to evaluate potential harvest results allotted the hayfields among members of the community to equalize income. However, this spontaneous redistribution did not have a large effect on reversing the trend of the best meadowlands falling into the hands of the *Toyon*.[22] This custom seemed to be one of their social support systems for the weak or the poor inside the rural community. Though it is certain that social stratification of the Sakha was developing through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it never congealed into a rigid social structure.

Collectivization and the Aftermath

The socialist government and its socioeconomic policies, especially the anti-shamanist measures, the oppression of the *kulak*, and collectivization during the 1920s to 1940s, reshaped the ethnographical landscape of the subsistence economies. Among the Sakhas, *Toyon* as landlords and as a social class disappeared in most cases in Yakutia and offices of collective farms were set up in the winter settlements of the Sakha as well as within the village administration (*nasleg sovet/sel'skii sovet*).

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21 Ivanov, *Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie,* p. 68–70; IYaA, *Istoriia Iakutskoi*, p. 145.

22 Seroshevskii, *Iakuty,* p. 271; Tokarev and Gurvich, "The Yakuts," pp. 271–272.

The transhumance pattern between two seasonal residences and the related use of pasture and meadow were preserved. This half-nomadic, half-sedentary trend among the Sakha changed from the middle of the 1950s because of an enlargement policy and enforcement of the collective farm system. The government amalgamated many tiny collective farms to organize large state farms in most areas of northern Siberia for the reason of economic efficiency. New settlements with larger local farm offices and administrative bodies were built or the old settlements were reorganized from the surrounding smaller hamlets so that most of the residents were forced to move into the larger and/or new administrative villages.

The collective/state farm system did not allow individual households to manage production. Furthermore, the system reorganized their subsistence economies into a system of labor provided by each farm inside the local community. In other words, the brigade system was introduced: each working team consisting of adult workers, theoretically regardless of family or kin relationship, was in charge of a different type of rural production such as horse husbandry, cattle husbandry, or farming.

Under these established circumstances, hay making became a collective task for the members of each farm. It is interesting to note that neither collective nor state farms arranged special working teams for hay making. It was seasonal intensive labor and joint work for all members of the farm. The collective or state farm had its members mow grass or make haymows in meadows belonging to each farm from the end of June to early August. Workers could then divide 10 to 15 percent of the harvest of hay among themselves. I heard that individuals could sometimes get their personal-use hay by helping out with hay making for a farm. The urban population, too, traveled to the rural areas where their relatives lived in order to help with the hay making. Sometimes, organizations in urban areas ordered their employees to help with hay making in certain regions. For the urban people, this work was often paid in foal meat in autumn, a favorite dish of the Sakha.[23]

Current Land Use and Naming Practices

With the collapse of the socialist state, the idea of private property was introduced into juridical and policy fields. Livestock became one of the objects that could be owned privately in addition to other goods. However, land was still not held privately, especially if it was used agriculturally, as most of it was still owned by the former collective and state farms. On the other hand, private land use was permitted for subordinate subsistence activities practiced by individual households in Yakutia.[24] These transformations raise the question

23 The interview was conducted with two workers of House of Culture in Tabaga village of Megin-Khangalas district, November 30, 2000.

24 M. Fedorov, ed., *Konstitutsii i konstitutsionnye akty Respubliki Sakha (Iakutiia)* (Yakutsk: Bichik, 1994).

of how the Sakhas (many of whom live in larger administrative villages) recognize and classify the alaas and taiga topography and the large terrace of the middle basin of the Lena River that lies beyond the limits of the villages they live in and that characterize the wider natural landscape of Central Yakutia.

The forest, which mainly consists of larch, is classified by the people I met in my field work into two types: light forest (*tya*) and dense forest (*ojuur*). In the dictionary sense, the word *tya* is a broader term signifying forest, rural, and even agropastoral zones, or the word implies the life-world in a traditional rural setting. On the other hand, the word *ojuur* means only forest and the depth of forest. In the *tya* forest, most trees grow tall and they are spaced far enough apart for riders on horseback to ride through the woods comfortably. The *ojuur* forest reflects the opposite image. The grasslands are called *khonuu* in general, and include the alaas and river terrace. There are three categories of alaas. The alaas, in a narrow sense, signifies a circular meadow surrounding a small lake enclosed by forest. As mentioned in the previous section, people usually give a name to each alaas; however, there are exceptions. A *maar* is a type of alaas deemed too small to name.[25] Another type of alaas-like topography is a *düödö*, which is a small lake enclosed by forest but without a meadow.

There are five groups of names still given to alaas. The first group is based on land use: *Buluus* means a place set up for Sakha's traditional underground cold storage; *Baahynia*, a word borrowed from the Russian *pashnia*, means arable land. The second type, the most popular, is based on Sakha words that describe features of the natural landscape. As examples, *Kharyjalaakh* means an alaas surrounded by fir trees (*kharyja*); *Uraanajdaakh* means a place where a bird, the bald coot (*uraanaj*), can be watched; *Buluguu'akhtaakh* means a place that features *bulgunn'akh*, which is a geological formation called a pingo, a hill that appears during the formative process of the alaas topography. Further, more simply, *Ulakhannaakh* means a large-size place, and *Uluu-Kuöl* means a great lake. The remaining three groups are less common and I will just explain each type. The third group comprises alaas names with unknown meanings. People believe that this type is usually very old and derived from one of the neighboring ethnic groups such as the Evenkis. After their migration to their current geographic location, the Sakha renamed certain places but some of the original names survive. The fourth group usually comprises relatively small alaas, the name deriving from the clan name or first name of people who used to live there, such as Taraggaj alaaha (the alaas of the Taraggai clan). The last type of name is related to events.[26]

Today, most of these alaas names are not common knowledge among the population. They know that each alaas has a name but detailed topographical

25 It does not mean that all the small alaas were not given a name due to size.

26 The information of the types of names from the second to fifth is acquired from a personal interview with Dr . Mikhail S. Ivanov (Bagdaryyn Sülbe) in his house in Yakutsk (December 20, 2000).

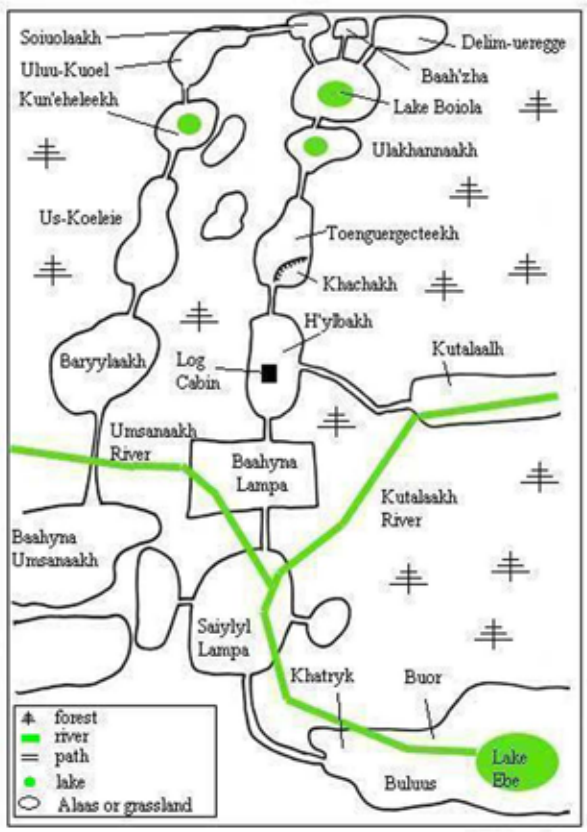

Figure 1. Alaas Topography in a Horse Herder's Mind

knowledge is shared by professional herders and hunters who spend most of their time outside the village and know the geography well. The reason lies, I suppose, in the historical context of sedentarization: people do not usually need to leave the village. An exceptional period is the hay-making and berry-gathering season from July to early September. Many who spend much time outside the village value the knowledge of alaas names. These names provide a frame of reference for the local geography, which, to an outsider, seems like a monotonous repetition of forest and grassland. One horse herder described the area in which he works so that I was able to draw a map of his work area (see figure 1). Each herder has a mental map of the local geography. Interestingly, herders recognize how the alaas are connected to each other through the forest. Viewing the landscape requires knowledge of the alaas names. The Sakha's method of horse husbandry, characterized as a year-long free-range system, means that herders always have to recognize the area where their animals roam. When herders exchange information about the animals and their herding activities, they refer to the names of alaas to locate their livestock in this region. The use of names to refer to the local geography is seen not only among herders but also among hunters. A professional hunter told me that knowing the names of the alaas, as well as the *düödö* (a small lake enclosed by forest but without any meadows), is important for trapping.

Under the post-socialist circumstances that opened the use of land as meadowland in Yakutia to the population privately, all villagers are associated with at least one particular alaas name, the alaas where they conduct hay making (photo 2). It is a completely different setting from the former socialist regime. The space outside the administrative village became very familiar to villagers in terms of land possession. Some families claimed that they should occupy a particular place related to their ancestors, and others did not insist on anything. The principle of post-socialist allocation was haphazard due to the

fact that grasslands in the alaas topography and river terraces vary in size, so that some families were fortunate enough to occupy a plot by themselves but others had to share one meadow with other families.

The Periodic Nature of Land-use Rights

How are land ownership practices played out through practical activity? The Sakha's private rights to the possession of land lie in seasonal or temporary rights for hay making. One middle-aged man, a manager of the farmer management category, explains: "Our land exists only from May to August." Although theses rights guarantee the possession and use of land in a legal sense, the population can only enjoy them as they delimit the exclusive rights for hay making. Seasonal possession is seen not only in private individual production, but also in other corporate types of production such as the former state farm and farmer management.

The agricultural production space surrounding the village, the grasslands, and the forest is identified as locally shared common ground for the local population regardless of the implications of judicial concepts. The Sakha people in this case allow people to have exclusive rights for making hay for their livestock. Importantly, these rights delimit the resources for hay making and are seasonal by nature: exclusivity begins from spring when the grass begins to grow—the pre-harvest condition—and lasts until the end of hay making. The grassland post-harvest is opened so that any local people can conduct

Photo 2. Hay-making activity in Chiuiia Alaas [near Chiuiia village in Megin-Khangalas District, 25 July 1999]

subsidiary subsistence activities.[27] Production space consists of common-pool resources and private resources, but the latter will appear only for a limited period within the year.

Imagine the topographical conditions of a hay-making plot that is usually a circled alaas enclosed by forest. There is usually a wooden fence with gates that surrounds the alaas which acts as a boundary between it and the forest. Do the fences indicate an attitude of privacy to the land where the hay plots are allocated to each villager? The answer is no: the fences are not new. They can be traced back in the Sakha's traditional material culture to a time even before collectivization. The population here only closes the gates of the fences of the hay plots from the late spring until the end of hay making. The reason that they are closed is not related to property ownership but rather to subsistence and ecological conditions.

As I have already mentioned above, the method of horse herding is free ranging. People also allow their cattle to roam free in the daytime from spring to autumn. These animals go together or separately regardless of who the owners are and may step into a hay plot to graze, consequently destroying the crop. This is the main reason for closing the gates. There are no distinct physical differences between hay plots and pasture features: they are both grassland for animals. When the local population passes through these grasslands and forests rather than through local roads during this season, they can open and close the gate in order to pass through an alaas. At the end of hay making, the gate is opened so that the livestock and people can pass through freely; the user of this plot, however, sets another smaller fence directly around the haystack. Some haystacks are moved to the yard of the owner's homestead just after hay making, but others remain in the plot until needed. This indicates that people devote themselves to securing good hay-making results rather than exercising the right of exclusive access to their hay plot.

When someone is permitted access inside an alaas, is it possible for him/her to conduct subsidiary subsistence activities such as hunting, netting fish in the lakes, or gathering berries and mushrooms from the surrounding land? At the time of my field research, the answers to both depends on the individual owner: some owners refuse outright to open their own land to strangers for their subsistence, while others do not mind since they believe that these "strangers" are more or less acquaintances from their village or neighboring villages. I suppose that the former answer may be derived from the recent privatization tendency, since the local population was able to conduct these subsidiary subsistence activities on any remote grassland during the socialist regime. In general, most villagers do not mind others fishing or gathering for their household consumption. One can expect that this new exclusive attitude

27 The ideas of pre-harvest, harvest, and post-harvest are examined in the work of Tomoya Akimichi (*Komonzu no jinruigaku: bunka, rekishi, seitai* [Anthropology of Commons: Culture, History and Ecology] (Kyoto: Jinbunsyoin, 2004).

to the resources within one's plot will evolve and be mutually shared by the local people in the near future. What I can see at this time is, however, that these subsidiary subsistence activities inside hay plots owned by others are within the tolerance levels of the local people.

Landscape and Spirituality

I will now explore the relationship between hay making, concepts of ownership, and the wider senses of spirituality and belief. In spite of Christianity spread by Russian Orthodox priests during the nineteenth century and the anti-religious policies of the former socialist regime, their traditional belief, shamanism, has never disappeared from their minds. In this paper, I shed light on religious practical aspects relating to land use rather than employing the conventional worldview approach to Sakha religion.[28] Religious practices and attitudes, particularly toward various spirits based on the Sakha's traditional religion, continue today in their domestic lives. Casual remarks and behavior towards spirits, for example, the "master of the kitchen range," are deeply embedded in daily life so that the people refer to spirits habitually ways, often unaware of the religious implications of what they are saying. The production space for subsistence activities, in a sense, can be filled with religious constituents; this is different in nature from the administrative village, a place that typically embodies socialist modernization. More concretely, alaas, grasslands, and the forests are spaces arousing a sense of spiritual efficacy and a sense of awe in the local population. Some people even feel that these landscapes are dangerous.

There are two prominent types of spirits in the Sakha's animistic belief system: *abaahy* and *ichchi*. In the context of daily life, the population seems to be very familiar with these two types of spirits. An *abaahy* is an evil spirit whose figure is similar to an ugly-looking human being, and its malevolent nature causes human diseases. A Sakha shaman (*oyuun*) can explore the cause of diseases and cure patients by finding out what type of *abaahy* caused the disease and then battling against it and expelling it. On the other hand, *ichchi* literally means "master," and the Sakha identify an *ichchi* (master) for every living thing – plant or animal, as well as natural phenomena and topography – and even artificial products such as knives and stoves. The *ichchi* themselves are neither good nor evil but beings to be respected and to be fed or well entertained.[29] At every moment and place in daily life such as at the start of dining or at a mountain pass when traveling, people usually offer items of food, vodka, cigarettes, or scraps of cloth to the kitchen stove, religious objects such

28 N. Alekseev, *Etnografiia i fol'klop narodov Sibiri* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 2008), pp. 17–184.

29 Waldemar Jochelson, *The Yakut* (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1933), pp. 103–106; Tokarev and Gurvich, "The Yakuts," p. 280; V. Pesterev, *Stranitsy istorii iakutii v dokementakh, legendakh i mifakh* (Yakutsk: Bichik, 2000), pp. 31–39.

as sacred trees (*kerekh mas*), or administrative boundaries. The Sakha call these ritual practices "feeding" (*ahatyy*) or "blessing" (*algys*) for each *ichchi*. They believe that performing these rituals can prevent misfortune or unhappiness from every master of existence. People are also expected to conduct feeding rituals when they enter the forest to gather berries and mushrooms, hunt, or when they start mowing or other subsistence activities in the grasslands. The spot for the ritual can be anywhere on the edge of the space where a task is to be performed. The ritual place need have no particular features. At the chosen spot, for example, by the wooden fence of the alaas, a small fire is built with twigs and branches gathered nearby and something like bread or vodka is offered by putting it in the fire. It is not a solemn ceremony but a quick, casual practice.

I would like to show how the belief in *ichchi* relates to hay making and the relationship with the land. In this regard, I found some interesting terms concerning the collective consciousness of landowners during my field research. The word *sirbit,* which consists of land (*sir*) and the genitive case for the first person plural (*bit*), signifies "our land" in a loose and neutral sense. The people use it to refer to various land-related words including land recently allocated for hay making, the village, the territory of Yakutia, and even the Russian Federation itself. On the other hand, the word *sir-uot* literally consists of land (*sir*) and fire or kitchen stove (*uot*) and means the land of the clan or ancestral land. It combines symbolic and religious implications. When individuals conduct ritual feeding or blessing for the land during subsistence activities, they are in awe of the land rather than merely seeing it as an object of economic exploitation. The people express this awe by not only conducting rituals for the land master (*sir-ichchite*), but also by requiring that people be quiet and keep peace in the *sir-uot*. The following case is an example of what is believed to happen if people do not keep quiet in the *sir-uot*.

> [Case #1] There was old Peter in the 1980s. He lost one of his legs in military service during WWII and then lived in Pavlovsk Village. The alaas named Ylly Syhyy was his *sir-uot* or ancestral land. Peter thought of holding a *yhyakh* festival[30] in that place for no reason. However, about sixty

30 The *yhyakh* is the traditional seasonal festival of the Sakha. The word, *yhyakh*, is derived from the verb, *us*, which means to sprinkle or scatter. Early twentieth century ethnography shows that Sakha held summer and autumn festivals. The summer festival was the blessing festival for the supreme god (*Ai-toyon*) and the autumn festival was held for the evil spirit (*abaahy*) (Jochelson, *The Yakut*, pp. 202–205). The post-socialist republic government financially supports this festival as part of its cultural policy but only in the summer (Hiroki Takakura, "Constellation of National Culture and Public Memories: The Kumiss Festival and Horse-hitching Post" (in Japanese), in Masahisa Segawa, ed., *Bunka no dispurei to dento no saihen* (Tokyo: Fukyousha, 2003), pp. 69–118. See also the following literatures. E. Romanova, *Iakutskii prazdnik ysyakh* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1994); and Takako Yamada, "The Revival of the Shamanism and the Significance of the Nature in Sakha-Yakut," [in Japanese], *Eko-sofia* 1 (1998), pp. 129–147 (Kyoto: Syowado).

> years had passed since anyone had resided in that *sir-uot*. About thirty people gathered to have the festival there. Peter built a horse-post (*serge*), and conducted the ritual of blessing or *algys*. He also offered horse hair, vodka, and *kymys* (a beverage made from mare's milk) to the land master or *sir-ichchite*. During the festival, of course they sang loudly and danced with each other. One month later, Peter died from a severe disease. That is the reason why I do not recommend that my sons go to such places. (From K. Sleptsov (pseudonym), born in 1940 in Paklovsk in Megin-Khangalas District, interviewed on December 11, 2000 in Yakutsk)

If one behaves noisily in the *sir-uot* in an alaas or grassland, even the ritual practices of feeding or blessing the master of the land cannot prevent misfortune.

The following materials show the connection between the *sir-uot* (ancestral land) and misfortune in more detail and from different angles. On December 12, 2000, in Yakutsk, I interviewed Mr. Sergei Romanov (pseudonym) who was born in 1973 and whom I first met in Tabaga Village in the summer of 1999.

> [Case #2a] The reason for the danger in a *sir-uot* is that an *abaahy* lives there. There are many types of *abaahy* such as white figures that look like human beings and some that have no face. There are both good and evil *abaahy* and some may guide you in the forest, but most of them harm people—Oops, I said that *abaahy* appear in the *sir-uot,* which is incorrect; instead, they appear in an *ötökh*. An *ötökh* means an old place such as a grave or old site of residence...I am not so sensitive to these kinds of things but during autumn duck hunting season, I have to wait a long time to hunt them alone inside a small hunting hide called a *doldakh*; that is the time when I become really frightened since the evil shaman and *abaahy* might appear. Some people say that they do not fear *abaahy* or *ötökh*, but it is not true, I know. If these guys were ordered to leave a Sakha knife in a grave located in the forest at night, no one could do it.

Mr. Romanov's understanding of *abaahy* is a little unique, since the current Sakha ethnographers usually describe *abaahy* as the eternal enemies of human beings. He also presents an interesting connection between an evil spirit or *abaahy* with an *ötökh* or grave/old place. From the latter half of the statement, I can deduce that the Sakha fear staying alone in a place that has been abandoned by those who lived there in the past.

Mr. Romanov's father-in-law, Nikolai Petrov (pseudonym) (born in 1938 and from the Gorny District in Central Yakutia), told me about *ötökh* as follows.

> [Case #3] *Ötökh* means an old site or abandoned place. If all members of the family died and the place was abandoned, it is extremely dangerous,

since there is a master of the *ötökh* or *ötökh-ichchite*. Never stay overnight in such a place. You must be quiet and should not abuse anyone there. In case you have to rest there, you may take a nap but you must never snore. *Abaahy* appear in between night and day, when one can recognize the *abaahy* as some human figure. During the night, one can only hear their footsteps or laughter. (Interview conducted in his house in Yakutsk on December 23, 2000)

We can confirm that the ideas of ancestral land (*sir-uot*) and old sites (*ötökh*) are somehow connected to misfortune and unhappiness. The reason lies in the fact that they believe there is a master of *sir-uot* or *ötökh* on the land who must be respected for the fear they inspire. One should properly behave oneself, keep peace, and never make noise. It is natural that these rules be applied in the hay-making period. People even prefer not to speak the name of the alaas or grassland that is their plot. I return to the interview with Mr. Romanov for an additional explanation.

[Case #2b] * SR=Sergei Romanov, TH=the author.

SR: It is not good to speak the name of the alaas directly. People just prefer to say, "I returned from the alaas" and do not refer to its name. During the time that one stays in the alaas, speaking its name is particularly bad. As the spirit master (*dukh ichchite*[31]) resides in the alaas, one should not laugh or make a racket. My wife is always frightened with these thoughts while gathering berries so that every moment, she tries to make a bonfire in four directions from her and feed the masters. There is not only the master of the alaas (*alaas ichchite*), but also the master of the old site (*ötökh ichchite*) and the house master (*di'e ichchit*e) (in the hay-making plot).

TH: If one wants to keep peace in the alaas, what should one do during hay making? I believe that many people gather and make noise during that time.

SR: People are supposed to keep peace even during hay making. The Soviet government changed this consciousness: Go to the alaas! Work! Gradually people did not care about it. But even now, grandmothers scold noisy children during the hay-making season...Oh, I am recalling the fact now that when my father-in-law mowed grass in the Kutalaakh alaas in the summer of 1999, he suddenly had too strong a pain in his foot bone to move. He recognized that the place was an old place, *ötökh*. When his daughter appeared in that place, he asked her to feed the alaas. His foot was soon better.

31 The word *dukh ichchite* is interesting expression because it is Russian – Sakha mixed. Russian word *dukh* is translated into spirit.

To summarise, the wider landscape of grasslands, including hay-making plots, is seen as full of spirits so people who use these places always try to form good relationships with the spirits through ritual practices. It is through the combination of these spontaneously required ritual practices and subsistence activities that the Sakha reaffirm their relations with the Sakha's alaas landscape as these are the places where the human world and the spirit world meet. This is manifest in the constant sense of awe that people express toward these spirits.

Neither the concept of ancestral land (*sir-uot*) nor old sites (*ötökh*) literally implies any particular relationship of descent from concrete kinship groups. They certainly regard some space as their ancestral land; however, the rituals do not bind a particular consanguineous person with a particular area of land and its spiritual master. The sense of awe is a general sense and it is different from the threat of danger or misfortune to a particular group. At the present time, I could say that a general sense of awe towards the land makes the population hesitate to fully exercise ownership rights when they attempt to own certain hay meadows in juridical terms. The idea of ancestral land logically ought to include the collective and/or private ownership of land; however, the spiritual masters living on the land affect all people, not only the owners. All individuals, regardless of who the owner is, are equally required to behave properly and conduct rituals if they want access to the resources found in places inhabited by the masters. Though the current government may see haymaking plots as something to be allocated under the concept of private possession, for the Sakha, the landscape and its utilization as a production space continues to mean that they must associate with malicious beings.

This information on Sakha spirits seems to be in opposition to information that other researchers have reported. Most other reports state that traditionally, particular families and clan groups pay homage to the land masters to protect their livestock and hay.[32] Other scholars construct more elastic arguments on this matter. The family clan use rights to a particular piece of land and the special relationship to land spirits coexist with free access to land in the traditional setting.[33] However, I would like to emphasize the importance of individual behavior relating to land use at a practical level. While the relationship between the family clan and the spirits may justify the land property relations in the post-socialist community, this does not contradict the communal aspect of land use. Importantly, the relationship between the family clan and the spirits does not justify exclusive ownership or use of a particular piece of land, which would be a cause for anxiety regarding the spirits. The individual even as an owner somehow feels the necessity of relating to the spirits accord-

32 V. E. Vasil'ev, "Kyt dukh-khoziaiki zemli po predstavleniiam iakutov," in *Traditsionnye predstvleniia sakha ob okruzhaiushchem mire* (Yakutsk, 1998), p. 5.

33 L. I. Vinokurova, and E. Romanova, "Zemlia korennykh narodov iakutii," *Rasy i narody* 28 (2002), pp. 122–129.

ing to their practical activities on the land. Use of the land provides the Sakha people with a reminder of their relationship with the spirits. The alaas landscape or meadow is the place in which social relations must be supplemented with symbolic practices.

Compared with hunting and herding in a particular plot, use of a meadow is the direct exploitation as hay is gained as harvest. How human beings interact with the spirits in a particular space according to the subsistence activity and the differences that may or may not appear according to the relationship between the land and that particular subsistence activity are questions I have found through this discussion and a topic of future research.

Conclusion

My point of departure in this paper was the approaches current in anthropology that stress the cultural dimensions and perceptions of topography and environment and the active role of practical activity in bringing about change in both the landscape and associated social relations. My aim has been to develop a historical perspective that examines the changing Sakha relationship with the land, as seen in the rural communities of Central Yakutia. My emphasis has been on historical background and ecological conditions, and the ways that both affect the current Sakha's land recognition and land use in a material and symbolic sense in the post-socialist context. The central concern has been with the practical task of hay making and its role underpinning the greater practice of Sakha cattle husbandry. The study has explored how hay-making activities and hay harvesting have come to be one element of more private and personal appropriation of land within the practical, social, and symbolic contexts in which the communities are active and venerate the land.

By tracing historical changes (from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the post-socialist present), I have explored how we can understand more easily the current Sakha perception, use, and ownership of different kinds of landscape in different seasons. Under the socialist regime, the Sakha people's livelihood system was completely changed from a transhumance way of life that was woven into the alaas topography and covered a vast area to a sedentary life within an administrative village. Nevertheless, use of the alaas landscape continued and rural individuals were allowed to own some private livestock for "subordinate management," which necessitated growing hay for fodder. The solution invented by the state farm was to offer the rural population hay in return for harvesting the hay crop. The state farm had a large quantity of cattle as well, but it had no organized hay-making brigade, so the cadre had people participate in hay making. This means that hay was no longer mere fodder, but an exchangeable product that was separate from the ownership of any particular piece of land.

The paper has explored how, in this historical context, private grasslands are garnered from communal spaces that are perceived in more general reli-

gious/spiritual terms. It also presents the religious implications of hay-making activities as part of a wider set of enduring beliefs that has persisted despite the persecution of traditional forms of belief, both in the tsarist and Soviet periods. In particular, persistent Sakha religious beliefs about the land master and related spirits still imbue the landscape with a sentient character—it is inhabited by spiritual forces that can cause human beings both fortune and misfortune. In order to maintain these relationships, the local population has taboos about appropriate behavior, especially on land where subsistence activities are conducted.

I have explored how mowing and hay making have emerged as indispensable practices in the daily and seasonal construction of the Sakha's cultural landscape, thereby stressing the active role of subjectivity in constructing and transforming the land and thereby developing new forms of social and symbolic relations. In particular, the paper has demonstrated how local communities relate to a unique geographical feature, the alaas, which are spread throughout the Central Yakutian forest and the middle basin of the Lena River, and has explored the Sakha's sociocultural use of these features. This conclusion may shed light on the next question: comparison of the social and symbolic construction of the alaas landscape or land use as a meadow with that of other Siberian peoples who engage in reindeer hunting/herding and/or fishing. Do the particular religious practices and attitudes derive from the unique feature of the Sakha's subsistence on cattle/horse pastoralism and hay making? To put it more precisely, does the hay making or solely the type of direct land exploitation engender a unique way of relating with the spirits in the socioeconomic context among the indigenous peoples of Siberia? These issues are open for future discussion.