



*Anthropological Studies in Creativity and Perception*

# **NARRATIVE OBJECTS**

**MUSEUMS, THE SAKHA SUMMER FESTIVAL,  
AND CULTURAL REVIVAL IN SIBERIA**

Tatiana Argounova-Low and Alison K. Brown



“*Narrative Objects* focuses on a mammoth ivory composition made in the 1860s and depicting *yhyakh*, the Sakha summer festival, within the broad contexts of the art and culture of the Sakha people (Yakutia, Russia). Thanks to the efforts of these authors, this composition, which is now part of the British Museum collection, was exhibited in 2015 at the National Arts Museum in Yakutsk. Its accurately executed scenes of the festival in the second half of the nineteenth century provoked wide interest in the Republic, among the general public and scholars alike, as important ethnographic evidence of the celebrations at that time. The ancient festival of *yhyakh*, which rose from the ashes in the 1990s, brings together the spiritual and material culture of the Sakha people, to which the authors draw attention in their book, connecting the silence of the past Soviet era with the modern-day celebration. This is an original study of the *yhyakh* celebration which is supported by Indigenous insights into the process of the revival of the old Sakha traditions.”

**Professor Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova**, *Arctic State Institute of Culture and Arts, Yakutsk, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)*



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Narrative Objects

*Narrative Objects* is concerned with the conversations that arise when artists, scholars, and museum practitioners come together with historic objects. Its focus is a unique mammoth ivory model of *yhyakh* – the annual celebration of the Sakha people in the Russian Far East – which has been in the collection of the British Museum since 1867. Almost 150 years later, the model was loaned to the National Arts Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) for exhibition and public engagement. As Sakha people revisit past histories and reconstitute cultural knowledge following decades of Soviet rule, this book considers narratives generated by the return of the model which speak to wider concerns in anthropology, material culture studies, and history about how knowledge is both suppressed and engaged with. The book also explores how art can be a focus for cultural pride, how skilled practices are entwined with oral histories, and how historic objects can contribute to wider processes of cultural revival. The chapters draw on fieldwork and museum and archival research in *Sakha Sire*, Paris and London.

*Narrative Objects* is particularly relevant to scholars of anthropology and museum studies as well as those with an interest in the subarctic and post-Soviet states.

**Tatiana Argounova-Low** is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, UK. As an Indigenous Sakha scholar, she conducts her work in her homeland – *Sakha Sire* – and other parts of Siberia. Her academic interests include questions of ethnic identity and nationalism, mobility and transport, and art and creativity in Siberia.

**Alison K. Brown** holds a personal chair in Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, UK. As a museum anthropologist, her work brings together people with collections separated by time and distance and draws on fieldwork in Canada, the USA, the Russian Federation, and Scotland. She is co-editor of the journal *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*.

## **Anthropological Studies in Creativity and Perception**

Series Editor: Elizabeth Hallam

The books in this series explore the relations, in human social and cultural life, between perception, creativity and skill. Their common aim is to move beyond established approaches in anthropology and material culture studies that treat the inhabited world as a repository of complete objects, already present and available for analysis. Instead, these works focus on the creative processes that continually bring these objects into being, along with the persons in whose lives they are entangled. All creative activities entail movement or gesture, and the books in this series are particularly concerned to understand the relations between these creative movements and the inscriptions they yield. Likewise, in considering the histories of artefacts, these studies foreground the skills of their makers-cum-users, and the transformations that ensue, rather than tracking their incorporation as finished objects within networks of interpersonal relations. This series is interdisciplinary in orientation, with the concern of the titles always being with the practice of interdisciplinarity: on ways of doing anthropology with other disciplines, rather than doing an anthropology of these subjects. Through this anthropology with focus, they aim to achieve an understanding that is at once holistic and processual, dedicated not so much to the achievement of a final synthesis as to opening up lines of inquiry.

Titles in series

### **Attention in Performance**

Acting Lessons in Sensory Anthropology

*Cassia Kilian*

### **Peripheral Methodologies**

Unlearning, Not-knowing and Ethnographic Limits

*Edited by Francisco Martinez, Lili Di Puppò and Martin Demant Frederiksen*

### **Digressions and the Human Imagination**

Tracing the Indirectness of Cultural Creativity

*Edited by Morten Nielsen*

# **Narrative Objects**

Museums, the Sakha Summer Festival,  
and Cultural Revival in Siberia

**Tatiana Argounova-Low and  
Alison K. Brown**



ROUTLEDGE

**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2025  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2025 Tatiana Argounova-Low and Alison K. Brown

The right of Tatiana Argounova-Low and Alison K. Brown to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The Open Access version of this book, available at [www.taylorfrancis.com](http://www.taylorfrancis.com), has been made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives (CC-BY-NC-ND) 4.0 license.

Any third party material in this book is not included in the OA Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. Please direct any permissions enquiries to the original rightsholder.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-31533-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-041-07762-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-45639-8 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9780429456398](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456398)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

**To the ivory carvers of *Sakha Sire* past, present and future.**



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Language and transliteration</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xvi</i>
<i>Foreword by Tim Ingold</i>	<i>xviii</i>
<b>Introduction: Encountering a model</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PART 1</b>	
<b>Places and History</b>	<b>23</b>
1.1 Introduction	25
1.2 Narrative and voice	30
1.3 Silence and <i>yhyakh</i>	47
1.4 <i>Yhyakh</i> returns	62
<b>PART 2</b>	
<b>Exhibition Narratives</b>	<b>81</b>
2.1 Introduction	83
2.2 A model made for display	88
2.3 <i>Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey:</i> connecting people with collections	107
2.4 Narrating the model in <i>Sakha Sire</i>	125

<b>PART 3</b>	
<b>Craftsmanship and Creativity</b>	141
3.1 Introduction	143
3.2 Mammoth ivory as material	147
3.3 Carving as art and craft	161
3.4 Artistic futures: The model and the aspiring artists	178
<b>Conclusion: Model of <i>yhyakh</i> as a narrative object</b>	193
<i>Index</i>	201

# Figures

0.1	<i>Model of a Summer Festival of the Yakuts</i>	2
0.2	Male figures holding carved <i>choroons</i>	3
0.3	Wrestlers engaged in a tackle	4
0.4	Women watching the wrestlers	5
1.1	The Russian Federation	25
1.2	Fedor Markov in his studio	33
1.3	A scene from <i>yhyakh</i> in 1902	43
1.4	<i>Yhyakh</i> celebration during the Soviet period	59
1.5	Women in Sakha dresses dancing at <i>yhyakh</i>	68
1.6	<i>Tühülge</i> area at Maia <i>yhyakh</i> , June 2016	71
1.7	Layout of <i>Üs Khatyŋ</i> indicating multiple <i>tühülges</i>	73
1.8	The ritual of greeting the sun at <i>Üs Khatyŋ</i>	74
1.9	<i>Aal Luuk Mas</i> at the Churapcha <i>yhyakh</i>	76
2.1	Bird's-eye view of the Paris Universal Exhibition grounds	88
2.2	Birchbark <i>uraha</i> in the Russian section of the Paris Universal Exhibition	92
2.3	Portrait of Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, c. 1870	96
2.4	Sketch of the <i>yhyakh</i> model made by Augustus Franks in his notebook during his visit to the Paris Universal Exhibition	97
2.5	<i>Model of a Summer Festival</i> on display in the National Arts Museum in Yakutsk, 2015	111
2.6	Vasilii Amydaev leading a carving master class for art students	113
2.7	Contemporary Dolgan clothing by Arsent'eva Miroslava inspired by traditional designs	116
2.8	Detail of the women's <i>ilin-kelin kebiher</i>	129
2.9	Interior of the <i>uraha</i>	133
2.10	The opening performance of the Gornyi <i>yhyakh</i> , June 2016	136
3.1	Carving of a mammoth with the change of ivory colour visible	149
3.2	Segment of mammoth tusk with 'sugar cone' structure clearly visible	151
3.3	<i>Setka</i> (mesh) structure visible on a carving	152
3.4	Sakha ivory carver at work, early twentieth century	153
3.5	Ivory <i>choroon</i> carved by T. V. Ammosov with Soviet realist and Sakha designs	167

xii *Figures*

3.6	Mammoth souvenirs for sale in Yakutsk	169
3.7	Konstantin Mamontov carving a mammoth figurine in his studio, April 2013	170
3.8	Maksim in a T-shirt displaying his artistic signature	173
3.9	The old and the new models brought together, June 2015	188

# Language and transliteration

Throughout the book, we use Sakha and Russian words. To identify them in the text, we *italicise* Sakha words and *italicise and underline* Russian words. We adhere to transliteration largely based on the Library of Congress convention, with a few adaptations which are listed below. Sakha words are transliterated following the same system, with additional characters. Geographical names follow the convention with some exceptions, for example, we use Yakutsk, not Iakutsk.

<i>Russian</i>	<i>English transcription</i>	<i>Sakha</i>	<i>English transcription</i>
Ё	E	Ḑ	gh (guttural sound)
Ж	Zh	Ҡ	ŋ (as in -ing)
Ю	Iu	Ң	n' (palatalised n)
Я	Ia	Ҕ	d' (palatalised d)
Ь/ъ	‘	Өө	Ö ö (as in fur)
		Үү	Ü ü (as in German für)

Translations from Sakha and Russian to English were made by S. Kholmogorova, N. Argounova, and T. Argounova-Low. Translations from French to English were provided by C. Rodriguez and G. Bauzyte.

# Glossary

Sakha words:

<i>Aal Luuk Mas</i>	mythological sacred tree of the universe
<i>aiyy</i>	deities
<i>alaad'y</i>	small, deep-fried pancakes
<i>alaas</i>	a meadow formed as a result of thawing of permafrost
<i>algys</i>	a blessing ritual which addresses deities with gratitude or a plea
<i>algyschyt</i>	a person who conducts <i>algys</i>
<i>at sürdüüte</i>	horse races
<i>balaghan</i>	traditional wooden winter dwelling in a shape of truncated pyramid
<i>chechir</i>	young birch trees
<i>choroon</i>	a wooden cup used for ceremonial purposes
<i>Döhögöi Toion</i>	deity, patron of horses and cattle
<i>ebe</i>	grandmother
<i>eterbes</i>	soft footwear
<i>ichchi</i>	more-than-human co-existing beings
<i>ilin-kelin kebiher</i>	female silver jewellery worn at the front and back
<i>ilge</i>	divine milky liquid sent down by deities to people
<i>khappakhchy</i>	screens to separate sleeping areas inside <i>uraha</i>
<i>khaarys</i>	silk
<i>khomus</i>	musical metal instrument, a mouth harp
<i>kymys</i>	a fermented drink used made with mare's milk consumed during <i>yhyakh</i>
<i>kytalyk</i>	cranes, Lat. <i>Grus leucogeranus</i>
<i>kut</i>	soul
<i>kürüö</i>	traditional wooden fence
<i>ohuokhai</i>	traditional circle dance
<i>olokho</i>	Sakha heroic epic narrative
<i>Sakha Sire</i>	Sakha land, an endonym used by Indigenous Sakha to refer to their homeland.
<i>selii</i>	mammoth

<i>serge</i>	wooden ceremonial pole connected to the cult of horses; tethering post
<i>simiir ihit</i>	large leather vessel for making <i>kymys</i>
<i>toiuk</i>	traditional singing genre; improvised singing
<i>Tuimaada</i>	name of the valley on the left bank of the river Lena
<i>tühülge</i>	yhyakh area where designated events take place; traditionally area for sacred rituals
<i>tüü</i>	fur
<i>uluus</i>	an administrative unit; a district
<i>uraha</i>	traditional summer dwelling
<i>uu oghuha</i>	water bull
<i>uus kihi</i>	craftsman
<i>ürüŋ kömüs</i>	silver
<i>Ûs Khatyŋ</i>	(lit.) Three Birches, name of the area where city's <i>yhyakh</i> is conducted
<i>yhyakh</i>	traditional summer festival
<i>yaghas</i>	container or bucket made with birch bark

# Acknowledgements

The *Narrative Objects* project, from which this book has emerged, would not have gone ahead without the support of a great many individuals and institutions. First of all, we thank the Trustees of the British Museum for granting permission to loan *Model of a Summer Festival* to the National Arts Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) so that so many Sakha people could engage with it. At the British Museum, thanks are due to the many staff, past and present, who have been involved with the project: Neil MacGregor, Jonathan Williams, Jill Maggs, Jane Portal, Jan Stuart, Imogen Laing, Katie Godwin, Alison Hollis, Sushma Jansari, Lorna Cruickshanks, and Lucia Cortelli. At the National Arts Museum in Yakutsk, we are most grateful to former director Asia Gabysheva for her guidance throughout the project, as well as Tanya Baskhardyrova, Lena Vasil'eva, and the many NAM staff who made us feel so welcome during our visits to Yakutsk. In particular, we thank Efrosinia Nogovitsyna, who generously shared her research with us, and Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova for helping us to understand why Sakha collections in museums worldwide matter so much. Special thanks are due to ivory carvers Fedor Markov, Vasiliï Amydaev, Oleg Solov'ev, Roman Petrov, Konstantin Mamonov, Aiaal Makarov, Maksim Struchkov, director Kiril Gavril'ev and the staff and students of the P. P. Romanov College of Arts for enhancing our understanding of *Model of a Summer Festival* in particular, and contemporary ivory carving practices more generally. We are grateful to Ellei Ivanov and Maxim Unarov for filming and photography throughout the project. We received generous support from many colleagues, family and friends during our travels: Uliana Vinokourova, Andrei Borisov, Alexander Zhirkov, Vladimir Tikhonov, Viliam Iakovlev-Tühülgen, Kapitolina Iakovleva, Natalia Struchkova, Lena Sidorova, Oleg Sidorov, Lena Lazareva, Larisa Pisareva, Moses Tarekegn, Sara Tarekegn, Liuda Popova, and Polina Peruasheva in Yakutsk, Timofei and Katia Nesterov in Maia, Marianna Iakovleva in Churapcha, Vanda Nikiforova in Taatta, Anna and Mikhail Argounov in Debdirge, Nikita Andreev, Tamara Kesareva, and Elizaveta Martynova in Berdigestiakh, and Iaroslava Popovich in St. Petersburg.

At the University of Aberdeen we would like to thank Glenys Milton, June Middleton, and Wendy Rudland, and our colleagues in the Department of Anthropology, all of whom have, over several years, generously supported us with insightful feedback on different aspects of the *Narrative Objects* project and this book in particular.

We also thank Pam Thomson in the School of Social Science for administrative support. Special thanks go to Eleanor Peers, who worked on the *Narrative Objects* project as a postdoctoral researcher, and whose many contributions shaped the success of the project overall. Liudmila Nikanorova's careful reading and comments on early drafts of this book have been extremely useful. Our advisory board members, Asia Gabysheva, Tatiana Sem, Egor Shishigin, David Anderson, Julie Cruikshank, and Jan Stuart, provided consistent guidance, and we are grateful to them all.

We are appreciative of the support of those museum colleagues in the UK who hosted our Sakha and Russian colleagues during the *Narrative Objects* project: Henrietta Lidchi and Victoria Adams (National Museum of Scotland), Anita Herle and Rachel Hand (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge), and Nicholas Crowe and Julia Nicholson (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford).

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Elizabeth Hallam, the series editor of *Anthropological Studies in Creativity and Perception*, who has guided us through the writing and editing of this book with such care and consideration, and also to Tim Ingold, the founding series editor, who worked with us to develop the initial project and wrote the Foreword. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers of our original proposal for their helpful suggestions, which made this a stronger book. We have been extraordinarily fortunate to work with the team at Routledge – especially Katherine Ong – who has patiently answered our many questions and supported us through the production process. We thank the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, which provided the majority of the financial support for this project (Grant number: AH/M000265/1), and the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, from which we received initial funding to support the development of the AHRC application. Finally, at home, we would like to thank Mervyn Bain, Joy Brown, Douglas Low, Alexander Low, and Katherine Low for their constant support.

## Foreword by Tim Ingold

I have two contrasting images in my head, both based on things I have recently read. One pictures a group of journalists standing on a mound of volcanic rock on the edge of Yucca Lake in Nevada. It is April 1952, and they have been summoned to witness the detonation of a nuclear device. Wearing goggles, they turn their heads to witness an umbrella cloud, of unimaginable brilliance, rising towards the heavens. In the following months, nearby Las Vegas would become a centre for what came to be called “atomic tourism”, as visitors would flock to see the explosions from locations offering a panoramic view. The second image is of a group of primary school students from the city of Yakutsk, capital of the Sakha Republic in northeast Siberia, peering intently at a tiny model, consisting of miniature figures, a dome-shaped lodge, birch trees, hitching posts, benches and sundry other furnishings surrounded by a perimeter fence, all carved in mammoth ivory and mounted on a rectangular wooden base measuring 23 by 74 cm. This model, recently arrived from the British Museum where it had lain virtually undisturbed for some 150 years, and depicting a scene from the traditional Sakha summer festival (*yhyakh*), had originally been commissioned for public display at the 1867 International Exhibition in Paris, and had been admired by the many thousands of visitors. Now, back in its land of origin, it had once again sparked intense public interest. The model, along with the events that surrounded its return, is the subject of this absorbing book.

Why the image of the nuclear test? It doesn't feature in the book. It came to mind, however, as I was reflecting on how an item as small and unassuming as an ivory carving could stand for something so much greater, with ramifications of consequence for us all. By this, I mean no less than an alternative vision for planetary conviviality – alternative, that is, to the nightmare that those of my generation grew up with, of a globe partitioned into opposed blocs, divided by impenetrable defensive shields, the security of which is supposed to rest on the threat of mutually assured destruction. It seems to me that the model *yhyakh* ranks in importance with the nuclear warhead in thinking about the kind of world we might bequeath to coming generations. The two, though utterly opposed in the futures they envision, are not unconnected. Recall that the United States military was testing its nuclear devices when the Cold War was at its height, facing off against the might of the Soviet Union, which was doing the same. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the

rise of the security state, founded on weapons of mass destruction, was directly linked to the repression or incarceration of peoples indigenous to the territories on which states would test their weapons, including nominally “uninhabited” sites in arctic Sakha. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, native Sakha voices were systematically silenced, only to re-emerge when the Union finally collapsed. In this, the model has served as a catalyst, helping to revive the very conversations previously suppressed in the name of security.

Let’s revisit these images. In one, the journalists, equipped with dark glasses and cameras to record the event, are looking from a safe distance at the unfolding spectacle. What they witness is an explosion, the terrifying force of which speaks to their belief that they are poised at a turning point in history, at which a new world is about to arise like a phoenix from the ashes of the old, attesting to humanity’s final conquest of nature. But there’s no such triumphalism in the children’s inspection of the model. Their heads are close together, even touching, as their eyes, wide with curiosity rather than shaded against the light, scrutinise its tiniest details. What is going on? What’s there inside the lodge? How are the figures dressed, and what expressions do they have on their faces? The nuclear explosion is centrifugal, it blows things up. But with the model, it is precisely the opposite. It is centripetal, as all attention converges on the miniature figures and their accoutrements. The model brings everyone together, students and teachers alike, as they crowd around it. But its draw extends far beyond those in its immediate presence. People of all generations welcome the chance to see it and to take pride in it. Far from marking a historical turning point, in the model, history turns on itself, rejoining the lives of today’s young people with those of their ancestors. Past and future, rather than being blown apart by the explosions of the present, are quietly and unobtrusively brought back into unison. Could this provide a model of conviviality for generations to come?

Perhaps the power of miniaturisation lies in precisely this: the capacity to draw things together into a singular focus. It is not just the reduction of scale that counts here, but the concentration. This concentration begins with the maker, as he works with the material, but is carried over into the vision of those who subsequently come to inspect the result. When everything is so small, vision is necessarily close-up, or myopic, again in striking contrast to the distant vision of the atomic tourist, watching an explosion from afar. Some might call such vision short-sighted. In the minds of planners and policymakers, short-sightedness is typically associated with a propensity to live for the present, and an inability to prepare for the future. People of European nations, considering themselves civilised, have long assumed that the inhabitants of faraway places are incurably present-orientated, and there is plenty of evidence that the predominantly well-heeled metropolitan visitors to the Paris exhibition of 1867 thought thus of the “ignorant savages” from the remote Siberian backwoods. For the people themselves, however, myopia opens up into a different relation to time itself: one in which past, present and future do not follow in linear sequence, but in which the path to the future lies in the remembrance of ancestral ways. This is the time of legend. If, for the model-maker, carving is equivalent to storytelling, for those who come to view the model, it is as if they were there,

listening. Only the atomic tourist, with his back turned to the past and deafened by the explosive blast of technoscience coming towards him, hears nothing.

The same touristic mentality, which rips the future from the past even as it celebrates the advent of a new technoscientific era, also relishes the prospect that long-extinct species might artificially be reconstituted, as perfect clones of their archaic prototypes. The lands of Sakha are littered with the remains of the woolly mammoths that once roamed there, well preserved in permafrost. Today, the mammoth has become an icon of the territory. A giant mammoth statue, placed outside the Research Institute for Permafrost in Yakutsk, has become a symbol of the city, while visitors to tourist shops are assailed with figurines representing these massive beasts, carved from the material of their tusks. It was from this material, too, that the figures of the model *yhyakh* were carved. But it was not because of its associations with a now extinct creature that the carvers of old chose ivory, but simply because, being relatively soft and durable, it responded well to the knife. It soon replaced wood and moose antler as their primary material, despite some misgivings about disturbing beings that, as legend would have it, continued to dwell in the underworld. Although grown and deposited so much longer ago than wood or antler, mammoth ivory is understood to possess an intrinsic vitality no less than these products of more recent lives. It is for the carver to bring this vitality into the open. Working under the watchful eye of those who have gone before, the carver follows a tradition in its proper sense, not stuck in the past but improvising a path into the future.

The world has gone backwards since the research on which this book is based was completed. It is becoming repolarised, even as the rules of international order, themselves forged in the shadow of war, appear to be crumbling. Returning to Sakha, what will become of the burst of creativity sparked off when the model *yhyakh* came to visit, as the shutters come down once again? Will it be extinguished? It would not be the first time. Notwithstanding its colonial undertones, the Paris exhibition of 1867 was driven by an optimistic vision of a world spurred by the free movement of persons and things to ever greater heights of creative endeavour. This optimism was crushed by the terrors of the twentieth century. And now, just when the world seemed finally to be reopening, the same thing is happening all over again. But all is not lost. We should never forget, even in dark times, that closure is never forever. The people of Sakha were relieved that their model *yhyakh* remained safe and sound in the vaults of the British Museum throughout the upheavals of the Soviet era and were happy for it to return there now after its recent visit. Like every artefact, as this volume powerfully demonstrates, the model holds a wealth of stories. It is by conserving the artefacts in their care until such time as their stories can be resumed that museums can keep the torch of common humanity alight. For it is above all in the capacity of artefacts to reconnect, bringing people, generations and nations together, that their real power resides.

# Introduction

## Encountering a model

On a chilly, bright morning in late November in 2014, we made our way across West London towards Blythe House, an imposing Edwardian red brick and Portland stone building originally constructed to house the Post Office Savings Bank, and familiar to people worldwide as a backdrop in many television shows and films. Since the late 1970s, the Grade II listed building has been one of several off-site collection centres for London-based national museums, namely the Science Museum, the V&A South Kensington, and the British Museum, storing significant quantities of the reserve collections within its labyrinthine rooms and corridors.<sup>1</sup> After collecting our security passes and meeting our hosts from the British Museum Loans and Collections teams, we slowly climbed the stairs to the third floor, taking in the glazed brick interiors, scrolled iron staircases, and striking early twentieth-century signage, before walking past rows of shelving and roller racking to reach a large room housing parts of the British Museum's Asian and European ethnography collections. This was the first time that we – the *Narrative Objects* project team consisting of Alison Brown, Tanya Argounova-Low, and Eleanor Peers – were to see the mammoth ivory model at the centre of this book. We were eagerly awaiting the encounter and the opportunity to discuss the logistics involved in loaning the model to our project partner, the National Museum of the Arts of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), in the spring of the following year.<sup>2</sup>

After chitchat with our hosts about our journey – Tanya and Alison having travelled on the overnight train from Aberdeen to London to where Eleanor was, at that time, based – we were taken over to the cabinet where the model is normally housed. And there it was. In the centre of a wide drawer at the bottom of the cabinet, placed alongside a second ivory carving of a man with a dog-sled: As.5068.a, otherwise known as “Model of a Summer Encampment of the Yakuts”.<sup>3</sup> We sat on the floor or knelt alongside the drawer, taking in what we saw and sharing our immediate impressions: it seemed smaller than we had anticipated, even though we knew the dimensions; the colour of the wooden base was a rich brown while the figures themselves were a creamy shade of ivory with the artificial light bouncing off the sheen (Figure 0.1). As the drawer's location made it awkward for us to see the figures closely, the museum team moved it onto a table nearby where we could see it more easily.

## 2 Narrative Objects

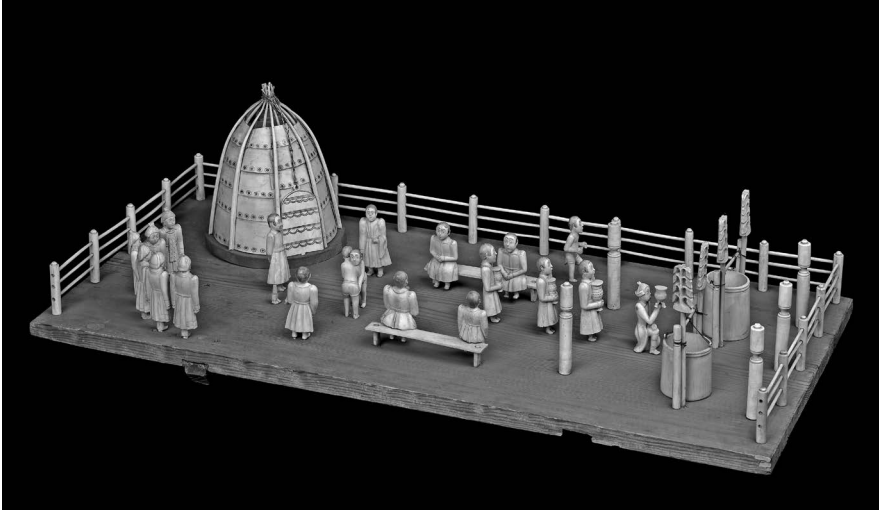


Figure 0.1 Model of a Summer Festival of the Yakuts. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

“Close”, “slow”, or “deep looking” is a technique often used by art historians and others who work with museum and gallery collections. A highly visualised form of engagement reflecting the hierarchy of the senses which privileges the ocularcentricity of European thought, it involves a viewer taking an extended period of time to pay attention to an item to pick out details that might not be obvious with a less focussed mode of engagement (Rose 2017) and can be augmented with a set of structured steps to note down materials, techniques, etc., while relating these to cultural and social context (e.g., Prown 1982; Greene 1992; Caple 2006).<sup>4</sup> It is often combined with drawing as a mode of recording, though we did not use this method on this occasion and relied on our cameras instead. To move away from the cultural biases of an ocularcentric approach, many researchers who work with cultural collections have adapted the method to bring in Indigenous perspectives and voice to add nuance to museum interpretations and depth to museum records (e.g., Hodge 2018), and draw on other sensory forms of engagement where circumstances and museum regulations permit. Physical engagement can certainly come into play in such encounters, which are often underpinned by the desire to better understand historic practices of making, but even in circumstances where tactile connection is not possible, visual engagement can still play a significant part in how viewers learn from objects as we were to discover as the *Narrative Objects* project progressed. Moreover, looking, as Lemire et al (2021: 34) note, can be “intensely dialogical” when undertaken collaboratively. Our experience in Blythe House bears this out. As we leaned in to bring our faces towards the minute ivory figures engaged in activities which resonated with Tanya and Eleanor’s experience of attending *hyakh* celebrations, all kinds of observations and questions came to us: the physical appearance of the carved figures seemed to one of our group to be



Figure 0.2 Male figures holding carved *choroons*. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

“European-looking”, rather than Sakha, and made them wonder how people would react to these images of their ancestors (Figure 0.2); artists would be interested in the technologies carvers used in an era before power tools to soften the ivory as well as to carve it; we speculated on how many carvers were involved, given that at least one of the figures seemed more roughly carved than the others. Was the model made by more than one carver with different levels of skill and experience, or was that piece simply made in a hurry? The museum staff asked about what the response of Sakha people to this early work of art being so far from Siberia might be. Finally, we wondered, what would the little people in the model say, if they could talk?<sup>5</sup>

\*\*\*

#### 4 *Narrative Objects*

This book speaks to concerns in anthropology, material culture studies, and history about the ways in which knowledge is both suppressed and engaged with, how art can be a focus for cultural pride, and how creativity and skilled practices are entwined with memory. It arises from a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project entitled *Narrative Objects: The Sakha Summer Festival and Cultural Revitalisation* based in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, from 2015 to 2019.<sup>6</sup> In the pages that follow, we examine the creative responses of people in *Sakha Sire*, also known as the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in northeast Siberia<sup>7</sup> to a model carved from ancient mammoth ivory in the mid-nineteenth century by a skilled master artist. The model depicts *yhyakh* – an annual ceremony of renewal that takes place around mid-summer – and has been in the British Museum in London since 1867 (Figures 0.3 and 0.4). *Yhyakh*, though



*Figure 0.3* Wrestlers engaged in a tackle. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



Figure 0.4 Women watching the wrestlers. Note their finely carved *ilin-kelin kebiher* (silver jewellery). ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

long a fixture in the Sakha calendar, underwent considerable transformation during the Soviet era and, in some areas, was absent altogether, along with other visible signs of Sakha ethnicity and culture. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, *yhyakh* has become the most significant national holiday in *Sakha Sire* and is celebrated by thousands of people as an expression of national unity and spiritual revival (Romanova and Ignat'eva 2012; Nikanorova 2020). Similarly, the art of mammoth ivory carving has been transformed in the 150 years since the model was made, as different technologies have been adopted, styles of carving have fallen in and out of favour, and artists have engaged with Sakha stories, concepts and art forms (Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021). While this is not the only model to depict *yhyakh* from the nineteenth century, it is believed to be the earliest representation of this festival. It is for this reason that people in *Sakha Sire* find it so intriguing.<sup>8</sup>

In April 2015 this enigmatic model – which had last been exhibited in the UK in *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* exhibition, curated by Turner Prize-winning artist Grayson Perry (Perry 2011) – returned to Yakutsk, the Republic's capital, where it was displayed in the National Art Museum (NAM) for five months.<sup>9</sup> It was an immense draw for local people and, with over 30,000 visitors, the exhibition – *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey* – was one of the most successful ever mounted by the NAM staff. The model's return was the subject of considerable media interest, as were the responses to it by Sakha artists and cultural specialists who incorporated it into new work and even into *yhyakh* celebrations, and who used it as a focus to explore questions of Sakha identity and its place within the arts. These responses to the model highlight the myriad ways in which people engage with historic objects and use them as tools for contemplating the past and for supporting

cultural revival processes. It is the narratives associated with these responses, drawn primarily from fieldwork with Sakha ivory carvers, educators, and culture workers, which shape this book. Much more than an exploration of how people and artefacts are entangled, however, the book moves beyond an approach to artefacts that focuses on biographies and histories so common in museum anthropology. Instead, by considering the narratives generated by the model, we offer insights into how the materials and creative practices which inspired its maker continue to have resonance in the present in a context in which re-establishing cultural knowledge is as much bound up with contemporary material practices as it is with memories of the past and concepts of tradition and authenticity. In so doing we endeavour to respond to the key questions which guided our project: What is a narrative object? What stories do such items evoke? What challenges to established narratives do they pose? Given the emphasis in museum interpretation, as well as in the work of social scientists working with the material, to examine what it means to communicate with and through objects – “to make them talk” (Latour 2005: 79) – these questions are not merely academic.

### **Contexts: Sakha Sire and revitalisation work**

We began this book with an encounter in a museum storeroom in London, yet the underpinning research has relied on multiple periods of fieldwork in *Sakha Sire*, thousands of miles to the east, as well as visits to archives and museums in Paris, Edinburgh, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. One of us (Tanya) is Sakha, which means this book is shaped by insider perspectives that add unusual richness to our thinking, and we discuss our positionality further below. Here, though, we briefly introduce the Republic to situate the book, with more detail provided in [Part 1](#). Established in 1992 following the reforms of perestroika and glasnost’ and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) replaced the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which itself had been created in 1922.<sup>10</sup> The cattle and horse-breeding Turkic ancestors of the Sakha migrated to southern Siberia around the tenth century, gradually moving north along the Lena River from approximately the fifteenth century (Ksenofontov 1992 [1937]). The republic is immense and covers some 3.1 million square kilometres of tundra and taiga landscapes (Fondahl et al 2014: 57), which are organised administratively into regions known as *uluus*. With temperatures reaching over 30°C in the summer and well below 50°C in the winter, it is often referred to as a place of extremes, with the fluctuating climate and its impact on the land and livelihoods of local people a topic of increasing concern (Crate 2017). The demography has shifted markedly across the last century, with Sakha forming 82% of the population in 1926, yet 55% by the 2020–2021 census which recorded a population of approximately one million (Balzer 2021: 32). Today, the Republic is home to a significant number of Russians, many of whom have lengthy family histories in the region, with their parents or grandparents having been exiled to the Russian Far East during the later nineteenth century and early Soviet period or having relocated to work in the potentially lucrative extractive industries – specifically diamonds (Argounova-Low 2006). Economic migrants from Central Asian states contribute

to the ethnic diversity of the population, while other *korennnye malochislennye narody Severa* (Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples of the North), Even, Evenki, Chukchi, and Yukaghir, make up just over 4% of the population according to the most recent census (Rosstat 2020).

For much of our fieldwork, we based ourselves in Yakutsk, though we also travelled to *uluuses* further afield for short periods in 2015 and 2016. While visiting historic monuments and museums in Yakutsk, we noted that official statements routinely report that the city was founded in 1632 by Russian Cossacks, even though it was a Sakha settlement long before then. As Balzer (2021: 29) comments in relation to the 2007 annual republican *yhyakh*, the commemoration of “375 years of Yakutia’s entry into Russia” was openly celebrated for the benefit of Moscow officials with the installation of a statue of Cossack leader, Petr Beketov in the reconstructed old town. For Balzer, this “jubilee-ization” of history is controversial among the Sakha elite, yet it is a marked example of the ways in which certain versions of history prevail and how public expressions of history, culture and ethnicity continue to be modified, and contested, even at the same time as they are created, recreated, and mobilised (see also Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; Argounova-Low 2012).<sup>11</sup> Narratives of many forms are at play in *Sakha Sire*, and the complexities of how these are shaped and given voice and why they matter permeate this book.

When we began to plan the *Narrative Objects* project, it was in part a response to the increasing visibility of *yhyakh* from the 1990s onwards, which, in turn, was related to a wider movement that had gathered pace across the Soviet Union to transform and bring new meaning to traditions and values that the authorities had tried to undermine (Humphrey 2001). In *Sakha Sire*, culture workers and the academic elite have been at the forefront of reviving cultural practices and forms, including language and song, supported by policies put in place by the Sakha government. As Tanya explains in Part 1, over a relatively short period of time, *yhyakh* shifted from small-scale gatherings at the time of her own childhood, albeit one she did not attend, into a significant annual event celebrated across the Republic. The rise in prominence of Sakha cultural expressions, and specifically the transformation of *yhyakh*, was accompanied by reflection on the part of Sakha researchers on the sustained impact of Soviet ideology on Sakha ethnic identity and the extent to which Sakha ways of life and associated beliefs and expressive forms had been maintained and passed on in the face of often very challenging circumstances. Indeed, our work has been informed by ethnographic scholarship on *yhyakh* published in Russian (Romanova 1994), as well as a growing literature by Sakha and other researchers that examines *yhyakh* and related expressive forms within the wider context of cultural revival in Sakha (Yakutia), in Siberia more broadly, and even beyond (e.g., Yamada 2008; Peers 2019). The movement to recover and revive distinctly Sakha ways of being is understood by many Sakha scholars as a way of confronting the entrenched silences about Sakha ethnic identity which marked the years of the Soviet era, and of giving voice to those for whom speaking of Sakha culture – and indeed, in some cases, of speaking the Sakha language – was restricted and potentially dangerous. This scholarship – as well as that of non-Sakha researchers who have undertaken fine-grained anthropological and

sociological studies of contemporary life and its expression in *Sakha Sire* – was fundamental in shaping the direction of the *Narrative Objects* project (e.g., [Crate 2006; 2017; 2022; 2019; Ferguson 2019](#)). As our focus was upon a specific work of Sakha art and the ways in which it might intersect with narratives of *yhyakh* and cultural renewal more broadly, anthropological scholarship in the areas of absence and silence, presence and counter-narratives or voice, and creativity, as they relate to museum work, inspired our thinking and our approach as we developed the project and wrote this book. We briefly introduce the themes which we have found most valuable below and provide a deeper examination of their influence in the introductions to the three parts of this book.

### **Contexts: silence/absence**

Today *yhyakh* is considered to be the ultimate expression of Sakha ethnic and cultural spirit; as one of our interlocutors told us early in the planning of this project, Sakha people live this festival and spend all year preparing for it.<sup>12</sup> Under Soviet socialism, however, like many other expressive forms and practices, it was transformed into a generic celebration with its distinguishing features, in particular, shamanic prayers and the offering of *kymys* (fermented mare’s milk) to the spirits, being replaced with speeches from Soviet officials in support of the state ([Peers 2019: 260](#)).<sup>13</sup> Any such practices that could undermine the integrity of the Soviet Union and give rise to the expression of ethnic difference were treated with suspicion ([Argounova-Low 2012](#)). Ritual and healing practices associated with shamanism, for example, having already resisted the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church for well over a century, were further repressed, with the material accoutrements associated with shamanism being destroyed or confiscated in an effort to stamp out beliefs which challenged those of the authorities ([Balzer 2003; 2011; Fein 2018: 263; Franz 2019](#)). As often happens in environments shaped by totalitarianism, the conflict with the ideologically approved line of the Soviet government and the consequent disempowerment experienced by the Sakha people resulted in what has been identified in other contexts as “silence, passivity, and assent without participation” ([Portelli 1991: 113](#)). While Portelli made this observation in relation to Fascist Italy, the profound silencing of dissenters across the Soviet Union, and its repercussions, have been the focus of recent scholarship concerning how silences continue to be entrenched, and the mechanisms through which silence is maintained, over thirty years following the Soviet Union’s collapse (see, e.g., [Yurchak 2006; Laptander 2020; Gavrilova 2022](#)).

Silences, both literal and metaphorical, take many forms in a place like *Sakha Sire*. Linguistic anthropologist Jenanne Ferguson, for example, begins her ethnography of language practices in Yakutsk with a telling encounter with a friend who shared his experience of hesitancy in speaking Sakha in public prior to the 1980s and 1990s. She describes her surprise at hearing this “oft-unspoken taboo on speaking the language in the public sphere articulated quite so bluntly” ([Ferguson 2019: 1](#)). While the Sakha oral epic tradition of *olonkho* is now recognised by UNESCO, as Ferguson notes, many older Sakha speakers were exposed to communicative

norms shaped by ideological, social, and economic forces which influenced how and when they spoke their first language. By contrast, nowadays, cultural pride in Sakha language as well as in expressive and visual art forms is evident, for example, in murals on walls of the high-rise buildings in Yakutsk city centre depicting *choroons*, the carved wooden vessels used for *kymys*, or Sakha women in traditional silver jewellery; in the high-profile Sakha film industry; and in language and culture camps run during the school holidays. Yet silences persist in public places, as is clear from Balzer's example cited above concerning the presentation of Russian colonialism (a contentious word and concept) in Yakutsk, and is also apparent in the ways in which Sakha relations with *korennyye malochislennyye narody Severa* (Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples of the North) are made public. In a wide-ranging study of *kravevedcheskiy* museums<sup>14</sup> in Russia which includes the Yakut State United Museum of History and Culture of the Peoples of the North as a case study, for instance, Sofia Gavrilova (2019; 2022) adapts the idea of "common unsaids" to examine the ways in which museum representational practices are complicit in silencing the experiences of non-Sakha Indigenous peoples for whom Sakha (Yakutia) is also home. Gavrilova notes that the term "blank spots" in relation to Soviet history was used first by Mikhail Gorbachev in a 1987 speech to journalists, in which he argued that such lacunae should be eliminated (Remnick 1993, cited in Gavrilova 2019: 22). The concept has since been effectively employed by historians such as James V. Wertsch (2008) in his analysis of collective memory in Russia, in which he outlines the processes through which people and events in the Soviet Union could literally and figuratively be airbrushed out of existence, as well as critiqued in Alexei Yurchak's (2006) evocative and influential analysis of the last years of the Soviet Union in which he highlights the often paradoxical relationship that Soviet citizens had with the socialist system under which they had lived all their lives. Gavrilova builds on this scholarship to develop her concept of "common unsaids" which we find especially helpful given the *Narrative Objects* project's interests in museums, public memory and the assertion of cultural identity. For Gavrilova, "common unsaids" in *kravevedeniye* are built upon various silences or "unsaid" in Soviet historical narrative, Soviet geographies, and Soviet ethnography, and while they can relate to cultural myths, they "are often formed out of problematic topics, pasts, and landscapes, or from societal traumas" and "unite people and create identities around shared societal silences" (2019: 26). We find this concept useful for thinking through responses to the model of *yhyakh*, in that across the project, many people with whom we spoke made reference to the ways in which the model "filled gaps" or was "a missing piece" that could be used actively to challenge what was regarded as an absence of experience, or of knowledge, or of opportunity to learn drawn from the longer-term impacts of having been raised at a time when voicing Sakha ideas and expressing Sakha ethnic identity could be challenging.

### **Contexts: presence/voice**

Many anthropologists and historians have examined the notions of absence and its flipside of presence in relation to silence, and we have found work which is

explicitly linked to material culture extremely useful in reflecting on what a narrative object might be. Rebecca Bryant's (2014) discussion of "temporal dynamism", for example, in which she examines how material culture can trigger memory in sites of former conflict, has been especially helpful, as has scholarship concerning the use of historic photographs and other artefacts to draw out submerged memories influenced by James Runia's (2006) influential work on the metonymical presence of the past (e.g., Rasmussen 2012; Geismar and Morton 2015). We discuss these works in more depth in Part 2. This scholarship, as well as this book and the research that underpins it, draw upon the premise that historic artefacts can be used to elicit narratives that might otherwise remain silent. Moreover, such engagements have the potential to foster counter-narratives that challenge established perspectives on the past and can contribute in a very active way to local cultural revival movements. Evidence of the ways in which historic artefacts can be mobilised to contribute to cultural revitalisation can be found in a wide range of projects in which artefacts, photographs, and sound recordings acquired during colonial encounters with Indigenous people have been reunited with the descendants of the peoples associated with them in museum spaces (e.g., Fienup-Riordan 2005; Morphy and McKenzie 2022), through web-based "virtual repatriation" (e.g., Lyons 2013), and in fieldwork situations (e.g., Brown et al 2006). These projects have shown that, even in cases where peoples and heritage materials have long been separated, re-engagement can result in meaningful discussions, and the articulation of historical narratives with contemporary efforts to recover cultural knowledge that has been submerged following the imposition of state-supported assimilation policies. There is a well-established body of literature dealing with these themes as they relate to Indigenous peoples in North America and the Pacific, and while comparatively few scholars have addressed in depth how historic artefacts can contribute to processes of ethnic renewal in the former Soviet Union, as we discuss in Part 2, local initiatives in *Sakha Sire* and in other former Soviet republics in the last four decades are nonetheless part of this worldwide movement to support access to cultural heritage collections (see Ivanov-Unarov and Ivanova-Unarova 2003: 344–345; Miller 2004; Dudding 2019).

### **Contexts: art, creativity, and making**

We have been inspired by scholarship on art, creativity, and material engagement as we worked through this project. Sakha scholarship on ivory carving (e.g., Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021) underpins our understanding of historical techniques as well as the wider social context in which carvings were made and circulated. This literature has provided a useful foundation for thinking through how the market in ivory goods today has social, economic and cultural implications for those Sakha people who, in response to the demand for mammoth ivory following global bans on the trade in elephant ivory, have become embedded in a network which is lucrative yet potentially dangerous. While we do not focus in this book on the mammoth ivory trade and its connection with the art market, the topic arose in conversation with some of our interlocutors, who told us about the challenges

facing carvers who need access to this rare and expensive material to make a living, and about how this trade is affecting people in northern parts of the Republic, where the desire to seek out ivory as the permafrost melts, rather than participate in more mundane subsistence activities, is contributing to a shift in the transmission of cultural practices as well as to social problems.

The art historical scholarship has provided useful background for thinking about the model as an artefact, however, the *Narrative Objects* project has also provided opportunities to think about the materials from which artefacts are made – in this case ivory that is thousands of years old from an animal that once lived, but like all of its kind, is now extinct (though it remains present in Sakha traditional beliefs as well as in fantastical stories and real-life scientific aspirations about bringing mammoths back to life). Clearly this is a material imbued with “liveliness” (Ingold 2011). Tim Ingold’s work has been especially illuminating, most especially his reflections on making, which encourage thinking from within in relation to what it means to make things (Ingold 2013), and his ideas about materials and materiality (Ingold 2007), which we have found to be both provocative and productive (see Howes 2022 for a recent critique). For example, early in the planning for this project, while we were still writing our funding bid, we gave a short presentation to our colleagues in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, at which Ingold encouraged us to begin with the mammoth, the material out of which the model was carved. Mammoth ivory is a material that is not only shaped by carvers but, having lain in the ground below layers of permafrost for thousands of years following the demise of the animal, it takes on the colours of deposits within the earth, which some artists today work with when they respond to a piece of tusk. Furthermore, this is a material that continues to shift, even in the enclosed space of a sealed display case. Artefacts made from ivory are by no means inert. The malleability of this substance and the responsiveness of ivory to its environment was a theme that featured regularly in our conversations with carvers in their workshops and with NAM staff in response to our questions about the small glass dishes of water they keep alongside the ivory artworks on display, placed there to regulate fluctuations in humidity and lessen the perceived risk of cracks in the material. In this book, we use the term “material dynamism” to encapsulate these ideas, which we believe aligns well with how we have used the concept of “temporal dynamism” proposed by Bryant (2014) and noted above. While our own direct experiences of “thinking while making” were limited to observing a workshop led by a carving specialist held at the NAM in which participants carved miniature figures from soap as part of outreach activities associated with the project, we found the ideas in Ingold’s work, and those expressed in essays in a volume edited by Hallam and Ingold (2014) on the theme of making and growing to be immensely helpful as we talked with carvers and educators about how they worked with mammoth ivory and with the model itself.

Similarly, essays in Hallam and Ingold’s (2007) earlier volume on creativity and cultural improvisation have generated useful insights into how we might think through the responses to the model that we witnessed and heard about during the project. As we discuss in Parts 2 and 3, these responses range from using the

model as the inspiration for a theatrical performance associated with the *yhyakh* of 2016, held a year after the model's return, to students imagining what a larger version of the model might look like following speculation from Sakha observers that perhaps the model was incomplete. That this model could generate such a wide range of creative responses and exciting discussions is testimony to its capacity to inspire, challenge, and remind us of its potential. Just like the material of which it is made, the model has no fixed meanings and the possibilities for interpretation are limitless.

### **Positionality, underpinning research, and organisational approach**

Co-authoring a book brings with it challenges as well as great enjoyment. The *Narrative Objects* project has allowed us to draw on our complementary research interests and professional expertise in the framing of the project, the fieldwork we undertook, and the subsequent analysis and writing. Tanya, as a Sakha scholar raised in Yakutsk, with interests in narrative, memory, and the expression of ethnic markers in *Sakha Sire*, as well as a professional background in translation, took a key role in translating fieldwork experiences and language to Alison, for whom this project was a first foray into fieldwork in a new research environment. Tanya's skills extended beyond translating between Sakha, Russian, and English to explaining everyday matters to Alison, whose Russian language skills are rudimentary. Alison's initial concerns about the impact of Tanya spending so much time translating were lessened when Tanya explained that the act of translation allowed her to remember and process the words of our interlocutors better. We developed a working pattern in which Alison would write notes by hand as Tanya translated. We would revisit these as soon as possible afterwards to supplement them with additional notes in Sakha and Russian that Tanya had jotted in her notebook during interviews and gatherings. This added depth to the preliminary notations and allowed us to reflect on our observations and conversations as we worked through each day's events. Additionally, Tanya's ability to draw on family relationships and long-standing friendships for support, her familiarity with government offices and processes, and her understanding of how life is lived in rural and urban settings in *Sakha Sire* smoothed the way for us as we navigated each stage of the project. In turn, and much like the research partnership described by Bloch and Kendall (2000: xii) in *The Museum at the End of the World*, the novelty of fieldwork in what to Alison was a new environment meant that she routinely drew Tanya's attention to what she might otherwise have overlooked. Across the project, the strange and familiar often intersected when we expected it least, and we both observed sides of the other that were new to us. Meanwhile, a background in museum anthropology with most of her fieldwork being undertaken in traditional Blackfoot territory in what is now Alberta, Canada, and Montana, United States, along with extensive fieldwork in museums and archives, has led Alison to see collecting institutions and galleries as productive sites for exploring the tensions – productive and otherwise – that emerge in encounters between Indigenous people and material heritage. Her familiarity with the museum as a site of power and

knowledge production as well as a space in which divergent views can rub alongside each other, on top of her professional expertise in curatorial processes such as loans and exhibition development, ensured that our museum partners were confident that we genuinely understood the constraints they face and how this might influence their participation in the project. We were joined in the research for this project by Eleanor Peers, a social scientist with interests in post-Soviet popular culture, neo-shamanism, and ethnic revival and identity, and a background of fieldwork in *Sakha Sire* and the Republic of Buryatia (e.g., Peers 2016; 2019; Peers et al 2020; Peers 2023). Eleanor had attended many *yhyakh* celebrations across Sakha (Yakutia) during earlier research and brought to the project a deep familiarity with Sakha expressive forms, as well as fluency in Russian, and an existing network of Sakha friends and colleagues, both of which were immensely valuable in the organisation of project activities.

We do not envision this book as a conventional ethnography, though it certainly draws upon what might be considered ethnographic experiences, and we made use of standard anthropological methods, such as field notes, interviews, observations, participation, and discussion throughout the project. Instead, it combines ethnographic reflections with archival and museum-based research to create our version of what unfolded when *Model of a Summer Festival* returned to Yakutsk, while recognising that there are many ways of responding to the model (e.g., Peers 2022) and that part of the appeal of this enigmatic object is its lack of fixity of meaning. We undertook our first fieldwork together in April 2013 when Tanya and Alison visited Yakutsk to discuss the possibilities for a funding bid with local culture workers, artists, and NAM staff. In 2015 and 2016, together with Eleanor, we undertook several further periods of fieldwork, ranging in length from a week in connection with the installation and exhibition opening to approximately three weeks during mid-summer. Tanya and Alison made a final short visit to Yakutsk together in April 2019 to meet museum colleagues and many of the carvers with whom we had worked in order to update them on the progress of project publications and to discuss future opportunities for collaboration.<sup>15</sup> In 2015 and 2016 Tanya stayed in Yakutsk for an extended period over the summer months, continuing fieldwork for the project independently, and she was also able to travel to Yakutsk for the closing of the exhibition that autumn. We (Tanya and Alison) undertook archival and museum fieldwork together in the National Library of France in Paris and in 2017 and 2018 in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where there are significant collections of Sakha ivory carving, which we were able to discuss with current and retired curatorial staff. Additionally, Alison spent several weeks in London working with the British Museum archives and British Library collections, focussing on documents related to the 1867 Paris International Exhibition. Eleanor undertook two periods of fieldwork in *Sakha Sire*, each lasting approximately three months in 2015 and 2016, during which she gathered perspectives on the model from visitors to the NAM as part of assessing local responses to the model's return, and interviewed artists, students, and culture workers. She worked closely with NAM Senior Researcher, Efrosinia Nogovitsyna, to follow up on efforts to identify the maker of the model and to better understand the circumstances through which it was sent to

Paris (Nogovitsyna 2017; Peers 2022). Additionally, she spent part of her fieldwork in Suntarskii *uluus*, some 900 km from Yakutsk, to gain insight into people's experiences of *yhyakh* in a region where there was less overt repression of Sakha beliefs and practices during the Tsarist and later Soviet eras than in other parts of the Republic (including in Yakutsk and Taatta *uluus*, where Tanya's family is from).

All three of us attended numerous *yhyakh* celebrations across the project, ranging from large-scale events sponsored by the Sakha government, to smaller, more intimate gatherings in Taatta *uluus* and Megino-Kangalasskii *uluus*. During our research, we visited numerous local museums and heritage sites, attended talks and events, spent hours in the workshops of master carvers, danced, ate, laughed, and learned, and these experiences all feed into this book. An important element of the project was the reciprocal research visit we hosted in 2016 for three of our museum colleagues from Yakutsk and St. Petersburg, all of whom are specialists in Siberian material culture. For two weeks, our colleagues visited the British Museum, the National Museum of Scotland, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, ably guided by Eleanor and joined by Tanya and Alison when teaching commitments allowed. During these visits, they met with curators and conservators, shared their knowledge about the collections they saw, and exchanged professional expertise. While we do not include reflections on this work in this book, it was nonetheless an important aspect of the relationship-building we were engaged in across the project.

As we discussed how to present the encounters we and others have had with *Model of a Summer Festival*, we recognised that our complementarity is our strength, and so while some experiments in collaborative ethnographic writing have endeavoured to meld different voices into one without specifying the author, we have resisted this temptation. Instead, each of us has taken the lead on a part of this book according to our expertise and positionality, and while we have read and commented on each other's writing, adding suggestions and drawing out nuances, we recognise our very different communication styles and have only lightly edited each other's words, choosing instead to highlight instances where more depth was required or where ideas derived from our reading or recollections from our fieldwork might enrich the text. The book is divided into three parts, with Tanya leading on [Parts 1](#) and [3](#). This has allowed her to draw on her experience as a Sakha person growing up in Yakutsk at a time when *yhyakh* and other markers of Sakha identity, such as language, were discouraged by the Soviet authorities. She brings her embodied knowledge of Sakha ways of living, as well as an ability to reflect on the experiences we had during the project with an eye to Sakha debates about identity politics and cultural practices, and how these have transformed during the turbulent years of the 1990s onwards as the Republic carved out a space for itself within the Russian Federation. Alison led on [Part 2](#) which has enabled her to utilise her archival skills and familiarity with museums as field sites, and to contextualise this within her wider experience of working with museums and Indigenous peoples on projects of cultural revival using collections as a focus. While working in *Sakha Sire* was new to her, having worked for many years in a context where Indigenous

identity politics, sovereignty, and cultural issues play a significant role in shaping relations between local people and the state, she was struck by how these matters are manifested in *Sakha Sire*, as well as by some of the parallels in strategies local people have developed to engage with cultural materials.<sup>16</sup> She also wrote the Introduction, led on the Conclusion, and assembled the manuscript. The book does not take a chronological approach, given that the story we tell straddles place, time, and differing worlds. **Part 1**, Places and History, introduces *hyakh* by locating it within Sakha belief systems, and then examines the ways in which the celebration transformed in the early years of the Soviet era through to its revival in the immediate post-Soviet era. This allows us to consider silencing as a political act as well as explaining how giving voice to Sakha cultural expression has been explicitly tied to the revival of *hyakh*. In **Part 2**, Exhibition Narratives, we trace how the model of *hyakh* has featured in a series of displays, from the Paris International Exhibition of 1867 through to *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, which opened at the British Museum in 2020, with most emphasis on its place within *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey* in the NAM in 2015. We use these exhibitions to reflect upon themes such as representational practices and access to heritage, as well as upon the ways in which historic artefacts generate meaning. Having traced the display history of *Model of a Summer Festival* in **Part 2**, the lengthy history of Sakha production and circulation of creative works is further reinforced in **Part 3**, Craftsmanship and Creativity.<sup>17</sup> **Part 3** also serves to extend the discussion of how people responded to the model by examining the relationship between material and art in connection with mammoth ivory carving in *Sakha Sire*. Drawing on museum and archival research and fieldwork with carvers, it examines the ways in which maker and material are intertwined, as well as how mammoth ivory, as a material and a resource, has taken on renewed significance in *Sakha Sire* in the face of socio-economic challenges connected to climate change. Together, the three parts highlight both how creativity and narrativity intersect in response to *Model of a Summer Festival*, and how this model acts as a starting point for addressing wider revival activities in Sakha (Yakutia).

We end this introduction with a note on our use of “object”. Words matter, and there is currently much discussion in the museum sector about how to respond to language that has its roots in colonial processes and Eurocentric scientific values, and that continues to silence and alienate those with ancestral ties to collections. These discussions are feeding into professional practice in transformative ways.<sup>18</sup> As such, while we use the word “object” throughout this book and are fully aware of its limitations, especially within a study concerned with materials and creativity and given efforts to critique language use and challenge entrenched and offensive terms, we are also mindful that the model was made with a non-Sakha audience in mind. It is undoubtedly autoethnographic, and, as our study shows, has important meanings for contemporary Sakha, but it was nonetheless commissioned as an artwork for external consumption. We have struggled to find an alternative to “object” in the context of this project, and alternatives that have been proposed in other contexts do not sit well with the model. “Belonging” or “cultural belonging”, terms that began to be used in North America with reference to Indigenous-made

items around the early 2000s, have been widely adopted, albeit not always critically. “Relative” is also used in some instances, as it nullifies the connotations of depersonalisation associated with “object”. Synonyms such as “artefact” or “thing” are also unsatisfactory for our purposes, although the original meaning of artefact as “made by hand” is accurate in the case of the model. Cultural approaches to language are diverse, and we worked across three languages (English, Sakha, and Russian) for this project. Moreover, while we are fully aware that some Sakha may consider certain categories of items to be persons or have the potential for personhood – for example, those associated with ritual – we did not work with material of that nature. That we raise this issue of terminology points to the wider matter of how people relate to museums and the things they contain. In *Sakha Sire*, there is an ongoing discussion about this topic, just as there is in other places, and these discussions are contributing to the re-evaluation and negotiation of museum language. We hope that readers will accept that our ultimate conclusions make it clear that our interests lie not in the “object-ness” of museum collections, but in their ability to generate multiple, fluid narratives.

## Notes

- 1 At the time of our visit, researchers could access the collections by appointment, however, the museum staff are now in the process of relocating the collections to purpose-built stores, including the new V&A East Storehouse scheduled to open to the public in May 2025, and the World Conservation and Exhibition Centre (WCEC) based at the British Museum’s Bloomsbury site which provides an accessible space with monitored environmental conditions suitable for the many organic materials found in ethnographic collections. See: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/va-east> (accessed 30 August 2024) and <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/whats-in-store-moving-objects-to-bloomsbury/> (accessed 8 July 2022).
- 2 This was not the first time that Tanya had seen the model, having held preliminary discussions with the British Museum staff about the possibilities for working with it as far back as 2008, but it was the first time we saw it together as a project team. Our observations became useful starting points for the many discussions we were to have as the project developed within *Sakha Sire*, and also in the UK as we worked through our research experiences.
- 3 This is how the model was recorded in the original British Museum accession records; however, for simplicity’s sake, throughout this book, we normally refer to it as “*Model of a Summer Festival*”, “model of *yhyakh*” or “the model”. We have chosen not to examine the distinction between models and miniatures in this book, as this is addressed by others (e.g., Stewart 1984; Mack 2007; Davy and Dixon 2019). Our interlocutors in *Sakha Sire* routinely referred to it as a model, and while discussions of scale permeated some of our conversations, other matters were of greater interest to them.
- 4 Readers wishing to experiment with this technique may find the Tate’s Guide to Slow Looking helpful: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/guide-slow-looking> (accessed 15 July 2022).
- 5 Brown, fieldnotes, 26 November 2014. See Daston (2004) for a discussion of how “things are simultaneously material and meaningful”. “Even if they do not literally whisper and shout” she notes, “things press their message on attentive auditors – many messages, delicately adjusted to context, revelatory, and right on target” (2004: 12).
- 6 Project reference: AH/M000265/1.
- 7 “Siberia” is not a locator that would routinely be used by people in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia); instead, they conventionally situate themselves within Northeast

- Russia or the Far East (*Dal'nevostochnyi region*). This raises questions of perspective and positionality which have influenced our research and writing choices and, as was clear from the fieldwork which underpins this book, are connected to debates related to the perception of centre and periphery and the place of Sakha in the world beyond the borders of the geographical region (cf. Balzer 2021: 5 on the controversial terms “Siberia” and “Siberiaki” or “old settlers”). While we use *Sakha Sire*, the name Sakha people use for their homeland, we also use Yakutia, Sakha (Yakutia), and the Republic throughout this book to reflect on the historic periods, and official titles.
- 8 Other examples which we examined during the *Narrative Objects* project are in the collections of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) and Russian Ethnographic Museum, both located in St. Petersburg (for details see Ivanov 1979 and Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021).
  - 9 The name of the artist was not recorded in the *Catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Exhibition* (Anon 1867), and so was absent from the British Museum accession files. Sakha art historians had been keen to establish his identity since the 1990s when they first became aware of the model, as is clear from local publications from this time. An extract of an article reproduced in the research files of the NAM shows that Vasilii N. Ivanov, Director of the Institute of Humanities in Yakutsk, who saw the model during a visit to the UK in 1997 and had promised the British Museum staff that he would endeavour to identify the carver, located evidence in documents from the Republic’s archives that suggested the carver was Nikolai Belousov from the Khamagatta *nasleg* in Namskii *uluus* (V. N. Ivanov 2001, The Yakut exhibit in the British Museum, trans. S. Kholmogorova, *Yakut Archive* No. 1, NAM research files). Ivanov’s article includes a transcript of a letter he sent to Brian Durrans of the British Museum in September 1999 with this information, however, as the original letter is not filed in the British Museum’s Asia Department records, it is not known whether it was ever received. During the *Narrative Objects* project, Eleanor Peers and NAM senior researcher Efrosinia Nogovitsyna located archival evidence in the Russian Museum of Ethnography (REM) in St. Petersburg to support the earlier speculation that the carver was Nikolai Belousov. This evidence is augmented by stylistic similarities between the human figures in *Model of a Summer Festival* and a better documented piece in the REM which is attributed to Belousov (see Nogovitsyna 2017: 43–7; Gabysheva and Nogovitsyna 2016).
  - 10 Neither terminology nor borders are stable. *Iakutskaiia oblast’* (Yakut oblast’) was the Russian term used in the nineteenth century to describe the region which is today referred to as the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), though the current boundaries do not map exactly onto the nineteenth century territory. *Sakha Sire* is how Indigenous Sakha people refer to their land.
  - 11 Both the glossing over and silencing of Sakha history and culture has a lengthy history. For a related discussion of the suppression of the work of nineteenth century ethnographers, see Takakura (2006).
  - 12 Brown, fieldnotes, 4 April 2013.
  - 13 For a related discussion of the Soviet House of Culture see King (2011) and essays in Donahoe and Habeck (2011). Donahoe and Habeck (2011: xi) note that in the past “Houses of Culture and their predecessors served as outposts for the Soviet *mission civilisatrice*...[;]...they were to confer Soviet culture and enlightenment upon the allegedly ‘unenlightened’ peoples of Siberia and Central Asia”.
  - 14 Gavrilova (2019: 13) defines the Russian phenomenon of *kravevedcheskiy* museums as those which “are meant to represent, *kravevedeniye*, [which] can be translated literally as ‘the knowledge (or study) of a home area’, which suggests its apparent purpose: to provide a summary of all essential information about the nature and society of a given territory”.
  - 15 This visit allowed us to continue our work with filmmaker Ellei Ivanov to develop a film about the project and to facilitate the commission of a new mammoth ivory sculpture for the British Museum from master carver Fedor Markov (Ivanov 2024).

- 16 We make this point while noting the complexities of the term “Indigenous” (capitalised) in relation to Russia, where official policy legally recognises as Indigenous only the so-called *korennye malochislennye narody* (Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples) – those with populations under 50,000. This contrasts with the United Nations Indigenous Peoples’ Forum approach, which also includes peoples with a republic within a larger state (Balzer 2021: 2). In this book we apply the term “Indigenous” to Sakha people, whose population according to the 2020 census numbered 469 348 (Rosstat 2020).
- 17 Some sections of Part 3 appeared as “Sensing the Life of Material: Mammoth Ivory and Craftsmen’s Work” in *Sibirica* 22 (3) (December 2023): 1–21, published by Berghahn, and appear here in a revised form.
- 18 The Pitt Rivers Museum’s *Labelling Matters* project (<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/labelling-matters>) has tackled this issue explicitly via gallery interventions, podcasts, and policy change. Carreau and Gunn (2024) discuss the challenge of incorporating critical documentation work into other museum projects as a route to addressing discriminatory language normalised through historical cataloguing practices. Essays in the special issue of *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* – Indigenous Knowledge Organization provide numerous examples of museums and cultural centres that are adopting Indigenous community-based approaches to knowledge organisation to nullify inaccuracies created by misnaming and other mainstream standardisation practices (Metoyer and Doyle 2015: 477).

## References

- Anon. 1867. *Catalogue Spécial de la Section Russe à l’Exposition Universelle de Paris en 1867* [*Catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Paris: Imprimerie Générale de Ch. Lahure.
- Argounova-Low, T. 2006. Frontier: reflections from the other side. *Cambridge Anthropology* 26(2): 47–56.
- Argounova-Low, T. 2012. *The Politics of Nationalism in the Republic of Sakha (Northeastern Siberia) 1900–2000: Ethnic Conflicts Under the Soviet Regime*. Edwin Mellen Press. Lewiston: New York.
- Balzer, M. M. 2003. Legacies of fear: religious repression and resilience in Siberia. In *The Psychological Impact of War Trauma on Civilians: An International Perspective*, eds. S. Krippner and T. M. McIntyre. Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, pp. 257–267.
- Balzer, M. M. 2011. *Shamans, Spirituality, and Cultural Revitalization: Explorations in Siberia and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Balzer, M. M. 2021. *Galvanising Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bloch, A. and L. Kendall 2004. *The Museum at the End of the World: Encounters in the Russian Far East*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brown, A. K., L. Peers and members of the Kainai Nation 2006. *Pictures Bring Us Messages/Sinaakssiiksi aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History’s remainders: on time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Caple, C. 2006. *Objects: Reluctant Witnesses to the Past*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Crate, S. A. 2006. *Cows, Kin and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press.
- Crate, S. A. 2017. Climate change adaptation and traditional cultures in Northern Russia. *Current History* 116(792): 277–281.
- Crate, S. A. 2019. Ohuokhai: transmitter of biocultural heritage for Sakha of Northeastern Siberia. *Journal of Ethnobiology* 39(3): 409–424.
- Crate, S. A. 2022. Sakha and *alaas*: place attachment and cultural identity in a time of climate change. *Anthropology and Humanism* 47: 20–38.

- Cruikshank, J. and T. Argounova 2000. Reinscribing meaning: memory and indigenous identity in Sakha Republic (Yakutia)'. *Arctic Anthropology* 37(1): 96–119.
- Daston, L. 2004. Speechless. In *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*, ed. L. Daston. New York: Zone Books, pp. 9–24.
- Davy, J. W. and C. Dixon 2019. What makes a miniature?: An introduction. In *Worlds in Miniature: Contemplating Miniaturisation in Global Material Culture*, eds. J. W. Davy and C. Dixon. London: UCL Press, pp. 1–17.
- Donahoe, B. and J. O. Habeck eds. 2011. *Reconstructing the House of Culture: Community, Self, and the Makings of Culture in Russia and Beyond*. New York: Berghahn.
- Dudding, J. 2019. Chasing shadows: Sharing photographs from former Northwest Manchuria. In *Life Histories of Ethnos Theory in Russia and Beyond*, eds. D. G. Anderson, D. V. Arzyutov, and S. S. Alymov. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, pp. 293–348.
- Fein, J. 2018. “Scientific crude” for currency: prospecting for specimens in Stalin’s Siberia. *Osiris* 33(1): 253–268.
- Ferguson, J. K. 2019. *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practices in the City*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Fienup-Riordan, A. ed. 2005. *Things of Our Ancestors: Yup’ik Elders Explore the Jacobsen Collection at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Fondahl, G., S. Crate, and V. V. Filippova 2014. Sakha Republic (Yakutia): Russian Federation. In *Arctic Social Indicators/ASI II Implementation*, eds. J. Larsen, P. Schweitzer and A. Petrov. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, pp. 57–91.
- Franz, M. K. 2019. A Gathering of Names: On the Categories and Collections of Siberian Shamanic Materials in Late Imperial Russian Museum, 1880-1910. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Toronto.
- Gabysheva, A. L. and E. S. Nogovitsyna 2016. Puteshestvie dlinoiu v vek ...Raskrytaia taina [A century-long journey ...mystery resolved]. *ILIN* 1: 4–19.
- Gavrilova, S. 2019. The present taxidermied: Soviet ‘common unsaids’ in Russian krayevedcheskiy museums. Unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford.
- Gavrilova, S. 2022. *Russia’s Regional Museums: Representing and Misrepresenting Knowledge about Nature, History and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Geismar, H. and C. Morton 2015. Introduction. *Photographies* 8(3): 231–233.
- Greene, C. 1992. Attribution, documentation, and the ideal type’. In *Art and Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture and Museum Studies in Honor of Jane Powell Dwyer*, ed. H. Juli. Brown University Research Papers in Anthropology, 5. Providence: Brown University, pp. 9–17.
- Hallam, E. and T. Ingold eds. 2007. *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. London: Routledge.
- Hallam, E. and T. Ingold eds. 2014. *Making and Growing: Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Hodge, C. J. 2018. Decolonizing collections-based learning: experiential observation as an interdisciplinary framework for object study. *Museum Anthropology* 41(2):142–158.
- Howes, D. 2022. In defense of materiality: attending to the sensori-social life of things. *Journal of Material Culture* 27(3): 313–335.
- Humphrey, C. 2001. *Marx Went Away - But Karl Stayed Behind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ingold, T. 2007. Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14(1): 1–16.
- Ingold, T. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge.
- Ivanov, E. 2024. *Isyakh – Krugovorot Zhizni* [Yhyakh, The Circle of Life]. Yakutsk: UStar Studia.
- Ivanov, V. 1979. *Iakutskaiia Rez’ba po Kosti* [Yakut Ivory Carving]. Moscow: Nauka.
- Ivanov-Unarov, V. and Z. Ivanova-Unarova 2003. The revitalization of the traditional culture of Northeast Siberian peoples: The role of the Jesup Expedition. In *Constructing Cultures Then and Now. Celebrating Franz Boas and the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Contributions to Circumpolar Anthropology*, Vol. 4, eds. L. Kendall and I. Krupnik.

- Washington DC: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, pp. 336–347.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. and L. Alekseeva. 2021. Ivory carving in Yakutia: national identity and processes of acculturation. *Sibirica* 20(2): 76–101.
- King, A. 2011. *Living with Koryak Traditions: Playing with Culture in Siberia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ksenofontov, G.V. 1992 [1937]. *Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: Ocherki po Drevnei Istorii Iakutov* [The Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: Essays on Ancient History of the Yakut People]. Vol. 1. Yakutsk: Natsional'noe Izdatel'stvo Respubliki Sakha (Iakutiia).
- Laptander, R. 2020. 'When we got reindeer, we moved to live to the tundra': The spoken and silenced history of the Yamal Nenets. Unpublished Doctor of Social Sciences thesis, Faculty of Social Sciences, Rovaniemi, University of Lapland. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-200-9>. Accessed 23 September 2023
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lemire, B., L. Peers, and A. Whitelaw 2021. *Object Lives and Global Histories in Northern North America: Material Culture in Motion, c. 1780-1980*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.
- Lyons, N. 2013. *Where the Wind Blows Us: Practicing Critical Community Archaeology in the Canadian North*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Mack, J. 2007. *The Art of Small Things*. London: British Museum Press.
- Metoyer, C. A. and A.M. Doyle 2015. Introduction. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 53(5–6): 475–78.
- Miller, T. R. 2004. Object lessons: Collecting wooden spirits and wax voices as cultural property. In *Properties of Culture – Culture as Property. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia* ed. E. Kasten. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, pp. 171–201.
- Morphy, H. and R. McKenzie eds. 2022. *Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value*. London: Routledge.
- Nikanorova L. 2020. Religion-making at the Sakha *Yhyakh*. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 59(1): 29–51.
- Nogovitsyna, E. S. 2017. *Vechnoe Pominovanie...Pamiati Iakutskogo Kuptsa 2-oi Gil'dii Gavriila Prokop'evicha Pavlova Posviashchaetsa* [Eternal Commemoration...to the Memory of Gavriil Prokop'evich Pavlov, a Yakutsk Merchant of the 2nd Guild]. Berdigiastiakh: *Üle Kütühe*.
- Peers, E. 2016. A nation's glorious heritage as spiritual journey? History making and the Sakha shamanic revival. In *History-making in Central Asia: Contemporary Actors and Practices*, ed. S. Jacquesson. Weissbaden: Reichert Verlag, pp. 122–138.
- Peers, E. 2019. Soviet *kul'tura* in post-Soviet identification: The aesthetics of ethnicity in Sakha (Yakutia). In *Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North*, ed. J. O. Habeck. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 257–293.
- Peers, E., 2022. What's in a model? Shifting multispecies relationships in Sakha (Yakutia). *Lagoonscapes* 2(1): 1–16.
- Peers, E., 2023. Dancing with cranes, singing to gods: The Sakha *Yhyakh* and post-Soviet national revival. In *The Siberian World*, eds. J. P. Ziker, J. Ferguson, and V. Davydov. London: Routledge: 219–231.
- Peers, E., A. Ventsel and L. Sidorova 2020. Voices of the forests, voices of the streets: Popular music and modernist transformation in Sakha (Yakutia), Northeast Siberia. In *Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic*, eds. T. Koivurova, E. Grete Broderstad, D. Cambou, D. Dorrough, and F. Stammeler. London: Routledge, pp. 76–91.
- Perry, G., 2011. *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. London: The British Museum Press.
- Prown, J. David 1982. Mind in matter: an introduction to material culture theory and method. *Winterthur Portfolio* 17(1): 1–19.
- Rasmussen, L. R. 2012. Touching materiality: presenting the past of everyday school life. *Memory Studies* 5(2): 114–130.

- Remnick, D. (1993). *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*. London: Viking.
- Rose, S. 2017. Close looking and conviction. *Art History* 40(1): 156–177.
- Rosstat (Federal'naia Sluzhba Gosstatistiki). 2020. Vserossiiskaia Perepis' Naseleniia [All-Russia Population Census]. Tom 5, tablitsa 1 [Volume 5, table 1]. Accessed 1 September 2023.
- Runia, E., 2006. Presence. *History and Theory* 45(1): 1–29.
- Romanova, E. N. 1994. *Iakutskii Prazdnik Yhyakh: Istoki i Predstavleniia* [The Yakut Holiday Yhyakh: Origins and Ideas]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Romanova E. N. and V. B. Ignat'eva 2012. 'The Yakut [Sakha] national festival Ysyakh in transition: historical myth, ethnocultural image, and contemporary festival narrative. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 50(4): 42–55.
- Stewart, S. 1984. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Takakura, H. 2006. 'Indigenous intellectuals and suppressed Russian anthropology: Sakha ethnography from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s.' *Current Anthropology* 47(6): 1009–1016.
- Wertsch, J. V. 2008. Blank spots in collective memory: a case study of Russia. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617: 58–71.
- Yamada, T. 2000. The revival of rituals among the Sakha-Yakut and the Hokkaido Ainu. *Acta Borealia* 17(1): 77–115.
- Yurchak, A. 2006. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

**Part 1**

# **Places and History**



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# 1.1 Introduction

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), also referred to as *Sakha Sire*, is Russia's largest political unit territorially (Figure 1.1). Situated in the north-east of the country, administratively it belongs to the *Dal'nevostochnyi federal'nyi okrug* (The Russian Far Eastern region). It comprises almost one-fifth of the entire territory of the Russian Federation and is 3,103,200 square kilometres. Despite its vastness, Yakutia remains little known beyond its borders, apart from clichéd visions of its remoteness, wilderness, and climate. It has, however, been known for centuries for its trade of mammoth tusks. As discussed later in Part 1, Indigenous people had long-standing trading connections with southern countries and engaged in barter exchange with their immediate neighbours as well as with merchants from China, Mongolia, and Arabia, long before the arrival of Russian explorers (Digby 1926; Cohen 2002; Kuznetsova and Starodubtseva 2009). According to some scholars,



Figure 1.1 The Russian Federation. Drawn by Jennifer Johnston, University of Aberdeen.

DOI: [10.4324/9780429456398-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456398-3)

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

the mammoth ivory trade with China started as early as the ninth or tenth century (Laufer 1925; Cohen 2002:65). Later, Yakutia became recognised for its reserves of gold, discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, and diamonds in the 1960s; mineral explorations of these natural resources, as well as coal, initiated several waves of economic development in the region and determined its industrial profile for many decades (Argunov 1985: 236–242; 1988: 14). Rich reserves of mineral resources turned the area into a supplier of raw materials for the Soviet state.

This region has experienced intense political, social, and economic changes throughout the socialist period and after the cessation of the USSR, but alongside these shifts, there have been notable transformations related to Sakha people's sense of identity. Increased ethnic consciousness and confidence, as well as the renewed relationship with ancestral heritage, are the focus of [Part 1](#) in this book. Tanya, who was born and grew up in Yakutsk in the late Soviet period, and who left to study in the UK after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is in a unique position to have observed these developments both from afar and up close when visiting her extended family in rural areas and the city. Almost thirty years since the establishment of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Yakutsk is an expanded and vibrant city with some 375,000 residents.<sup>1</sup> Yakutsk was the main location of our fieldwork, where most of our interviews and meetings with art historians and ivory carvers took place, and where the National Arts Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (hereafter NAM) is located.

Yakutsk is a place of tangible history despite the pressures of modernity. During our walks in the city, when moving from one meeting to another or on an evening stroll, we would see a sharp contrast between the old and the new, paucity and wealth: small, wooden houses, tilted from age and gradually melting permafrost, alongside new, glass-and-steel business buildings. Old-fashioned Soviet buses rolling on the road slowly next to the latest models of foreign vehicles. It is inevitable, therefore, that this book relies on the *long durée* approach and includes reflections on processes stretching over centuries from past to present. As part of this approach, we attend to different, often contrasting, historical periods and events, and observe how these different temporalities become intertwined, collide, or enhance each other, frequently in the most unexpected ways. Historical eras are multitemporal, argues Serres, as they draw simultaneously “from the obsolete, the contemporary, and the futuristic” (1995: 60). He argues that objects, too, are multitemporal and polychronic and gather time “with multiple pleats” (Serres 1995: 60). Bryant takes the idea of Serres further and proposes the concept of “temporal dynamism” (Bryant 2014), which we find conducive for thinking about how memory, narrative, objects, and materials intersect. Bryant asserts that objects and materials not only hold histories and evoke the past, but similarly explain the present and point towards the future. Temporal dynamism, as a term, thus implies that materials and objects have the capacity to elicit different temporalities, which results in collaboration or conflict of timespaces; these colliding or cooperating temporalities can be used to explain certain past or current processes and to identify trajectories for moving forward. In this book, we use temporalities as an opportunity to comment on political, social, and cultural transfigurations that took place over time in the region.

In **Part 1** we lay the foundation for the book and draw attention to the underpinning historical contexts and themes that influenced the conversations we had across the project. At first glance, these themes might seem somewhat remote from one of the key foci of this book: The Model of a Summer Camp, an object from the British Museum depicting the celebration of *yhyakh*. This model was invariably the starting point for all our formal interviews and an overarching topic of our conversations with artists and culture workers, alongside non-expert audiences. The variety of themes that emerged in these exchanges speaks to the capacity of objects in general, and of this model in particular, to generate ideas and to facilitate discussions that, in turn, highlight the distinctiveness and versatile qualities of this unique composition.

The Model of a Summer Camp depicts a specific event in the cultural calendar of Sakha people but it stands for much more than just a festival celebrated on a particular day. Consideration of the origin of the object, its creator, and the circumstances of its carving, as well as its subject matter, helps us to appreciate the broader conditions of the time it was produced, to understand the position of Yakutia within the Russian Empire at that time, and to gain some sense of Sakha self-expression in the mid-nineteenth century. It was commissioned by the Russian governors and Sakha patrons who funded the work to illustrate the extent of the Empire during the nation-building period and to display the diverse ethnic composition of the Russian Empire. The model is an artistic portrayal and an accurate reproduction of *yhyakh*, a Sakha summer festival and the most significant element of Sakha culture to present to the wider international community. We used the model as an object for learning about history, but also as a tool. The artefact served as a refraction surface, as it were, providing us with an opportunity to ponder on time and contemplate historical perspectives. It helped us think about transformations of the *yhyakh* celebration and its current developments, to understand wider social processes in the region over a period of time. In effect, this model from a former time became a crucial element with which we thought about larger continuous social developments in which historical epochs, ideologies, and identities were entangled.

In **Part 1.2**, we acknowledge the role narratives have played in Sakha culture. People value storytelling and oral narratives greatly, they often consider them to be important sources of information and Sakha cultural knowledge, which until the early nineteenth century existed only in oral form. During our fieldwork, we frequently experienced situations where stories were told to support a message or an argument, proving the power of storytelling. The narratives that have established the very foundation of the book have therefore been inspired by our conversations with our interviewees. One cluster of stories is related to mammoths, ancient extinct animals, which became an integral part of artistic endeavours in the region. Artists in *Sakha Sire* continue to exploit mammoth imagery for carving and use mammoth tusks for their creative projects drawing upon stories about origins of Sakha people, traditional rituals and knowledge, as well as contemporary themes. Using mammoth tusks for carving becomes a form of storytelling, where material literally and figuratively provokes and shapes narratives.

The themes of *yhyakh* and belonging to Sakha culture emerging from many interviews and discussions shaped by the experiences and memories of people we interviewed, formed another cluster of narratives we address in the book. *Yhyakh*, the most important Sakha celebration observed for many centuries, was seriously impacted by the dominant Communist political regime. This impact and the ways in which the festival was modified should be seen as part of broader political processes and ideological pressure exerted on all forms of expression of ethnic identity within the Soviet Union. Narratives about *yhyakh* are both records of transformations and simultaneously of its endurance and continued appeal. While historically *yhyakh* was a festival celebrated among the closest kin and centred around the practices that addressed *aiyy* (deities) and *ichchi* (more-than-human co-existing being), it has now outgrown its initial purpose and today it is the most important annual cultural event for Sakha people, as well as a republican celebration open to many ethnic groups within *Sakha Sire* and beyond.

The theme of silence provides an important backdrop to our main story. In [Part 1.3](#), we use silence as a theme to describe the effects of ideological pressures imposed by the state on all forms of expressions of ethnic identity, and we focus on the experiences of individuals who were raised during the Soviet era. Celebrations of *yhyakh* stopped altogether in many places in the Republic for prolonged time and where they continued to be celebrated, they were transformed into ideological festivities of the socialist regime where *aiyy* and *ichchi* were replaced by Communist leaders. Most significantly, *yhyakh* celebrations changed from being inclusive and participatory to detached and performed events, at which people could watch the activities but in which they could not take part. This changed the view of the traditional festival from participant to observer perspective and altered the experience from active engagement to passive viewing, which was a form of silencing people's opinions and their desires for ethnic expressions.

Finally, in [Part 1.4](#), we address how the lifting of the imposed silence and ideological restrictions has provided many opportunities for people to articulate their ethnic identity and how tacit acknowledgement of ethnicity under the Communist regime has turned into pride and ownership of culture after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This process was accompanied by reforms of the language policy in the republic and marked an important departure from the silent Soviet past, where the Sakha language had little voice as it was not used much in public. The Model of a Summer Camp from the British Museum itself is a silent object, but as the *Narrative Objects* project took shape, and during the exhibition of the model in *Sakha Sire*, the silence around it began to shift as the artists, carvers, art historians, scholars, and students who worked closely with the model became articulate, outspoken, and debated with each other, inspired by the presence of the model. It is their voices we present in this book.

## Note

- 1 The Federal Statistics Bureau reported 372,928 residents in Yakutsk in 2020 ([Rosstat 2020](#)).

## References

- Argunov, I. 1985. *Sotsial'noe Razvitie Yakutskogo Naroda. Istoriko-Sotsiologicheskoe Issledovanie Obraza Zhizni* [Social Development of the Yakut People. Historic and Sociological Research of the Lifestyle]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History's remainders: on time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Cohen, C. 2002. *The Fate of Mammoth: Fossils, Myth and History*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Digby, B. 1926. *The Mammoth and Mammoth-Hunting in North-East Siberia*. London: H. F. and G. Witherby.
- Kuznetsova, T., and I. Starodubtseva. 2009. Mamonty i istoriia geologicheskogo izucheniia poberezh'ia morei Laptevykh i Novosibirskikh ostrovov [Mammoths and history of geological study of the seacoast of the Laptev Sea and the Novosibirsk islands]. In *Sistema Moria Laptevykh i Prilegaiushchikh Morei Arktiki: Sovremennoe Sostoianie i Istoria Razvitiia*. [The System of the Laptev Sea and the Adjacent Arctic Seas: Contemporary Situation and History of Development], eds. H., Kassens, A. Lisitsin, J. Tide, E. Poliakova, L. Timokhov and I. Frolov. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, pp. 481–500.
- Laufer, B. 1925. *Ivory in China*. Anthropology Leaflet 21. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History.
- Rosstat (Federal'naia Sluzhba Gosstatistiki). 2020. Vserossiiskaia Perepis' Naseleniia [All-Russia Population Census]. [www.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020](http://www.rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020) Tom 1, tablitsa 6 [Volume 1, table 6]. Accessed 1 September 2023.
- Serres, M., and B. Latour [transl. R. Lapidus]. 1995. *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

## 1.2 Narrative and voice

During fieldwork for the *Narrative Objects* project, we had many conversations with residents of Yakutsk and with people further afield. Some of these exchanges were structured and purposeful and were held in the offices of government officials, educators, and other professionals; some were more informal, and took place whilst having a cup of tea, chatting at a bus stop or during *yhyakh* activities. While these talks were often driven by the overall topic of our research, they have also been helpful for identifying other prominent themes of interest and concern to our interviewees which emerged through their professional engagement, their involvement with the project, or due to everyday activities they perform as residents of the city and rural settlements located in the geographical north. These themes and topics, prompted by our interlocutors, have formed a chain of narratives and it is therefore important that we address them here.

For many people who live in *Sakha Sire*, climate and weather are important subjects which shape their everyday lives. By bringing them up in conversations, it seemed to us that people were making a point about the unique environment in which they live, the importance of summer and, therefore, the summer festival, as well as emphasising the resilience and inner strength of people who live there. A very important part of the environment in *Sakha Sire* is permafrost, a geological feature of the landscape that is crucial to so many aspects of living in the region. *Alaas* is a geophysical feature which forms due to thawing permafrost and consists of a meadow with a lake in the middle. It is also a cultural, social, and economic phenomenon, important for sustaining Sakha rural life. Synonymous to homestead, *alaas* is imbued with spiritual meanings that have inspired many songs and poems; it “permeate[s] Sakha historical narratives, belief systems, and present world understandings” (Crate 2021: 7).

Due to the preservative capacity of permafrost, the remains of mammoths, extinct pre-historic animals, have survived into the present in almost pristine conditions. Mammoth ivory extracted from the frozen ground has long been a valuable material predominantly for craftsmen who use ivory for their carvings, a popular form of art in the republic which we address in detail in [Part 3](#).<sup>1</sup> In their exchanges with us, many artists including those who work with mammoth ivory, brought up discussions about the natural environment, the remoteness of *Sakha Sire*, and recent climatic changes that have affected the landscape and their access to raw

material: mammoth tusks. The carvers spoke a great deal about the unique qualities of mammoth ivory, which they consider to be a malleable and *poslushnyi* (obedient) material. Mammoths and mammoth ivory were the focus of many of our conversations with experienced carvers and young artists alike, but they also served as a backdrop for the *Narrative Objects* project overall. An emblematic animal, the mammoth has become transformed into a mascot that is successfully employed in the region for attracting tourists and scientists. Indeed, from our very first fieldwork together in *Sakha Sire*, the prevalence of mammoths stood out to us. We observed their bones and preserved carcasses lying inside the carved ice caverns of the Institute of Permafrost and *Tsarstvo Vechnoi Merzloty* (The Kingdom of Permafrost Museum), we were offered small packets of mammoth woolly hair to buy in gift shops, and we encountered gigantic reconstructed mammoth effigies on display in public spaces in the city of Yakutsk and in northern rural settlements (see also [Arzyutov 2019](#)).

The museum curators, restorers, and educators we spoke with in the museums we visited in Yakutsk and in the *uluuses* of Churapcha, Taatta, Verkhoiansk, Megino-Khangalass, and Gornyi identified many important themes drawn from their curatorial work with local audiences associated with renewed public attention to cultural heritage, *olonkho* and *yhyakh* celebrations, as well as to the ethnographic records written by the scholars who were exiled to Yakutia as punishment for their political activism by the Tsarist government in the late nineteenth century ([Takakura 2006](#)). When we spoke with art historians, we were often presented with the themes of transformation of artistic expressions and the renewal of ethnographic attention in creative works, as well as the desire for preservation of cultural heritage. Repeatedly, aspects of purity of style and what might be considered “Sakha-ness” in creative work came up, leading to questions about identity and the expression of ethnic belonging. Art historians told us that they are frequently called upon to advise on the authenticity of new developments, for instance, new constructions to be installed at the sites used for *yhyakh*, the designs and decorations for *tihülge*, and even on the creation of new works by local ivory carvers.

A further cluster of narrative themes examined below is drawn from our discussion with local historians who pointed to the transformations following the changing political environment which were conducive to the expression of ethnic identity and which were in contrast to the stifling atmosphere of censorship characteristic of the ideological climate of the Soviet period. Their narrative focussed on how the *yhyakh* celebrations, in particular, have changed in the last 30 years. These themes were related to a form of silence which runs as one of the main story lines through this book and is discussed in more detail in [Part 1.3](#). Comparisons of the past with the present are inevitable given that the collapse of the Soviet regime remains a powerful marker in history and its repercussions continue to reverberate throughout *Sakha Sire* as they do in other former Soviet republics.

We concur with the view of those scholars who argue that *yhyakh* has been in transition for some time ([Romanova and Ignat’eva 2012](#)). From a purely clan-based social event, to a mass political gathering replete with the Soviet symbolism, to a public Labour holiday, and finally, to a large ethnonational project, *yhyakh*

has been continuously transforming over the last few centuries, yet remains at the core of Sakha culture. It is a fluid and evolving celebration; it is a process not a constant, and it changes and transforms in response to contemporary needs and demands of people who consider themselves concerned with and related to Sakha culture. What are perceived as traditions are often a continuous process of adaptations and inventions (Hobsbawm 1983: 1); *yhyakh* is no different in this regard, yet it remains the most important annual event in the life of many people living in *Sakha Sire*.

### Oral traditions and narratives

To examine what we mean by a “narrative object”, we first need to provide some context for the term “narrative”, which refers to a recapitulation of past experiences by “matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events that actually occurred” (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 20). In our work we refer to a narrative not only as a story about events that took place in the past, but as “a way of learning about the world and way of passing on to others what has been learned” (Berger 1997: 4–10). Narrative is an important concept which we use as a device to bring several themes of the book together; it is also an important part of life and communication, as until the end of the nineteenth century the Sakha language did not have a written form, making narrative expressions an important and substantial part of the Sakha culture. While “orality is the basic human mode of communication” (Tonkin 1992: 3), it does not mean that it is simplistic; indeed, the Sakha language, with its complex structure and grammar, is intricate, rich, and poetic (Ferguson 2019: 93). Like many Indigenous languages, Sakha is descriptive and imaginative, calling on sound and visual associations, metaphors, and hyperbole. The *oloykho* is a form of storytelling and ancient epic narratives where “fantastic invention and majestic images of the ancient myths fancifully combine with vital realistic pictures” (Okladnikov 1970: 263).<sup>2</sup> For many Sakha people, the *oloykho* remains a narrative of importance often used as evidence in various circumstances. For example, people refer to the *oloykho* as a proof of their ancestry: they can say “our clan is one of the oldest, because it is mentioned in the *oloykho*”, thus confirming long-lasting attachment of their kin to the land. Often *oloykho* is used to confirm geographical locations and landmarks; names for valleys and places are mentioned to demonstrate the relations and connections to the ancient history of a place. It is also a confirmation of the Sakha people’s southern origin, marking historical connections with the Turkic world. Finally, *oloykho* contains wisdom and is often appealed to as undisputable truth (Balzer 1996; Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; Harris 2017).

The urgency of telling a story as evidence might be lessening in modern life, but the importance of storytelling and narratives for artistic and creative work is ever increasing. The *Narrative Objects* project was concerned not only with historical narratives centred on the model of *yhyakh* itself, but also with the ways in which contemporary artists responded to it. In both cases narrative has been an important foundation for the analysis of these creative works and for understanding the



Figure 1.2 Fedor Markov in his studio. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

artistic endeavour, as is explained in [Part 3](#). These days, the theme of *oloykho* is widely used in creative work and often serves as a plot and an inspiration for artists, carvers, performers, writers, and filmmakers. The artist and ivory carver Fedor Markov, for example, takes inspiration for his sculptures from the *oloykho* texts and folklore stories. Our conversations with Markov about his works regularly turned into storytelling sessions, references to myths, legends and *oloykho* ([Figure 1.2](#)).

Narratives and storytelling for many Indigenous cultures were the primary method of retaining memory about past events before written forms could preserve it on parchment. Oral stories retold from generation to generation were a way to keep information about the past, often with minute detail, which may include references to specific historical times and even some elementary statistics ([Izbekova 2014](#)). Indeed, oral narratives are often used as a historical record and as evidence of past events ([Ray 2011](#)). As [Tonkin \(1992: 2\)](#) notes, “In more than one language, the same word – in English it is ‘history’ – has to stand both for ‘the past’, history-as-lived, and ‘representation of pastness’, history-as-recorded”.

Narrative is an important connector between the teller and their surroundings and is a form of belonging. This is why the principle of localisation is such an important element of narratives and oral histories. The stories that are retold often have a reference to specific localities and points in landscape, which verify the trueness of the stories or transform fiction into reality (Ármason 2011; Argounova-Low 2012; Brown et al 2016). To localise memory is to anchor a story to a certain place. Places related to tragic historical prohibitions perceived among Sakha people as injustices, for instance, serve as conduits of memory and have created powerful local responses in the way stories are retold. Through these narratives, local people link history and culture and reinscribe place on the landscape (Cruikshank and Argounova 2000: 115). At the time of narration, a place becomes an important and meaningful container of tangible history and a connector between an event that occurred in the past and the present.

Keith Basso (1996) in his work on landscape among the Western Apache mentions that places are more important than written records for the meaningful understanding and interpretation of history. In some societies, he explains, where devices for preserving the past are lacking or where writing is absent, “interpreting the past can be readily accomplished ... without recourse to documentary archives, photographic files, and early sound recordings. It cannot be accomplished, readily or otherwise, without recourse to places and the place-worlds they engender” (Basso 1996: 7). Julie Cruikshank, an anthropologist who worked closely with First Nations communities in Canada, has highlighted the importance stories play in attaching human history to places and the value they have in the local community. As one Tagish First Nation elder told Cruikshank during her fieldwork in the Yukon, there is a link between understanding place names, knowing stories about these place names, and being a decent person (Cruikshank 1998: 18).

In many Indigenous cultures there are examples of how stories are imprinted in the land, how ancestral movements and ancestors themselves have been “metamorphosed” into landmarks, landscape features, mountains and knolls, their movements imprinted forever (Ingold 2000: 53). In some cases, people turn to stories to assert certain rights over land and, in such situations, narratives can be a politicised and ideological way of conveying a claim, a belief and an aspiration; as such these narratives can often be reshaped and amended to reflect on certain agendas. Narratives about past, present and future, where places are seemingly fixed anchors in histories, can be used strategically to recast historical meanings and re-evaluate events (Bryant 2014). A narrative about *yhyakh*, for instance, is a way to claim the ownership of the festival, to draw attention to Sakha culture and its traditions. It is a way to claim the ancestral connections of Sakha people to the land by referring to specific legendary landscapes described in the *olonkho*. Narratives are not fixed and can be amended to suit a particular objective. Over centuries, narratives about *yhyakh*, as we demonstrate, have changed to emphasise specific messages, whether about kinship, allegiance to the Soviet state, or aspirations of a new ethnopolitical project.

For centuries, generation after generation told stories about mammoths, which exist across the world, from France to China (Cohen 2002: 23–40). In *Sakha Sire*

these stories are linked to places and climatic conditions and incorporate local knowledge and references to specific features (e.g., rivers covered in ice in winter, ice breaking in spring, mammoth tusks, and bone found in the melting permafrost). Mentions of specific landscapes, locations, and historic events make these stories more credible and convincing. By including such references, the storytellers claim the ownership of the stories, these incredible animals, and the land. A site called *Börölöök* located on the Indigirka River features in many stories as a place where remains of about 140 mammoths were found (Protopopov et al 2018; Lazarev et al 2007). The story retold by local people and supported by the scientists' findings refers to an event thousands of years ago when numerous mammoths died crossing the river on thin ice during migration. This location was named by local people and scholars as *kladbishche mamontov* (mammoth's cemetery).

There is another very important aspect of the nature of narrative, where narratives anchor and connect stories, places, and events to certain groups of people and can assist in their claims. Narratives help knowledge, expertise and claims to history and ownership be shared with other people and other cultures. As such, oral narratives remain an important way to preserve information for the future. In Western cultures, where literacy became commonplace, written documentation pertaining to past events is privileged over other cultural forms. By contrast, for many Indigenous cultures, oral narratives took precedence and, in some places, they remain the preferred way to pass on specific forms of knowledge (Cruikshank 1998; Smith et al 2011). In *Sakha Sire*, as in many other Arctic cultures, use of the spoken word continues to be a respected skill and a significant form of storing of information. It is therefore important that such a form of communication continues, as the cessation of the oral stories means the inevitable and irreversible loss of important data, knowledge, and expertise (Smith et al 2011).

Finally, narrative is also about its ability to affect, to touch and stir up feelings. Indeed, as we discuss in Part 2, the *Narrative Objects* project emerged from such powerful first impressions, namely that produced by the model of *yhyakh* when Tanya first saw it in the British Museum when she was a graduate student, and the inspiration of art historians and culture workers in Yakutsk who read an illustrated booklet about the model by a scholar who was probably the first Sakha individual to see it in almost 120 years (Gorokhov 1993). The mammoth ivory model depicting the celebration of *yhyakh*, with its miniature figurines, has an ability to rouse a person's interest. The ability of an object to create such an impression, to arrest the attention of the observer, to make the viewer wonder and be amazed, and to offer a story, is partly why we refer to it as a "narrative object".

### *Narratives about climate and permafrost*

Narratives about weather and climate might not be an immediate connection one would make when looking at the model of *yhyakh*, but the link is straightforward and logical, as will become clear. Stories about the weather are important for people in *Sakha Sire*, given the harshness and excessive temperatures they experience year on year. The climate is described as extreme continental, with cold winters and

hot temperatures in summer, and the effects of climate change are becoming more evident (Crate 2008; Crate 2021). One third of the territory of *Sakha Sire* is situated in the Arctic region, where winter temperatures can drop below  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Anon 2020). As such, the climate and weather routinely feature in the stories people tell about their land and what it means to live in this region. The excessively low temperatures also explain why the warmth of the spring and summer are so eagerly awaited and why *yhyakh*, the summer festival, has been so important for Sakha people. For the people who live in *Sakha Sire*, there is nothing “extreme” about such cold, as their everyday lives continue in low temperatures even when everything around is frozen: teachers and pupils go to school, doctors go to the hospitals, farmers look after their animals and truck drivers take food along the ice roads up north. In fact, there are many narratives about how useful low temperatures are, for example, for preserving food, as well as for keeping intact the remains of the prehistoric creatures which once roamed the area.

The severe climatic conditions and low temperatures have contributed to the formation of the phenomenon known as permafrost. Permafrost served as “a sepulchre” for preserving the remains of ancient fauna (Digby 1926: 16). Sakha (Yakutia) is one of the few regions worldwide that is almost entirely located on continuous permafrost. This means that the ground maintains negative temperatures constantly, hence the Russian term for permafrost, *vechnaia merzlota*, translated as “eternally frozen” (Chu 2015; Chu 2020; Crate 2021; Takakura et al 2021). Permafrost began to develop in the northern parts of Yakutia in the late Pleistocene era (Crate et al 2017). This period was characterised by complex climatic changes: rapid decline of temperatures, surface glaciers, as well as prolonged waves of cold and warm spells causing widespread development of ice. The cold air during ice spells penetrated inside the ground, turning the soil into a frozen, concrete mass. The repeated cycles of such widespread intensive cold facilitated deep penetration of ice into the soil. The frozen ground in the central part of Yakutia is one million years old, according to some geological data (Alekseev 2011). Yakutsk is the base for the Institute of Permafrost, the leading world research institution for studies of this natural phenomenon. It houses a deep shaft in the frozen ground where one can see the preserved remains of ancient fauna and flora. The shaft serves as a natural freezer and stores a repository of tens of thousands of seed samples of agricultural and wild plants.

Standing above the ground, it is hard for a non-specialist to tell whether there is permafrost underneath or not, and it is easy to forget about permafrost when walking in the summer heat in the city centre and seeing colourful flowerbeds and luscious green trees. However, local people encounter permafrost all the time and generated deep knowledge about it even before the arrival of cryolitologists and glaciologists, through experience of living on the frozen land and learning how to adapt to the conditions (Crate 2021). Traditional Sakha tales are a form of didactic narratives teaching children about cold, frost and ice and their qualities. Ethnographers of the nineteenth century described how Sakha people could distinguish hills, knolls, mounds, etc. by different names reflecting the stages of the formation of permafrost. Vatslav Seroshevskii, a Polish ethnographer and a political exile who

spent 12 years in Yakutia in the later nineteenth century and produced a detailed ethnography entitled *Iakuty: Opyt Etnograficheskogo Issledovaniia* (Seroshvskii 1993 [1896]) reported being told by local Sakha residents about frozen earth and its depth. The locals gave him practical advice on building houses on permafrost and how to keep food preserved in the ice houses. Sakha people's deep knowledge of permafrost resulted in an enhanced ability to cope with and use the cold and permafrost to their benefit. Many stories and fairy tales contained references to eternal cold and what was hidden in the frozen ground, as discussed later in this Part.

### **Narratives about mammoths**

For many centuries the mammoth has been a source of inspiration and raw material for creative works in *Sakha Sire*. Just as the Model of a Summer Camp began with the manipulation of mammoth ivory coming from the mammoth, we thought it might be a good idea to start the book from this animal. Woolly mammoths are probably one of the most enigmatic animals to have walked the earth. Their existence has always been shrouded in mystery, with only nebulous rock drawings made by ancient people serving as confirmation of their existence (Okladnikov 1970: 17; Stone 2001: 7). Prior to the advent of scientific techniques which have shed light on what mammoths were and how they became extinct, their bones and tusks found in the ground were perplexing for those who found them. They seemed to be part of a gigantic puzzle that needed to be put together. Not surprisingly, these mysterious animals have stirred up much curiosity throughout history and many unanswered questions.

Lack of knowledge about these animals has led to many legends about them (Okladnikov 1970: 18). The Chinese people believed that mammoths were giant rodents living in the north in the deep snow that survived on herbs and trees. They were compared to a giant mole and described as “a species of animal which burrows under the ground, and which dies when exposed to the sun and air. Its bones are very white and bright like ivory. It is not by nature a very powerful animal and is therefore not very ferocious. It generally occurs on the banks of rivers” (Laufer 1925: 23–24). Some early Chinese practitioners, at the beginning of the eighth century, described the animal as a water buffalo that lived and moved underground (Laufer 1925: 24). Meantime, Indigenous people in North America believed that mammoths were gigantic animals living under the ground that died because they had breathed air (Strong 1934: 81). Old Sakha narratives referred to these animals as animated spirits called *uu oghuha* (water bull). Finding the well-preserved remains of the mammoth from time to time, such as those washed out onto the shore, made people believe that water bulls lived under water, at the bottom of large lakes and rivers. Those creatures, when they moved, would create waves in the rivers, and the current would become stronger, and the noise would be heard from afar (Lindenau 1983 [1745]: 43). An old Sakha belief goes that when mammoths woke from their winter hibernation and started moving under the ground, the ice on the rivers would start breaking. The enigma of mammoths continued to fire up imaginations, creating legends and myths, as more mammoths' remains and tusks were

found. Such legends and tales among many groups of people had many similarities, despite long distances between them.

Despite mammoths being obscure beasts, the impact of their existence has always been tangible. The tusks were a valuable raw material and a precious trade item, as described in the reports of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century travellers to Yakutia. One such account was made in 1705 by explorer Nicolaas Witsen in his book “Noord en Oost Tartarye” (North and East Tartary), based on his travels in Russia and Siberia, where he quoted local residents who referred to the bone findings as “mammouttekoos” (Laufer 1925: 28–29). The origin of the word, while not very clear, might be from an Arabic word, “mehemoth”, meaning a monster or giant (Laufer 1925: 29). According to a different version, this word has a Finno-Ugric origin and comes from “maa muut”, which translates as an earth mole (Protopopov et al 2018: 4). Sakha people have a different name for mammoths and refer to them as *selii*. The origins of this designation are unclear (Lazarev et al 2007: 1).

In 1799, German naturalist Johann Blumenbach presented the first realistic interpretation of the skeleton findings and gave a scientific name, *Elephas primigenius*, to what would have been a gigantic ancient animal: a mammoth. It is now known this ancient species existed in the Pliocene and Pleistocene periods, partially alongside humans, who hunted them for meat and utilised their skins, bones and tusks. There are still debates around what made this powerful species extinct; it is believed that abrupt change in climate and the progressive warming of the climate increased precipitation and caused the decline and subsequent extinction of the mammoth of the Late Pleistocene (Boeskorov 2005). Human activity may also have contributed to their decline (Vereshchagin 1977).

The region of *Sakha Sire* has been known for its large reserves of mammoth tusks for a long time. Today, tusks remain an important commodity, just as they were almost a century ago, when Basset Digby wrote:

Tundra is the sepulchre of the mammoth. Swollen by the flood water of mild summers the creeks and rivers of the northward tilting top of Asia spill their swirling torrents seaward, scooping out the bank at every bend in their course. And out with the mud and freshly thawed prehistoric silt come, occasionally, the entombed mammoths, from their age-old, cold storage.

(Digby 1926: 16)

It is permafrost, of course, with its negative temperatures which has preserved the remains of this animal underground so well. Occasionally, when melting, the opened layers of the earth would bring to the surface full carcasses of the animal. In the last few decades, due to climate change, the frozen earth thaws faster which makes the finding of the mammoth remains more frequent.

Sakha people for a long time were fearful of the animal remains, which deterred them from excavating them. For them, finding mammoth remains and, occasionally, well-preserved mammoth meat, was evidence that these animals were not, in fact, extinct. They avoided touching the remains and considered finding them to be a bad omen. Hunters and herders often left a sacrifice to the “master of the earth”

to avoid dramatic consequences from such a find (Laufer 1925). Their fears might have hindered local people from excavations, but it did not dissuade merchants and profiteers from engaging in the valuable ivory trade.

The term ivory applies to elephant tusks, but also includes other similar kinds of materials. The upper incisors of the elephant, tusks, are not covered with enamel (Hodges 1988: 154). Mammoth and elephant tusks thus consist entirely of dentine making it soft material for carving and a desirable raw material. The mammoth ivory trade with China was ongoing as early as the tenth century, according to Laufer (1925), yet some believe it was earlier still (see, for example, Iakunina 1957; Kuznetsova and Starodubtseva 2009; Potravnyi et al 2020). According to these sources, not only did people from Siberia travel to Mongolia and China to deliver ivory to the markets, but, allegedly, Chinese collectors travelled north to buy tusks on the spot as well (Digby 1926: 21). While it is difficult to confirm these statements, it is clear that the mammoth ivory trade proliferated.

By the eighteenth century, the ivory trade was well established; large quantities of mammoth ivory were excavated and transported regularly from Siberia to China (Laufer 1925: 34). Mammoth ivory, like other commodities such as tea, tobacco, and silk, helped to establish commercial connections over large distances. At the start of the nineteenth century, the trade in mammoth ivory was “lively” and “the quantity of fossil ivory which was sent from Siberia to the European markets was enormous” (Laufer 1925: 32). On average 25 tonnes of ivory were sold annually at the market in Yakutsk in the nineteenth century and up to 1913. In 1923, there were 56.7 *puds* (928.8 kg) of ivory collected for sale (Potravnyi et al 2020: 112). The uses of this mammoth ivory were diverse. In addition to being used as a raw material for carved objects, mammoth ivory was sold at drug stores in China as “dragon’s bones” or “dragon’s teeth”, and large amounts of ground tusk were sold as a powder to treat “ague, fevers, hemorrhages, and fluxes” (Laufer 1925: 25–26).

Mostly, however, mammoth ivory was used for carving. As trade developed, ivory was processed and carved in various places such as Khiva, in present-day Uzbekistan, a major stop along the Silk Route (Laufer 1925: 33). While mostly intended for sale in the south, some ivory was retained for the markets in Yakutia, where it was used for carving. Today, Sakha (Yakutia) continues to be an important region for the mammoth ivory trade and tusks are a valuable commodity. Harvesting mammoth became part of the local economy in the northern settlements in Yakutia, where collecting ivory brings additional income to families (Potravnyi et al 2020). Every year, 100 tonnes of mammoth tusks are sold, with about 30 tonnes of these through illegal trading chains (Ferris 2020). The federal and republican legislation is becoming stricter to prevent illegal trade and ecological damage in the areas where mammoth remains are collected (Potravnyi et al 2020). Nevertheless, most of the excavated mammoth tusks, more than 60 tonnes annually, are dispatched to the Chinese and wider Asian markets, where they are used predominantly for traditional carvings. The demand for mammoth tusk is continuously growing due to a ban on elephant ivory trading was implemented via the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1989 as a response to elephant poaching which, in turn, reduced its

supplies. This prohibition affected countries like China, where ivory has long been used for aesthetic, religious, cultural, economic and medical purposes. The sanctions put on the often-illegal supply of elephant ivory pushed up the demand for mammoth tusks considerably (Gao and Clark 2014).

Mammoth ivory is more than just a trade item. Its symbolism is woven into the fabric of many aspects of life in Sakha (Yakutia). The image of the mammoth, a treasured prehistoric animal, has become an emblem of the region: “Mammoth is an animal that exemplifies the frost and harsh region of Yakutia. This is our visiting card ...” (Protopopov et al 2018: 2). Mammoth symbolism is used widely in the cultural landscape of the Republic. Like other animal imagery used for cultural representation, the mammoth has acquired an iconic status and has become a powerful symbol of connection to the land, ancestry, rootedness, and history. Tourism and other businesses are built around mammoth remains and its ivory; souvenir kiosks are bursting with mammoth ivory carvings offering small figurines (often of mammoths naturally), key rings, and knick-knacks to tourists. As we demonstrate in Part 3 mammoth ivory carving has been a form of traditional craftsmanship and continues to be an important part of the creative arena in Sakha (Yakutia).

Contributing to the mystique of the mammoth and its emblematic status is the scientific data that confirms archaeological findings and is incorporated into the mammoth narrative today. In 2013, a team of scientists from Yakutsk and their international counterparts excavated a mammoth carcass on the island of Malyi Liakhovskii with well-preserved soft tissues and even blood of the animal. The recent findings of this biological material present an opportunity for geneticists to work further with the material, suggesting some controversial intentions to form a mammoth embryo (Shapiro 2015; Arzyutov 2019). These findings and the science fiction-like scenarios have been covered in a few documentary films, news coverage, popular book, and museum displays (Stone 2001; Shapiro 2015; Frei and Arbugaev 2018). These animals, although long gone, continue to feature in contemporary narratives, help to promote businesses in the region, agitate scholars in asserting revolutionary discoveries for the advancement of scientific knowledge, assist people in claiming the ancient past, and serve as a symbol for the republic.

### **Narratives of identity and *yhyakh***

There are many theories about the origin of the Sakha people. Ancestors of Sakha, the Kurykan, inhabited the area around Lake Baikal and were involved in herding, development of iron foundries, and fortress building (Okladnikov 1955: 295; Gumilev 1993: 264–265). According to one dominant theory, intertribal warfare forced them to move from the south (Ksenofontov 1992 [1937]; Okladnikov 1949; Okladnikov 1970; Gumilev 1993) and they gradually migrated and settled in the current location between the tenth and sixteenth centuries, with a further much later movement of a smaller group of Sakha to the north (Gurvich 1977). Evidence of the southern origin of Sakha is in their language, which belongs to the Turkic group of languages and has a strong Mongolic influence. This is evident from the vocabulary which contains many words of southern origin. Additionally, the

archaeological findings confirm the relatedness of Sakha to other ancient cultures further away from Siberia.

Further evidence of the Sakha people's southern origin is the continuing tradition of celebrating *yhyakh*, the most important Sakha festival (Crate 2006; Peers 2019). It is celebrated on 21 June, the summer solstice. According to one origin story for *yhyakh*, an ancestor of the Sakha, called Ellei, addressed the spirits of the place where he lived and asked them to bless him and his family. As a sign that his words were received and his plea was heard, the spirits sent down seven *kytalyk* (white cranes). Since then, Ellei worshipped the spirits and, as a sign of respect, once a year at the beginning of summer, he would organise a feast with offerings to the deities (Ergis 1974: 74–75; cf. Jochelson 1933: 198–199). *Algys*, a ritual to address the deities and a traditional opening of *yhyakh* celebrations, praises deities and expresses people's gratitude to them:

The god above (Ayy-Tangara) created a Man so that he lived on earth, adorned it, and availed himself of its treasures during his lifetime. The body is feeble and must die, but the soul (kut) will live ever green in the sky in the shape of a larch. Over the visible sky are many other heavens and gods, but beneath the earth live evil spirits. At the festival today we thank the gods for creating us and handing us the gifts of the earth, therefore we drink of one vessel as a token of unity.

(cited in Jochelson 1933: 200)

Historical records of this festival were provided by occasional travellers, starting with Evert Ysbrants Ides, a diplomat and explorer, who in the seventeenth century stopped in Yakutia on the way to the eastern outposts of the Russian Empire and included a brief mention of the celebration in his account of his journey (Ides 1706). Further accounts contributed by Strahlenberg (2010 [1730]), Lindenau (1983 [1745]), and Middendorf (1878) offer more details of the festival, highlighting the prominence of the celebration for the Sakha. Vatslav Seroshevskii's monograph *The Yakut* includes a section about *yhyakh* and boasts a detailed ethnographic description (Seroshevskii 1993 [1896]: 445–447).

The origins of *yhyakh* lie in the ancient Turkic tradition of praying to the deities at the start of the summer. This practice was later adopted by Sakha people and turned into the celebration of *yhyakh* (Romanova 1994: 53). *Yhyakh* marks the awakening of nature and celebrates the special relationship people have with the environment. Gavriil Ksenofontov, the nineteenth-century ethnographer, described the festival as “the axel and the symbol of the ancient religious beliefs of the Yakut who inherited the steppe nomadism” (in Lukina 2018: 60). According to researchers studying the beliefs of the peoples in Siberia, the *yhyakh* festival is a spiritual occasion providing an opportunity to communicate with *aiyy* (deities). Some scholars describe the celebration of *yhyakh* as a ritual and a prayer: “This public prayer was accompanied by singing in a circle and walking in the direction of the sun, thus highlighting the cults of the Sun and Heaven” (Gogolev 1993: 27). There is a well-recorded link of the *yhyakh* celebration honouring the *Ürüŋ Aiyy*

*Toion*, the deity of southern origin, during the festival (Alekseev 1975: 178). The ancient Sakha referred to themselves as “children of the Sun” and worshipped the sun by conducting specific rituals, dances and prayers (Lukina 2018).

It is believed that in the past people held *yhyakh* several times a year, with the most important one taking place during the summer solstice (Seroshevskii 1993 [1896]: 445). The summer *yhyakh* has distinct solar and celestial symbolism, reflecting on the traditional Sakha worldview as composed of three vertical tiers and is often mentioned in old narratives and in the *olonkho*. This concept of the world structure is similar to the vision of many pastoral groups of Southern Siberia and Central Asia, who shared shamanic beliefs, and is related to their spiritual ideas and perception of world in a tree-like structure (Balzer 2011: 117). According to such spatial vision and traditional Sakha beliefs the world is represented and symbolised by the *Aal Luuk Mas* (The Tree of Life or World Tree), which grows, according to the legend, through the three tiers, connecting earth with the sky and underground, where the Lower World is inhabited by the evil spirits, the Middle World is a place where people dwell, and the Upper World is a place of residence for deities and gods. The trunk of the *Aal Luuk Mas* is then the important connection – or conduit – between the three worlds and signifies close existence, mediation, and interdependencies in the world, as well as an opportunity for communication between the three tiers of this world.

Vladimir Jochelson, a Russian ethnographer who conducted research in Yakutia at the start of the twentieth century described *yhyakh*, also referred to in his writing as a “*kumiss*” (also *kymys*) festival,<sup>3</sup> not only as a celebration of spiritual significance, but also an important social event:

During the summer, in olden times, every rich man arranged a *kumiss* festival [*yhyakh*] at which all members of the clan assembled and were entertained. Other people, and frequently whole clans, were also invited ... Every such ceremony was initiated with sacrifices, which were accompanied with songs, dances, games, horse and foot races, and other contests ... [T]he boys and girls gave the goblets of sacrificial *kumiss* to the elder and honored members of the clan, both male and female, who ... drank from the goblets and passed them on to the less important and the younger people. Behind every honored or aged member of the clan, sat or stood his domestics, less esteemed relatives ...

(Jochelson 1933: 200–203)

The celebration in this passage is clearly structured, with the order of events conditioned and regulated by hierarchies and social norms, as described by Jochelson precisely (Figure 1.3). The festival was also an opportunity to fulfil social duties for the poor members of their clan. In this passage, Jochelson provides the most detailed early account of the important ritual of the celebration – drinking of *kymys* from *choroons* (carved wooden goblets) used specifically at *yhyakh*. This account acts as a benchmark for recognising the extent to which *yhyakh*, like many similar festivals, changed its meaning during the Soviet period when it was altered to fit

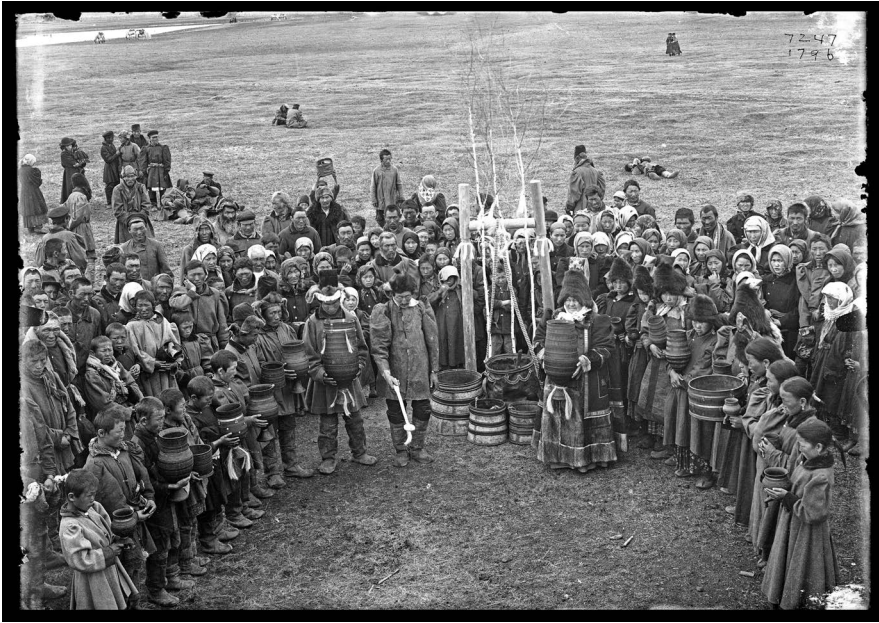


Figure 1.3 A scene from *yhyakh* in 1902 as witnessed by Waldemar Jochelson. Image 1796. American Museum of Natural History Library.

the ideological standards of the time and, in some places, stopped being celebrated altogether. We turn to these transformations in [Part 1.3](#).

## Notes

- 1 In *Sakha Sire*, carving is perceived as a traditionally male occupation, and today there are only a few professional female carvers.
- 2 *Olonkho* has become a literary monument recognised by the UNESCO as an intangible heritage [<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/olonkho-yakut-heroic-epos-00145>].
- 3 *Kymys*, a slightly fermented drink made with mare's milk, is traditionally consumed during festive events and is mainly associated with the celebrations of *yhyakh*.

## References

- Alekseev, N. 1975. *Traditsionnye Religioznye Verovaniia Iakutov v Kontse XIX- Nachale XX v.* [The Traditional Religious Beliefs of the Yakuts at the End of 19<sup>th</sup>–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Alekseev, V. R. 2011. *We Live on Permafrost*. Yakutsk: IMZ SO RAN.
- Anon. 2020. Arctic Russia. <https://arctic-russia.ru/en/article/yakutia-a-journey-into-the-cold/> Accessed 10 September 2023.
- Argounova-Low, T. 2012. Narrating the road. *Landscape Research* 37(2): 191–206.
- Árnason, A., N. Ellison, J. Vergunst, and A. Whitehouse (eds.) 2011. *Landscapes Beyond Land: Routes, Aesthetics, Narratives*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Arzyutov, D. V. 2019. Environmental encounters: woolly mammoth, indigenous communities and metropolitan scientists in the Soviet Arctic. *Polar Record* 55: 142–153.

- Balzer, M. M. 1996. Flights of the sacred: symbolism and theory in Siberian shamanism. *American Anthropologist*, New Series 98 (2): 305–318.
- Balzer, M. M. 2011. *Shamans, Spirituality and Cultural Revitalization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Basso, K. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Berger, A. 1997. *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Boeskorov, G. 2005. Arctic Siberia: refuge of the mammoth fauna in the Holocene. *Quaternary International* 142–143: 119–123.
- Brown, A. K., T. Eccles, and A. Herle. 2016. Storied landscapes: enlivening Blackfoot collections in UK Museums. *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, vol. 29, pp. 29–52.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History’s remainders: on time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist*, 41: 681–697.
- Chu, P.-Y. 2015. Mapping permafrost country: creating an environmental object in the Soviet Union, 1920s–1940s. *Environmental History* 20 (3): 396–421.
- Chu, P.-Y. 2020. *The Life of Permafrost: A History of Frozen Earth in Russian and Soviet Science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cohen, C. 2002. *The Fate of Mammoth: Fossils, Myth and History*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Crate, S. A. 2006. Ohuokhai: Sakhas’ unique integration of social meaning and movement. *Journal of American Folklore* 119 (472): 161–183.
- Crate, S. 2008. Gone the bull of winter? Grappling with the cultural implications of and anthropology’s role(s) in global climate change. *Current Anthropology* 49 (4): 569–595.
- Crate, S., M. Ulrich, J. Habeck, A. Desyatkin, R. Desyatkin, A. Fedorov, T. Hiyama, Y. Iijima, S. Ksenofontov, C. C. Mészáros, and H. Takakura. 2017. Permafrost livelihoods: a transdisciplinary review and analysis of thermokarst-based systems of indigenous land use. *Anthropocene* 18: 89–104.
- Crate, S. 2021. *Once Upon the Permafrost: Knowing Culture and Climate Change in Siberia*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Cruikshank, J. 1998. *The Social Life of Stories*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Cruikshank, J. and T. Argounova. 2000. Reinscribing meaning: memory and indigenous identity in Sakha Republic (Yakutia). *Arctic Anthropology* 37(1): 96–119.
- Digby, B. 1926. *The Mammoth and Mammoth-Hunting in North-East Siberia*. London: H.F. and G. Witherby.
- Ergis, G. 1974. *Ocherki po Iakutskomu Fol’kloru* [Essays on Yakut Folklore]. Moscow: Nauka.
- Ferguson, J. 2019. *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practices in the City*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ferris, E. 2020. Russia and the woolly mammoth trade: how climate change drives illegal tusk trafficking. In RUSI [www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-woolly-mammoth-trade-how-climate-change-drives-illegal-tusk-traffic](http://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-woolly-mammoth-trade-how-climate-change-drives-illegal-tusk-traffic). Accessed 1 September 2023.
- Frei, C. and M. Arbugaev. 2018. *Genesis 2.0*. Christian Frei Filmproductions.
- Gao, Y. and S.G. Clark. 2014. Elephant ivory trade in China: trends and drivers. *Biological Conservation* 180: 23–30.
- Gogolev, A. 1993. *Iakuty. Problemy Etnogeneza i Formirovaniia Kul’turny* [The Yakuts. Ethnogenesis and Culture Formation]. Yakutsk: Yakutsk State University.
- Gorokhov, S. N. 1993. “Ysyakh”: *Iakutskii Eksponat v Kollektcii Britanskogo Muzeia* [Ysyakh: A Yakut Artefact in the Collection of the British Museum]. Yakutsk: KIF SITIM.
- Gumilev, N. 1993. *Drevnie Turki* [The Ancient Turks]. Moscow: Klyshnikov-Komarov Publishing.
- Gurvich, I. 1977. *Kul’tura Severnykh Iakutov-Olenevodov. K Voprosu o Pozdnykh Etapakh Formirovaniia Iakutskogo Naroda* [Culture of Northern Yakut Reindeer Herders. On Late Stages of Formation of the Yakut People]. Moscow: Nauka.

- Harris, R. 2017. *Storytelling in Siberia: The Olonkho Epic in a Changing World (Folklore Studies in Multicultural World)*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Hobsbawm, E. 1983. Introduction: inventing traditions. In *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–14.
- Hodges, H. 1988. *Artifacts: An Introduction to Early Materials and Technology*. Kingston: Ronald P. Frye and Company.
- Iakunina, L. 1957. *Iakutskaiia Reznaia Kost' [Yakut Carved Ivory]*. Yakutsk: Iakutskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo.
- Ides, E.Y. 1706. *Three Years Travels from Moscow Over-Land to China*. London: W. Freeman et al.
- Ingold, T. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment. Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Izbekova, E. I. 2014. *Chislitel'nye v Olonkho: Struktura i Semantika [Numerals in Olonkho: Structure and Semantics]*. Yakutsk: Severo-Vostochnyi Federal'nyi Universitet.
- Jochelson, V. 1933. *The Yakut. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: The American Museum of Natural History.
- Ksenofontov, G. V. 1992 [1937]. *Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: Ocherki po Drevnei Istorii Iakutov [The Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: Essays on Ancient History of the Yakut People]*. Vol. 1. Yakutsk: Natsional'noe Izdatel'stvo Respubliki Sakha (Iakutiia).
- Kuznetsova, T. and I. Starodubtseva. 2009. Mamonty i istoriia geologicheskogo izucheniiia poberezh'ia morei Laptevykh i Novosibirskikh ostrovov [Mammoths and history of geological study of the seacoast of the Laptev Sea and the Novosibirsk islands]. In *Sistema Moria Laptevykh i Prilegaiushchikh Morei Arktiki: Sovremennoe Sostoianie i Istoria Razvitiia. [The System of the Laptev Sea and the Adjacent Arctic Seas: Contemporary Situation and History of Development]*, eds. Kassens, H., A. Lisitzin, J. Tide, E. Polyakova, L. Timokhov, and I. Frolov. Moscow: Izd-vo Mosk. un-ta, pp. 481–500.
- Labov, W. and J. Waletzky. 1967. Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience. In *Essays on Visual and Verbal Arts*, ed. J. Helm. Seattle: University of Washington Press, pp. 12–44.
- Laufer, B. 1925. *Ivory in China*. Anthropology Leaflet 21. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History.
- Lazarev, P., G. Boeskorov, A. Tikhonov, and G. Savvinov. 2007. *Po Sledam Mamontov: Ekspeditsii, Issledovaniia i Vystavki Muzeia Mamonta [Tracing Back Mammoths: Expeditions, Investigations, and Exhibitions of the Mammoth Museum]*. Yakutsk: Muzei Mamonta.
- Lindenau, Y. 1983 [1745]. *Opisanie Narodov Sibiri. Pervaia Polovina XVIII veka. Istoriko-Etnograficheskie Materialy o Narodakh Sibiri i Severo-Vostoka [Description of the Peoples of Siberia. First Half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Historical and Ethnographic Materials about the Peoples of Siberia and the North-East]*. Magadan: Magadanskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo.
- Lukina, A. 2018. Osuokhai, The Yakut Circle Dance. *Sibirica* 17(3): 60–67.
- Middendorf, A. F. 1878. *Puteshestvie na Sever i Vostok Sibiri [Travels to the North and East of Siberia]*. St Petersburg: Tip. Akademii Nauk.
- Okladnikov, A. P. 1949. *Istoriia Iakutii*. Tom 1 [History of Yakutia. Volume 1]. Yakutsk: Iakutgosizdat.
- Okladnikov, A. P. 1970. *Yakutia Before Its Incorporation Into The Russian State*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Peers, E. 2019. Soviet kul'tura in post-Soviet identification. The aesthetics of ethnicity in Sakha (Yakutia). In *Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North*, ed. O. Habeck. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 257–290.
- Potravnii, I., A. Protopopov, and V. Gassii. 2020. Mammoth tusk getting as a type of traditional nature management. *Arktika: Ekologiya i Ekonomika* 1(37): 109–121.
- Protopopov, A. and E. Maslichenko. 2018. *Mamont i Drugie Zhivotnye Sibiri: Entsiklopedia [Mammoth and Other Animals of Siberia: Encyclopaedia]*. Yakutsk: Bichik.
- Ray, A. J. 2011. *Telling It to the Judge: Taking Native History to Court*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press.

- Romanova, E. N. 1994. *Iakutskii Prazdnik Ysyakh: Istoki i Predstavleniia* [The Yakut Festival Ysyakh: History and Imaginations]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Romanova, E. and V. Ignat'eva. 2012. The Yakut [Sakha] national festival ysyakh in transition: historical myth, ethnocultural image, and contemporary festival narrative. *Anthropology and Archaeology of Eurasia* 50(4): 42–55.
- Seroshevskii, V. 1993 [1896]. *Iakuty: Opyt Etnograficheskogo Isseldovaniia* [The Yakuts: An Ethnographic Study]. Moscow: ROSSPEN.
- Shapiro, B. 2015. *How to Clone a Mammoth: The Science of De-Extinction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Smith A., L. Reitsma, E. van den Hoven, P. Kotze, and L. Coetzee, 2011. Towards Preserving Indigenous Oral Stories Using Tangible Objects. In *Second International Conference on Culture and Computing. Proceedings*, eds K. Hachimura, T. Ishida, and N. Tosa. Los Alamitos: IEEE Computer Society, pp. 86–91.
- Stone, R. 2001. *Mammoth: The Resurrection of an Ice Age Giant*. Cambridge, Mass: Perseus Publishing.
- Strahlenberg, P. 2010 [1730]. *Das Nord Und Ostliche Theil Von Europa Und Asia* [The Northern and Eastern Parts of Europe and Asia]. Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing.
- Strong, W. D. 1934. North American Indian traditions suggesting a knowledge of the mammoth. *American Anthropologist, New Series* 36(1): 81–88.
- Takakura, H. 2006. Indigenous intellectuals and suppressed Russian anthropology. Sakha ethnography from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s. *Current Anthropology* 47(6): 1009–1016.
- Takakura, H., Y. Iijima, V. Ignat'eva, A. Fedorov, M. Goto, and T. Tanaka (eds). 2021. *Permafrost and Culture: Global Warming and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Russian Federation. Study Guide for Environmental Education*. Center for Northeast Asian Studies Report 26. Sendai: Tohoku University.
- Tonkin, E. 1992. *Narrating Our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vereshchagin, N. 1977. Berelekhskoe “kladbishche” mamontov [The Berelekh mammoth cemetery]. *Trudy Zoologicheskogo Instituta Akademii Nauk SSSR* [The Working Papers of the Zoological Institute, USSR Academy of Sciences] 72: 5–50.

## 1.3 Silence and *yhyakh*

The ideological transformations of the Soviet period dramatically impacted people's ability to demonstrate their cultural identity, express their ethnic consciousness, and continue their relationship with their heritage and ancestry. Such transformations were large-scale, occurred throughout the Soviet Union, and affected all ethnic groups, leaving indelible marks on all aspects of life: culture, education, upbringing, and socialization (Frolova-Walker 1998; Oushakine 2000; Balzer 2011). Some authors argue that “in most of Eastern Europe the Soviet period is now officially perceived as a time of colonization, oppression, suffering, annihilation of the nation, and economic and cultural backwardness” (Klumbyte 2010: 23). At the very core of these changes were conformity with ideology, political ideas, and certain expectations of what it meant to be a citizen of the Soviet Communist state. In return for their loyalty, the state took care of its citizens and rewarded them with free education, healthcare, accommodation, and a range of social benefits, but non-conformity and disloyalty to the ideas of the Soviet state were punishable (Getty 1987; Rittersporn 1991; Petrone 2000). In Part 1, we discuss the pressure for ideological conformity exercised by the regime and authorities (Yurchak 2003). We analyse how the expression of ethnic belonging through a belief system, customs, and language was either banned or severely redacted under ideological pressure, which negatively affected the ways in which people related to their ancestral traditions, knowledge, and practice.

### **Silencing traditions**

Traditional celebrations and festivals that at their core were closely related to the worldviews of many cultural groups were modified to serve as showcases for the ideological foundation of the Communist state. Soviet festival culture created new celebrations as substitutes for traditional ethnic holidays to convince the masses of the virtuousness of the new state, demonstrate the power of the state, affirm the socialist order, and convert people to the new ideology. Thus, as will be demonstrated in more detail shortly, the symbols and highlights of the traditional celebrations – an important form of cultural belonging and identity – were replaced with Soviet symbolism and the Communist leaders replaced local gods and deities. Such ideological pressures on traditional forms of celebrations were experienced in all ethnic

republics of the USSR. In Yakutia, for example, the ancient content of *yhyakh* was replaced by new ideological and political meaning, as we explain below.

We find the concept of “silence” and what it entails conducive for describing and analysing many social and cultural processes that took place within the ideological totalitarian space of the Soviet Union. The theme of silence creates an important background in this book for discussion of ethnic identity alongside ideology and politics, it also is helpful for greater understanding and evaluation of past events. Many scholars found the theme of silence productive (Portelli 1991; Oushakine 2000; Portelli 2003; Humphrey 2005; Maitland 2008; Kidron 2009; Argounova-Low 2011; Fivush and Pasupathi 2019; Murray and Durrheim 2019; Laptander 2020). Inspired by these findings, we refer to silence as a reaction, a response to the dominance of the totalitarian regime, an inability to express and be proud of one’s own ethnic identity. The type of silence that resulted from the powerful imposition of state consciousness is not positive; the type of silence that emerges from disagreement and conflict with the approved ideological line and often results in fear. Such silence is often associated with passivity, apathy, and indifference. It is not an encouraging silence, but a spirited and despondent one.

Silence is a ubiquitous phenomenon. In our work, we are interested in a form of silence that is more than speechlessness, non-utterance, or the inability to speak out; we take an expansive approach that includes the process of silencing under different circumstances and regimes enacted in atmospheres of dominant political orders or where silence was used as a form of protection (Humphrey 2005; Kidron 2009; Fivush and Pasupathi 2019). Here, we talk about silence, which is individual but also public and emerges through pressures and demands for ideological conformity. Expressing ethnic identity in the Soviet Union was restricted to certain accepted ways, with unspoken, not formal but conventionally prohibitive norms, which affected many aspects of everyday behaviour, from wearing traditional clothes to speaking native languages in public. Indeed, the silence we refer to was imposed from outside the community, by the authoritarian powers. This type of silence became, following the proposition by Alessandro Portelli (2003), a metaphor for the suppression of opinion. The following quotation from Sara Maitland (2008: 28) describes this type of silence in the best possible way: “Silence is the place of death, of nothingness. In fact, there is no silence without speech. There is no silence without the act of silencing, someone having been shut up, put bang to rights, gagged, told to hold their tongue... lost their voice. Silence is oppression and speech, language, spoken or written, is freedom”. It is this juxtaposition between speech on the one hand and the process of silencing on the other that led us to explore the relationship between the weak and the powerful, described as “the dialectic of disguise and surveillance” (Scott 1990: 4). This form of silence is born from the social control of public space by hegemonic powers, which creates an environment where the ruling totalitarian regime produces a certain form of language and permits only regulated and sanctioned public utterances. Such an environment also creates a subtle interplay between language, encoding, and doublespeak (Oushakine 2011). The type of silence and non-utterance that existed during the Soviet period was perpetuated by an inability and fear of potential repercussions

for voicing criticisms, questioning the existing regime, and disagreeing with the political and ideological restraints imposed on people. It is similar to what Fontein (2006: 77) has described as the “silence of anger, not happiness” and is a silence related to a loss.

In an environment of dominance and totalitarianism, non-acceptance of the ideologically approved line “often results in silence, passivity, and assent without participation” (Portelli 1991: 113). In the Soviet ideological environment, this type of silence arguably turned into a widespread form of social paralysis. Serguei Oushakine (2000) used the term “aphasia”, originally a speech disorder in psychology, to describe the inability of the post-Soviet people to express their ideas and thoughts. Aphasia, closely linked to silence following Nina Naumova’s definition of “speechless culture” (in Oushakine 2000: 993), is understood as a reaction of people to the instability of the surrounding social system or precarious political environments. Both aphasia and speechlessness are useful for our discussion and can be applied in the case we present, as these terms enhance the notion of “silence” and describe conditions and processes of creation of such silence more succinctly. In the atmosphere of ideological silencing, cultural identities were made less prominent; ethnic belonging became insignificant compared with being a member of the larger Soviet nation. Festivals and celebrations became subdued and quieter in their traditional expression, equated with archaism and condemned to oblivion.

There is a parallel between silence and deliberate omissions of facts, events, and experiences, despite conspicuous presence and common knowledge about them. Silences around these aspects are at the core of “common unsaids”, mentioned in the Introduction to this book, which imply a deliberate exclusion of an event or a chunk of history from public discourses due to the enforced manipulation of public knowledge about these events or parts of history (Gavrilova 2022). “Common unsaids” is a useful term for thinking about the atmosphere of unspoken truths characteristic of the Soviet environment. It relates to uncomfortable pasts, traumas, and difficult events, but also, as the term implies, they are about things that people were not able to openly talk about. In the Soviet Union, such “common unsaids” were imposed by the government authorities in an attempt to produce their own reading of history and interpretation of certain events. To illustrate this practice, we will demonstrate how traditional festivals, including *yhyakh*, were modified under the Communist rule later in Part 1.3.

Ethnography, a respectable discipline that flourished in the Soviet Union (Gellner 1977), pre-occupied itself with recording folkloric texts, studying handicrafts, and describing customs and traditions. Apart from being safe and neutral topics to engage with in the environment of surveyance and suspicion, these ethnographic studies were to prove the righteousness of the Marxist theory of social and cultural evolution (Zil’berman 1976:146; Hirsch 2005: 187–227; Cvetkovski 2014; Elfimov 2014; Anderson 2022). Ethnography was considered “a branch of history, which researches the cultural and customary particularities of different peoples of the world in their historical development, which studies the problems of origin and cultural-historical relations between these peoples and which establishes the history of their settlements and movements” (Tolstov quoted in Dragadze 1978: 65).

Such a vision of cultures, and with them ethnic groups, as archaic and consigned to the past, provided urgency to studying ethnic cultures with their old traditions and customs. It was important “to record all traditions and local customs before they die[d] out” (Dragadze 1978: 64). This approach, not unique to the Soviet Union and common worldwide, rendered traditional cultures as disappearing and inevitably being replaced by modernity. These were strange circumstances when, on the one hand, traditional cultures of native people were suppressed, while studying, recording, and preserving them as objects in museums was encouraged.

There is, of course, a different kind of silence, which is important to mention. It is the silence of *Model of a Summer Festival*, the centrepiece of our research and this book. Obviously, the figurines on the model are silent, but it is clear that the composition and the figurines are very expressive and articulate even, as they convey a lot of information to the viewers. The figures on the model are presented by the craftsman as engaged in an activity, providing them with action, despite being static. Looking at the model, one can easily imagine an animated scene with little figurines waking up from slumber and moving around, accompanied by sounds of the wrestlers groaning, unhurried talk of the elders sitting on the benches, and the poetic and flowing speech of the *algyschyt* asking the sky for blessings. And although the silent figurines of the model remained silent, they generated many, sometimes heated, discussions, evoked narratives from artists and museum staff, and encouraged people old and young to speak about art, creativity, new artistic projects, and, most importantly, about *yhyakh*.

### **Soviet festival culture**

When talking about *yhyakh*, it is important to reflect on the transformations of the festival during the Soviet period. Here, we offer some analysis of the changes that this important celebration has undergone. As we noted in the Introduction to this book, Tanya is herself Sakha and was born and lived in Yakutsk in the late Soviet period. Her personal reflections about the festival are woven into [Part 1.3](#), and her own narratives are representative of people of her generation who grew up in the city. Throughout the *Narrative Objects* project, Tanya drew on and was confronted by her personal experiences, which inevitably had an impact on how we approached the research. This positionality is important, as it acknowledges the experiences of several generations of Sakha people who were raised in the dominating environment of the supra-national Soviet culture, and who gradually grew more detached from Sakha culture and language. As Zil’berman (1976: 149) has observed, it was this generation that “completely mastered the ‘Soviet style of life’”.

When we started the project and began enquiring about people’s experiences of *yhyakh*, we discovered that many of our informants, both Indigenous Sakha and ethnic Russians, who had spent their childhood in Yakutsk prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, did not recall any *yhyakh* celebrations in the city. For many of these individuals, their first encounter with *yhyakh* was in the early 1990s, at the time of perestroika, raising questions as to why it had not been possible for people of that generation to have experienced *yhyakh* earlier. Those who grew up in the city of

Yakutsk of the late Soviet socialist period share experiences of having dual identities: being a native Sakha and a resident of the Soviet state. And often, with only a few exceptions, the generic Soviet identity prevailed: schools taught all subjects in Russian, the Sakha language was not part of the school curriculum generally, and Sakha history and literature were not taught either. In conversations during our fieldwork, we often heard references to *yhyakh* as a festival that was banned. At the same time, there were opinions insisting that the festival continued throughout the Soviet time and was celebrated every summer without restrictions. To address these contrasting opinions and explain the lack of *yhyakh* experience, we have had to disentangle the narratives and establish whether *yhyakh* was really banned in the Soviet time.

To answer this question, it is necessary to look far back into the history of the Soviet celebratory culture. Scholars who have studied celebrations, festivals, and rituals of the Soviet state mark an important aspect – the great need of the new state to influence, convert, and convince people of the righteousness of its politics and ideology (Lane 1981; Petrone 2000; Rolf 2013; Lebedeva 2015). Such a task was enormous in its scale and required various mechanisms for its implementation. One way to exert influence and power on mass consciousness was the formation of the Soviet festival culture. The Soviet state was tasked with introducing the revolutionary worldview against the “old world” and creating its own civic celebrations targeting the religiosity of the population and traditional native culture (Antonov et al 2003: 284–285; Lebedeva 2015: 1784).

The new Soviet celebrations and festivals served multiple purposes: introducing the new Soviet state, instilling devotion and patriotism in the public, and creating a mechanism of conversion and propaganda. Soviet festivals were to demonstrate to the world, as well as convince the masses, that these celebrations were a manifestation of happiness and joy at being a Soviet citizen and that “life has become more joyous” for comrades in the Soviet Union according to Stalin’s slogan (Petrone 2000: 6). Undeniably, such celebrations were also aimed at lifting the spirits of people after the years of hardship: “The ascetism of the 1920s and the political radicalism of the First Five Year Plan that had allowed few opportunities for pleasure were replaced by officially sanctioned entertainment and gaiety” (Petrone 2000: 6). Note the use of the term “officially sanctioned”, which will be discussed later. As state channels through which the state influenced people and disseminated ideas, such celebrations and festivals were heavily controlled areas of activity by authorities. The physical scale of this ideological project was huge, drawing in all ethnic areas and incorporating “citizens from all walks of life and geographical areas into the imagined Soviet land” (Petrone 2000: 11).

According to Mamysheva (2018: 76), the Soviet festival culture, an important segment of the Communist ideology, contributed to the political education of the masses and was aimed at the establishment of ideological norms and values. Religious traditions and practices – whether Orthodox, Islamic, or Shamanist – were discredited by the Soviet state. The project of establishing the new Soviet society required a new ideology, thus overcoming the existing beliefs and instilling new revolutionary thinking in people. Soviet festivals and celebrations were of utmost

importance in confronting religious practices and replacing traditional holidays with ideologically clean Soviet celebrations. But “Soviet holiday culture was a syncretic mixture of traditional and Soviet holiday practices” (Petrone 2000: 19). The Soviet government introduced new holidays which were scheduled to coincide with the ethnic festivals and replace the old ones with something recognisable and relatable (Lane 1981). All religious and traditional festivals were seen in opposition to Soviet ideology, and where such celebrations became deeply rooted, the Soviet authorities tried to usurp them (Rolf 2013: 42). These practices were co-opted into the Soviet official system: Soviet parades were similar to Christian processions, with images of Lenin, Stalin, and other Party leaders replacing religious icons, and the body of Lenin in the Mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow serving as a holy relic for pilgrims (Petrone 2000: 11–12). The religious and traditional festivals involving worshipping gods and deities became unacceptable and were transformed into the secular and seemingly god-less style of the Soviet Union, but where the Communist Party leaders became canonised and turned into new gods on pedestals, as Bernstein and Yurchak (2017: 200) have wittily argued, “Soviet communism was a secular religion with its own rituals, icons, and religious texts.”

According to the instructions of the Soviet of People’s Commissariat of the Russian Federation “On weekly days off and holidays” published in the Code of Labour in 1918, the following holidays were confirmed as holidays, commemorating historic and public events: Revolution Day, Paris Commune Day, Overthrow of the Autocracy Day. However, the final shaping of the Soviet holiday calendar was made in 1927–1928 and was connected to The Decrees of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR (Mamysheva 2018: 76). All celebrations were organised according to a script that was provided by the Communist Committee centrally and then made more concrete on regional levels. Pamphlets containing such scripts and aids on how to organise celebrations were distributed widely and the authorities categorically did not allow any liberties in the organisation of new celebrations and festivals (Mamysheva 2018: 76). The existence of such scripts made the structure of the Soviet celebrations uniform. According to the script, the event would normally open with a speech by political leaders delivering up-to-date reports which highlighted achievements and condemned drawbacks. This was followed by another set of activities that were part of the approved scenario. Highly coordinated, mass celebrations in the Soviet Union were never spontaneous. The organisation of such celebrations turned into a branch of ideological work; committees were set up for articulating recommendations and instructions on conducting celebratory public events. These committees were to set standards and to produce blueprints and scenarios for mass celebrations and festivals. The efficiency of providing blueprints meant that irrespective of the geographical position of the event, celebrations were carried out in the same manner, under the same slogan and political message. For people who carried out such celebrations, the script served as protection and a guarantee that the event was ideologically safe. Rolf (2013: 52) explains how ideological hierarchies made sure the celebrations in all regions and republics ran according to the same script without deviations. The role of *massovik* or “ritual specialists”, as coined by Christel Lane (1981: 26), became endowed

with characteristics of an instructor who conducted censorship, ensuring their correspondence to political and ideological standards (cf. [Rolf 2009](#)).

Two main factors encouraged the Soviets to invent civic socialist holidays and to change or ban traditional festivals: to remove religious content from celebrations, as the church was separated from the Soviet state, and to standardise rituals that would suit many different ethnic groups of people in the Soviet Union. In other words, it was important that the people of one large country collectively shared the same rituals and were unified through the denial of religions, national customs that created the threat of separatism, and anything else that detracted from the idea of a mutual homeland. As [Sadomskaya \(1990: 112\)](#) has observed:

Even among the small peoples of far northeast Siberia one can observe the supplanting of traditional rituals by new Soviet rituals. Thus, in several Koryak settlements, the Nerpa [Seal] Holiday merges with New Year's Day. Among the reindeer Koryaks ... the traditional Reindeer Holiday is shifted in time and becomes a sport competition that coincides with Soviet Army Day.

Ethnic festivals and celebrations all over the Soviet Union were under tight censorship as they were considered anachronistic and related to traditional beliefs, and these factors served as sufficient grounds to prohibit the celebration of these festivals in many places in the Soviet Union. Novruz (Navruz), a popular traditional spring celebration among different ethnic groups of *Sredniaia Azia* (Middle Asia) comparable with the celebration of *yhyakh* in its significance and meaning, was considered “a nationalistic religious celebration” in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period and, from 1937, was prohibited from being celebrated in that region ([Sabiroglu 2016](#)). In Kazakhstan, Navruz was banned for decades, yet returned in 1988 as a pre-cursor of political independence in the country ([Aiazbaeva 2023](#)). These examples demonstrate that where traditional ethnic festivals continued to be celebrated in the Soviet period, they were officially sanctioned and conformed with the socialist prescriptions and would have contributed to the Soviet project ([Petroni 2000: 19](#)). That meant that while ethnic festivals continued to be celebrated, the traditional meaning of these celebrations was transformed to fit the approved ideological standard.

Prohibitions of celebrations and censorship over festivals and public events is an interesting and important aspect of scholarship yet to be fully addressed. A researcher, who has been working in Tajikistan for a long period of time, has commented on the situation with Navruz from a historical perspective:

In reality, between the 1930s and 1950s Navruz was prohibited. In the 1960s the ban was taken off, but there were no clear instructions and therefore the attitude to this festival remained that of mistrust. In the neighbouring regions the festival was not encouraged and not celebrated. In some areas the celebration was overlooked, in some places it was celebrated on a smaller local scale. In the neighbouring Uzbekistan, in the 1980s, Navruz was transformed into a new state celebration altogether with a new name Novbakhor [New Spring].<sup>1</sup>

Suspicion about traditional celebrations demonstrated the Soviet state's colonialist attitude to ethnic groups and their cultural heritage. The most damaging aspect of this approach was the impact on the younger generation of people who were not exposed to the true meaning of these important celebrations, as in the case of *yhyakh*.

### ***Yhyakh* in the Soviet times**

*Yhyakh* has been continuously transforming. Significant ritual changes were recorded as early as the nineteenth century: some sacred qualities of the festival were lost, and the shamans were not as important as they were in the past (Romanova, Ignat'eva 2012: 44). But the transformations of the Soviet period, one can argue, were the most critical. As these local scholars argue, *yhyakh* became a conduit of cultural practice aimed at the creation of a new Soviet Person:

After the events of October 1917, planning, organisation and celebration of ethnic festivals were conducted under the leadership of the Soviet Communist organisations and the celebrations were gradually becoming ideological and political by form and content. Political mythicization of history, events and actions aimed at formation of ideas about 'unbreakable unity of Party and the people' had its effect on ethnic celebrations. *Yhyakh*, like other festivals in ethnic regions of the USSR, was there to fulfil the order of the Communist Party and its government to construct the universe of the Soviet people. The earliest document officially regulating the order of 'conducting the summer festivals *yhyakh*' is dated 1921.

(Romanova and Ignat'eva 2011: 31–32)

Most significant changes to the *yhyakh* celebration took place in the 1930s and 1940s when traditional elements of the celebration were replaced with Communist slogans, speeches made by political leaders, and Soviet symbolic paraphernalia (red flags, the hammer and sickle). The *yhyakh* opening ritual with sacrifice to deities was replaced with drink and food offerings to Stalin and were placed on a specially built platform in front of the portrait of the leader (Romanova 1994: 149). *Ohuokhai* dance and singing – traditionally an integral part of the *yhyakh* celebration – were heavily edited and customary improvisation was banned. Veteran *ohuokhai* singers had to get their texts approved in advance to make sure their songs were appropriate for the ideological protocols and glorified the Communist Party and its leaders (Crate 2006: 168–169). The most important event in the *yhyakh* celebration, *algys*, a thanking ritual, was replaced by a performance of gratitude to the government and its leaders, who by now had unequivocally replaced deities. Many elements of the festival had disappeared or transformed in the process of distancing from the spiritual content of the festival.

Deviations from the official ideological scenario and approved plan of the event were not possible. Archival documents from 1945 located and analysed by Sakha scholars Ekaterina Romanova and Vanda Ignat'eva for their study of the festival

demonstrate how the Yakut District Committee of the Bolshevik Communist Party reprimanded those responsible for the non-ideological content of *yhyakh*:

Last year some *kolkhozes* opened their *yhyakh* with a performance of archaic ceremonies, various kinds of rituals of religious nature. When organising *yhyakh* such activities should not be allowed. *Yhyakh* should be organised as the celebration of the Soviet peasantry ... We recommend that an *yhyakh* is opened by a brief meeting, a speech made by the Chairperson of the Soviet or *kolkhoz*. It is followed by a report of the *kolkhoz* economic indicators, readiness for haymaking season, a collective letter to comrade Stalin pledging further progressive achievements. After the meeting proceed to *kymys* drinking, other mass activities. The sites of *yhyakh* should be festively decorated with posters, slogans, photographic exhibitions, addressing [people] to work hard, to increase productivity of cattle breeding, to start the hay making season in an organised manner, to provide due care for crops, and so on. To display the boards with *kolkhoz* work indicators in visible places, as well as a leaders' board. The reports on *yhyakhs* to be delivered to the District Committee of the Communist Party by July 1.

(cited in Romanova and Ignat'eva 2011: 34)

And thus, gradually, the celebration of *yhyakh* was transformed, its deeply sacred character becoming a generic Labour Festival with essential elements of socialist rituals. The ritual ceremony of the *yhyakh* opening included Communist Party leaders' reports on productivity and achievements of *kolkhozes* instead of *algys* to the deities, as well as awards being given to the champions of socialist labour. From the 1940s, the significance of the *yhyakh* as an important celebration declined further. Petrone notes that, overall, during the period of Stalin's rule, at the time when terror and purges were commonplace, celebrations and festivals diminished; as the cadres were disappearing and the terror increased, the celebrations weakened (2000: 205). One exception for loosening the restrictions was made in May 1945 when, all over the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, large *yhyakh* were held to celebrate victory in World War II (Romanova and Ignat'eva 2011: 32).

Apart from a few exceptions, restrictions and surveillance of celebrations were applied at all times, though to varying degrees depending on geography. In some rural areas, while challenged by imposed restrictions, thanks to the efforts and commitment of some elders and enthusiasts, *yhyakh* continued to be celebrated annually, albeit in a transformed way to emphasize ideological themes. One such important figure and a keeper of Sakha traditions was Sergei Zverev, a performer and singer from the Viliui *uluus*, whose initiative and dedication helped maintain *yhyakh* and turn it into a powerful symbol of Sakha culture (Crate 2006). Zverev's legacy continues to be appreciated by his compatriots to this day and several *yhyakh* celebration have been devoted to his creative work over the decades.

In the city of Yakutsk and other central areas of the region, *yhyakhs* were not encouraged or banned, many of our informants reported they never experienced

this celebration because in Yakutsk the festival was never held. Romanova and Ignat'eva confirm that “[e]ven in such restricted forms *yhyakhs* were conducted only in rural settlements of Yakutia, it was prohibited in town settlements, first of all, in the capital of the republic – Yakutsk” (Romanova and Ignat'eva 2011: 34). Similarly, the *ohuokhai* was banned in the capital of Yakutsk and the central regions (Crate 2006: 168). An attempt to initiate this traditional collective circle dance would prompt wardens and political activists interfere to prevent dancing. As one individual recalled:

I remember how some students would spontaneously organise the *ohuokhai* circles preparing to dance in a small square between the dorms on campus. As soon as they start dancing, the university administration staff would show up, and a woman from the University Communist Committee in a leather jacket, would write down the names of the students who were taking part in the event. To prevent students from participating in such activities in the future, they would lock the dorm doors at 11 pm and the students would not be allowed out.<sup>2</sup>

Other people who were students in the 1980s shared with us similarly troubling experiences of being prevented by the police from similar public actions manifesting their cultural belonging or identity.

The celebrations which replaced *yhyakh* in the city were deliberately neutral in their content. Horse racing, a very popular sport, which traditionally constituted an integral part of *yhyakh* in the Soviet period, took place in the suburbs of Yakutsk, at the local hippodrome, but was presented as an independent sporting event with little acknowledgement of the Sakha tradition of horse breeding. Equally, the *spar-takiada*, sport competitions, was a replacement for the *yhyakh* sporting contests and included traditional wrestling. But such events did not have any reference to Sakha traditions, they lacked traditional context and did not incorporate any rituals or ceremonies. There were no sacred rituals by the *algyschyt* to open events and ask for blessing. Once again, a speech by the leader of the local Communist Committee would normally open the event. Traditional prizes for the winners of these sporting contests, chunks of boiled meat and goblets of *kymys*, were substituted with red pennants and certificates of achievement or diplomas from the authorities.

However, the most significant transformation of the festival during the Soviet time, in our opinion, was about public involvement and participation in *yhyakh*. For ordinary people, the new state-organised festivals became a show that they could attend and observe as one would attend a concert, but they were not able to participate in the activities. Visitors to the festival would be watching dancing taking place on the stage, listening to the music, but not taking part in the *ohuokhai* themselves. The Soviet festivals, orchestrated events, conducted according to a prescribed scenario, turned people into mere spectators, passively watching activities happening in front of them. Festivals organised in this manner would prevent people from being involved and they would also keep people silent. This contradicted the fundamental idea of *yhyakh* of being part of rituals and celebrations,

whether preparing food and drinks, participating in sporting competitions, racing horses, wrestling, singing and dancing the *ohuokhai*, praying to gods, or socialising with extended kin. An annual *yhyakh* was an important constituent part of people's lives, an all-embracing, engaging, and involving event. Indeed, taking part in *yhyakh* meant to join in the celebration of spiritual power, of gods and deities, to express gratitude to the powers above humans, and ensure the following year in one's life would be protected and looked after by the deities from above. Usurping people from such active participation, resulted in many genuinely collective elements of the *yhyakh* celebration, like the *ohuokhai*, becoming stifled. The festival almost lost its main meaning and certainly lost its meaning for several younger generations.

James Scott has commented on complex relationships with governments and authorities in totalitarian regimes by offering the notions of “public” and “hidden” transcripts that have important implications for our discussion (Scott 1990). In the atmosphere of domination and totalitarianism, the public transcripts present visible and formal interaction between the dominant party, represented by authorities, and people, the subordinate party in this equation. Such public transcripts are often an imposition, as they are aimed at the affirmation of those in power and require conformity and compliance from everyone. The hidden transcript of the subjugated party is found in the words, in actions when the words have to be silenced, and in certain ways of behaviour to avoid repercussions from the dominant regime. A further distinction made by Kharkhordin (1999) separates “official” and “hidden intimate” selves, where the latter refers to behaviour shared with close people and where the former conforms with the imposed public norms. In the Soviet environment, such a distinction indicated not only a norm but also a form of self-protection.

While the public transcript in heavily controlled and censored environments can create the experience of paralysis and intensify the imposed silence, it also provides opportunities for covert actions, for divergent hidden transcripts, following Scott's definition. In such regimes, people created underground movements for subverting prescribed and regulated behaviour. Zdravomyslova and Voronkov (2002: 53) refer to such shadow movements and unofficial activities as the “informal public sphere”, which included dissident groups, music movements, and ethnic societies, among other forms. Examples emerging from our fieldwork conversations point to some *yhyakh* celebrations conducted in remote places, in smaller family settings, and as unofficial gatherings. Our interviewees described how some of these celebrations were carried out despite lacking important elements and paraphernalia historically associated with the festival. In subtle ways, then, people continued practising customs and ancient rituals and held on to traditional knowledge as best they could. Some informants described the compliant, non-confrontational, or semi-secretive nature of these gatherings, which were not advertised. The hidden transcript was essential for the continuation of knowledge and traditions; it is because of these quiet, often surreptitious activities, that traditional customs and ways of celebrating *yhyakh* and performing rituals have persisted. These were in stark contrast with the overall atmosphere of acceptance of the regime and integration of Soviet ideological elements into native cultures throughout the socialist

history of the region, where traditional rituals and customs were combined with the ceremonies organised by the state and acquired new aspects.

In rural areas, people did conform to official *yhyakh* celebrations in the Soviet style, organised by the communist leaders; in the cities, however, quieter and more tucked away gatherings were taking place too, through which people could express their ethnic belonging. These were celebrations that continued the original purpose of the festival of gathering to thank the deities for their benevolence by sharing food and sticking to traditions. Such celebrations were unofficial, not advertised, and people would not talk about them openly. These celebrations, quiet and low-key, did not have many traditional elements, but in such gatherings, hidden from the public eye, people continued giving their respects to ancient traditions. Our interviewee, who was in her late 50s at the time we met, told us about her childhood memories of the *yhyakh* in the 1970s celebrated in a quiet and offstage way. In her story, she recalls her father organising an *yhyakh* at their *dacha* (summer house) in the outskirts of the city:

This was about 1970-71 and I recall a big pine tree in the field and that it was a hot summer day. I remember commotion and grown-ups being busy, I remember the word ‘*kymys*’ repeated many times. They could not find *kymys* for a long time but finally managed to get a small quantity from a farm nearby. I remember a lot of meat, cooked in big chunks, not the city fashion in small bits, but big chunks. There was no much other food, only *kymys* and meat. People did not wear traditional clothes; it was not approved ... They celebrated [*yhyakh*] very quietly, as if stealthily. They sat around this big pine tree in the field, drank *kymys*, ate meat and *alaad’y* (pancakes). I do not recall them dancing *ohuokhai*, they could have done it in the evening, but it was dangerous to do anything like that then. They did everything surreptitiously. For some reason only men were organising *yhyakh*. They did not make much fuss and carried the celebration out quietly. After the celebration on the field, they probably went home and had a drink or two, I do not know ... That field has completely changed and is built up with tall buildings now.<sup>3</sup>

Similar stories were shared with us by others with whom we spoke across the project. We heard recollections from interviewees of how their parents or older relatives would gather for a picnic in the forest to share food and drinks, and although it was not considered *yhyakh*, such tacit gatherings were to give respect to traditions. Some of our friends and interviewees were happy to share images from their family albums with us and used them to illustrate the stories they wanted to tell.

The interviewee who shared this black and white photograph of a picnic with us (Figure 1.4), explained that as a child, she saw this photograph often. In the picture, a group of people are gathered in the shady pine grove to share some food. Despite the poor quality of the image, one can feel the summery atmosphere of the setting. People dressed in light, Western clothes, are relaxed and clearly enjoying themselves. And only many years later, our interviewee realised that the picture



Figure 1.4 *Yhyakh* celebration during the Soviet period. Photographer unknown, private collection.

captured a celebration of *yhyakh* in the suburbs of Yakutsk. It is not surprising that our interviewee could not identify this gathering as an *yhyakh* celebration; without traditional clothing, ceremonial fire, and other obvious paraphernalia of the *yhyakh* celebration, it could be any other summer picnic with friends. Upon a more careful inspection, however, one can notice a string of *salama* (bunting) stretched from one tree to another and then, in the middle of a rug spread on the ground, a modest, middle-sized *choroon*. In the mid-1950s, when the picture was taken, a slight relaxation of ideological pressure is discernible, yet gatherings remained quiet, low-key and clandestine, as our interviewee mentioned. While such celebrations lacked spiritual leaders, rituals, ethnic dresses and signalled compliance from all sides, they nevertheless served the main purpose – to mark the event. There was no open defiance, contradictions, rebellion, or even a hint of challenge to the regime in such settings. But even silent and unassuming remembrance of traditions and identity were important for cultural memory, because soon enough perestroika would change the ideological perspectives and bring new opportunities for tacit knowledge to become audible, for songs to be sung, and for the *algys* opening of the *yhyakh* to be heard far and wide.

## Notes

- 1 Argounova-Low, email communication, 19 June 2020.
- 2 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 03 July 2015.
- 3 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 19 July 2015.

**References**

- Anderson, D. 2022. 'Etnos-thinking' in 1917 and today. In *Revolutionary Aftereffects*, M. Swift (ed.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Aiazbaeva, A. 2023. Narodnyi prazdnik: kak vo vremena SSSR zapreshchali Nauryz. In: <https://dknews.kz/ru/dk-life/277929-narodnyy-prazdnik-kak-vo-vremena-sssr-zapreshchali> Accessed 28 September 2023.
- Antonov, E., A. Borisov, and S. Boiakova (eds). 2003. *Narod Sakha ot Veka k Veku: Oчерki Istorii* [Sakha People from Century to Century: Historical Essays]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Argounova-Low, T. 2011. *The Politics of Nationalism in the Republic of Sakha (Northeastern Siberia) 1900–2000: Ethnic Conflicts Under the Soviet Regime*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Balzer, M. M. 2011. *Shamans, Spirituality and Cultural Revitalization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bernstein, A. and A. Yurchak. 2017. Sacred necropolitics: a dialogue on Alexei Yurchak's essay "The canon and the mushroom: Lenin, sacredness, and Soviet collapse". *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(2): 199–216.
- Crate, S. A. 2006. Ohuokhai: Sakhas' unique integration of social meaning and movement. *Journal of American Folklore* 119(472): 161–183.
- Cvetkovski, R. 2014. Introduction: on the making of ethnographic knowledge in Russia. In *An Empire of Others: Making Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, eds. R. Cvetkovski and A. Hofmeister. Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 1–22.
- Dragadze, T. 1978. Anthropological field work in the USSR. *Journal of Anthropological Society of Oxford* 9(3): 61–70.
- Elfimov, A. 2014. Russian ethnography as a science: truths claimed, trails followed. In *An Empire of Others: Making Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, eds. R. Cvetkovski and A. Hofmeister. Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 51–80.
- Fivush, R. and M. Pasupathi. 2019. Silencing self and other through autobiographical narratives. In *Qualitative Studies of Silence. The Unsaid as Social Action*, eds. A. Murray and K. Durrheim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 126–146.
- Fontein, J. 2006. Silence, destruction and closure at Great Zimbabwe: local narratives of desecration and alienation. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32(4): 771–794.
- Frolova-Walker, M. 1998. "National in form, socialist in content": musical nation-building in the Soviet republics. *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51(2): 331–371.
- Gavrilova, S. 2022. *Russia's Regional Museums Representing and Misrepresenting Knowledge about Nature, History and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Gellner, E. 1977. Ethnicity and anthropology in the Soviet Union. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie* 18(2): 201–220.
- Getty, A. 1987. *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hirsch, F. 2005. *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Humphrey, C. 2005. Opasnye slova: tabu, ukloenie i molchanie v Sovetskoj Rossii [Dangerous words: taboo, declining and silence in the Soviet Russia]. *Antropologicheskii Forum* 3: 314–339.
- Kharkhordin, O. 1999. *The Collective and The Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Kidron, C. 2009. Toward an ethnography of silence. The lived presence of the past in the everyday life of Holocaust trauma survivors and their descendants in Israel. *Current Anthropology* 50(1): 5–27.
- Klumbyte, N. 2010. The Soviet sausage renaissance. *American Anthropologist*. 112(1): 22–37.

- Lane, C. 1981. *The Rites of the Rulers. Rituals in Industrial Society – The Soviet Case*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laptander, R. 2020. *When We Got Reindeer, We Moved to Live to the Tundra: The Spoken and Silenced History of the Yamal Nenets*. Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopisto.
- Lebedeva, L.V. 2015. Formirovanie sovetskoi prazdnichnoi kul'tury v 1920-e gody: novye ritualy v protsesse sotsial'nogo konstruirovaniia [Formation of the Soviet festival culture in the 1920s]. In: *Fundamental'nye Issledovaniia* 2(8): 1784–1787.
- Maitland, S. 2008. *A Book of Silence: A Journey in Search of Pleasures and Powers of Silence*. London: Granta Publications.
- Mamysheva, E. P. 2018. Sovietskie prazdniki v Khakassii v 1920-e gody: osobennosti vospriiata [The Soviet Festivals in Khakassia in the 1920-ies: Specific perceptions]. In: *Zhurnal Khakasskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* 2(28): 76–78.
- Murray, A. and K. Durrheim eds. 2019. *Qualitative Studies of Silence. The Unsaid as Social Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oushakine, S. 2000. Third Europe-Asia lecture. In the state of post-Soviet aphasia: symbolic development in contemporary Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies* 52(6): 991–1016.
- Oushakine, S. 2011. Introduction. Jokes of repression. *East European Politics and Societies* 25(4): 655–657.
- Petrone, Karen. 2000. *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades. Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Portelli, A. 1991. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Portelli, A. 2003. *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rittersporn, G. 1991. *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953*. Chur: Hardwood Academic Press.
- Rolf, M. 2009. A hall of mirrors: sovietizing culture under Stalinism. *Slavic Review* 68(3): 601–630.
- Rolf, M. 2013. *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917–1991* (Translated by Cynthia Klohr). Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Romanova, E. N. 1994. *Iakutskii Prazdnik Ysyakh: Istoki i Predstavleniia* [Yakut Festival Ysyakh: History and Imaginations]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Romanova, E and V. Ignat'eva. 2011. Iakutskii natsional'nyi prazdnik ysyakh v situatsii perekhoda: istoricheskii mif, etnokul'turnyi obraz i sovremennyi prazdnichnyi narrativ [Yakut national festival of Yhyakh in transition: historical myth, ethnocultural image and contemporary festive narrative]. *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* 4: 29–40.
- Romanova, E. and V. Ignat'eva. 2012. The Yakut [Sakha] national festival ysyakh in transition: Historical myth, ethnocultural image, and contemporary festival narrative. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, 50(4): 42–55.
- Sabiroglu, F. 2016. Mify sovetskogo vremeni o Novruz Bairamy [Soviet myths about Novruz Bairamy] (<https://vzglyad.az/news/57875/news.html>). Accessed 11 September 2023.
- Sadomskaya, N. 1990. New Soviet rituals and national integration in the USSR. In *Soviet Nationality Policies: Ruling Ethnic Groups in the USSR*, ed. H. Huttenbach. London, New York: Mansell Publishing Limited, pp. 94–120.
- Scott, J. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Yurchak, A. 2003. Soviet hegemony of form: everything was forever, until it was no more. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45(3): 480–510.
- Zdravomyslova, E. and V.Voronkov. 2002. The informal public in Soviet society: double morality at work. *Social Research* 69 (1): 49–69.
- Zil'berman, D. 1976. Ethnography in Soviet Russia. *Dialectical Anthropology* 1(2): 135–153.

## 1.4 *Yhyakh* returns

This chapter reflects on an important historic period in post-Soviet Russia which resulted in unique opportunities and subsequent major changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres for all ethnic regions. For many Sakha people of the generation born in the late socialist period, this was the time for learning more about their own culture and embracing their heritage, whether speaking their mother tongue in public, taking part in a traditional festival, or performing the *ohuokhai* dance. Most importantly, it was about true ownership and expression of their ethnic identity and active engagement with their own culture without fear of being reprimanded.

Here, we discuss how transformations following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 affected the Sakha people's relation to their culture and language. A sizeable part of this chapter is dedicated to the summer festival, *yhyakh*, and how the cultural landscape in *Sakha Sire* has transformed since the 1990s. We investigate how *yhyakh* started to be celebrated again in Yakutsk after a few decades of being banned in the city and look at the changes the festival has undergone, particularly the spatial conceptualisation of the *yhyakh* venue, which resulted in rescaling of the event. We argue that the renewed spatial understanding of the *yhyakh* venue has made this festival more inclusive, boosted its popularity among various social and ethnic groups in *Sakha Sire*, and opened opportunities for people to actively participate in the celebration. The extravagance with which the contemporary *yhyakh* is celebrated now speaks to its changed functions, intergenerational appeal, diversity, and multiculturalism. We aim to demonstrate how *yhyakh* has gained its voice again after decades of being silent.

With the arrival of Gorbachev to power in 1985, the political landscape of the Soviet Union started changing dramatically, but the most evident changes for ethnic regions started in 1991 when Boris Yeltsin replaced Gorbachev as the head of the country. Yeltsin's famous words "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow" (Kahn 2001: 380) served as encouragement to the leaders of the ethnic republics in the Russian Federation to conduct a series of reforms that involved negotiations of power with the federal government. Many reforms of that politically tumultuous period led to the recognition of cultural diversity in the ethnic regions, the promotion of regional profiles, the revitalisation of language policies, and support for ethnic cultural development (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996; Balzer 2021).

DOI: [10.4324/9780429456398-6](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456398-6)

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

The government of Sakha focused on economic reforms and renegotiation with the Kremlin over the revenues from the mineral resources for the Republic but also devoted considerable attention to social reforms. These transformations were supported by the political elite and people passionate about cultural change on a broad range of issues with special attention given to education, culture, and linguistic policy. One distinctive feature of this critical period was the involvement of people at large: museum workers, schoolteachers, activists, local historians, ethnographers, and many others, who supported fresh and novel ideas of self-determination in the republic and enthusiastically engaged in the process that can be fairly referred to as “revitalisation” of culture.

After decades of silence, whispers, and rituals conducted surreptitiously, there came a period distinguished by strong voices, articulated speech, expressive discussions, sounds of ethnic music, and songs. An important characteristic of the post-Soviet transformations in the Republic of Sakha was the pluralism of initiatives, projects, and campaigns. Different and often contrasting views, diverse interpretations of events – it seemed anything could be vocalised in the almost intoxicating air of freedom, where multivocality was in contrast with the single voice of the ideological meta-narrative of the Soviet regime.

### **On culture and strategic essentialism**

The concept of culture in anthropology has been continuously debated (Geertz 1973; Clifford 1988; Carrithers 1992; Schneider 1995; Ingold 2005). We do not attempt to provide an exhaustive rendition of the concept but we need to explain how the term culture is used in this book. We leave the definition of culture deliberately broad and describe it as a complex of ideas, values, rules, and norms of behaviour shared by a social group. We also let this notion be explained by our respondents in their own terms in order to demonstrate how the idea of culture facilitates the transformational processes that take place in the Republic. Handling this notion in writing is further complicated by the use of three different languages in our fieldwork and, as we demonstrate throughout, the aspect of translation of words and notions has been a significant element in this multilingual project. *Kul'tura*, directly translated as culture, for people with whom we held many conversations, does not have an aspect of exoticism, it is something they live with or even live in. The word “culture” does not have a direct equivalent in the Sakha language and is best described as *olokh maigya* (lifestyle) or simply *olokh* (life). Culture, then, is a complex whole and it has many significant ways of expressing and living. For our interviewees, Sakha culture was about their language, traditions, material objects, and certain ways of doing things. To illustrate this point, many of our discussions with art historians were about what they considered to be the specific, genuinely Sakha, style of carving. Such perspectives might appear essentialist and temporally suppressed (Phillips 2010), but for our interviewees culture is historically contingent and has collective legitimacy. We argue that this interpretation of culture from an essentialist perspective is used by Sakha activists strategically. The concept of strategic essentialism offered by Gayatri Spivak (1996) describes strategies employed by

minority groups to influence society and politics. As such members of minority groups “may engage in an essentializing and to some extent standardizing of their public image, thus advancing their group identity in a simplified, collectivized way to achieve certain objectives” (Eide 2010: 76). With this strategic approach, the notion of cultural revitalisation, which has been employed by Sakha activists, becomes appropriate despite its controversy.

In discussions with us, people often talked about culture as an object: “Sakha people were lost in the late socialist period because they *poteriali kul'turu* (lost culture) and much of it needed to be brought back by piece by piece”.<sup>1</sup> The experienced loss of culture not only presents it as a bounded category or a discrete thing even, but also highlights the evolving nature of culture as a fluid and temporal phenomenon. It also points to an important distinction that *imet' kul'turu* (to own culture) also means that culture can be dispossessed or re-possessed by a collective. Furthermore, it brings up questions of agency and the ability to act. “[S]trategic essentialism aims to describe identity practices of resistance to dominant groups’ impositions... it is a concept that brings us more firmly back to the ‘substance’ or ‘essence’ of identity claims” (Bell 2014: 116). Ownership of culture and agency in ownership were themes in many conversations we had with Andrei Borisov, former Minister of Culture. He evoked how desperate the situation was between the 1960s and 1990s, the years which he described as *ne bylo kul'tury* (void of culture). According to Borisov, at the beginning of the 1990s, Sakha culture was at its lowest, visible only as staged shows and performances, “but it was not really our culture”. For Borisov “our culture” is not about folkloric shows or glossy leaflets, it is about lively conversations in the native language, music and stories, art and education as part of everyday experience, as well as vibrant participatory celebrations (cf. Peers 2019: 284–288).

Borisov recalled heated discussions around the revival of *yhyakh* in the early 1990s. Some politicians were arguing for an exact replication of the traditional *yhyakh* from the archival records and ethnographic accounts which, in their opinion, would have ensured the authenticity of the celebration. Borisov’s opinion differed; in his view, it was impossible to return to the past. Moreover, an important element of the *yhyakh* revival in his vision were people who needed to become part of the celebration again, join the festivities, take part in contests, dance the *ohuokhai*, so that the passive observers could again become active and engaged participants. It was Andrei Borisov, who in 1991, led the government programme of reforms in the cultural sphere on *vozhrozhdenie* (revitalisation) of the Sakha culture with four priority areas identified by the following key clusters, expressed succinctly and strategically essentialist as: *khomus* – *yhyakh* – *olonkho* – *iteghel* (traditional belief system) (Antonov et al 2003: 296). These four clusters referred to important cultural elements and symbols – a traditional musical instrument, a festival, a traditional literary genre, and an ancestral system of beliefs – and were seen by the government as the priority areas requiring urgent attention. And while these reforms seemingly targeted specific singular events, *yhyakh* for example, or objects even, like a *khomus*, they represented much broader social and cultural areas that were affected and consequently needed to be enriched. Some thirty years

later, Borisov, now an advisor to the government, spoke about the success of this programme when we discussed it with him during fieldwork:

So many years have passed since then and look at us now - we do play *kho-mus*, we celebrate *yhyakh*, and we sing *olonkho* [...] At the beginning, when we started this process, no-one had imagined this would ever be possible.<sup>2</sup>

This evaluation of the achievements the Republic attained has been echoed by many we interviewed who expressed their pride that their culture was thriving, and its future prospects are brighter with younger generations of Sakha knowing more about their traditional history and culture, pointing to contemporary ethnic art, music, and cinematography. In what follows, we analyse three most visible areas of revitalisation: language, traditional dress, and the renewed spatial conceptualisation of *yhyakh*.

### Language

The Sakha language, also known as Yakut, belongs to the group of Turkic languages and counts approximately 480,000 speakers, the majority of whom reside in the republic (Rosstat 2020). During the Soviet period, one could hear the Sakha language on the radio and television, but this was largely a token for the façade of multiculturalism in the USSR. In reality, the Sakha language was almost silent, particularly in urban spaces, where it was not spoken in public (Ferguson 2019: 1–11). People did not speak Sakha in the bus, in the long queues in the shops, in formal meetings and public gatherings. The language was silent as it was considered retrograde and associated with the past, with Russian being the main language of communication and education, these attitudes were common for all ethnic regions in the Soviet Union (Grenoble and Whaley 2006). Out of 30 comprehensive schools in the city of Yakutsk, only two provided partial teaching of some subjects in Sakha (Chevalier 2017: 617). All training at the higher educational institutions was conducted in Russian, and therefore parents had no choice but to educate their children in Russian. Like many of the reforms in the republic of that period, the Sakha language revival is associated with Mikhail Nikolaev, President of the Republic (1991–2002), who was the first politician to make his public speeches in Sakha. One such moment is described by ethnographer Lilia Vinokurova:

I recall that day when ... Mikhail Nikolaev started speaking in Sakha from the lectern, still covered in red ‘communist’ velvet. How my heart leaped upon hearing my native speech spoken by an official at an important meeting for the first time. It was a very special moment to hear the Sakha language as a state language after centuries of my mother tongue referred to as foreign, perceived as wild, uneducated, and later as backward and non-progressive ...  
(Vinokurova 2004)

Vinokurova refers to the moment in her memory that re-instated official and formal functions of the Sakha language. These reforms were further supported by The

Decree on Language proclaiming Sakha a state language of the Republic (Zakon 1992). The revival of language was more than political declarations and legislation; the changing political climate and shift in language politics on their own would not have been able to improve the usage of the Sakha language. A shift in communicative norms in the Republic is associated with the growing migration of the rural population into the city of Yakutsk in the 1990s, as well as widespread campaigns for popularisation of Sakha as a form of verbal art (Ferguson 2022), and the increased demand for Sakha training in educational institutions. These factors led to its valorisation and improved linguistic environment in the city (Argounova-Low 2007). Gradually, language became a practice and a tool for everyday mundane tasks: shopping, socialising, making announcements on the bus, and asking for a direction on the street. In the past few decades, the linguistic landscape in the Republic has been further supported by the expansion of technology and social media, making electronic communication in Sakha easier to circulate, as well as growing creative industries such as music and cinematography which use Sakha as their main medium. The language, once considered retrograde, finally got its voice back and its expanded use increased the confidence with which people embraced their Sakha belonging and identity.

### **Ethnic dress**

Ethnic dress is an effective means of communication and plays an important role in society. Dress is crucial in establishing people's identity; it reflects kinship structures, political alliances, and religion, and indicates hierarchical positions. As one of the visible physical and cultural characteristics, dress facilitates the development of social identity and collective representation (Chattaraman and Lennon 2008: 520) and is important in expressing people's ethnic belonging. Transformations of the Sakha traditional dress is a very interesting area of research and it requires some serious scholarly attention, particularly given the potential value of engagement with museum collections and archival images to support revitalisation, as we note in [Part 2](#).

Sakha clothing has been altering all the time in its design, style, and fashion. The ways in which the ethnic dress and its symbolism change reveal larger societal, political, and economic processes. Ideological pressures have affected the visibility of the traditional Sakha dress in the past and it is important to reflect on those shifts when thinking about contemporary tendencies and the significance people lend to Sakha dress in expressing their ethnic identity. Scholars have commented on the communicative function of dress serving as conformation and appraisal, which depends on shared social norms and values (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Chattaraman and Lennon 2008; Paulicelli and Clark 2009; Riello and McNeil 2010). In our case, we are concerned with ethnic clothing first of all, where ethnic dress is a medium for making a statement, communicating a message, or even narrating a story about personal and collective identity. With reference to Gofman's performance theory, Chattaraman and Lennon argue that dress represents a sort of visible dialogue between an ethnic dress wearer and the audience about social and cultural

collective representation. Dress in this case becomes more than a part of identity; it also becomes dramaturgical performance (Chattaraman and Lennon 2008: 520).

In the Soviet Union, however, the relationship between cultural identity, traditional dress, and its visibility was severed. The Communist ideology dictated plain, non-ethnic clothes for a standard dress code as a sign of a new era, progress, and dynamism, as opposed to the past, traditions, and their perceived stagnation. Although adhered to more strictly in big cities than in rural settlements with traditional economies, this transition to non-ethnic dress was widespread. In addition, as Blitstein (2006) describes, traditional garments were seen as a marker for nationalist sentiments. Traditional silver jewellery, an important accessory of the female Sakha dress, was considered apolitical. As a result, ethnic dress during the Soviet period was severely restricted in the functions it served, as Soviet identity prevailed over ethnicity, and the traditional dress was relegated to trivial and insignificant roles in the rare instances where such manifestation of ethnicity was permitted. Large concerts, performances, and shows emphasising the long-lasting friendship of all peoples in the Soviet Union were appropriate venues for exhibiting traditional apparel. School concerts and performances became a common place for wearing ethnic garments. In venues like these, traditional attire, full of meaningful significance, turned into a costume and a fancy dress. In the passage below, our interviewee revisits her childhood memories to realise, with some bitterness in hindsight, how her Sakha dress was consigned to a party costume and was not taken seriously, just like other carnival outfits:

You remember I told you about my Sakha dress made for me by my auntie. I loved the dress, it had the most beautiful beads and special ribbons, it was so very nice and shiny. I was very happy when I had a chance to wear it. But I only wore it for the New Year school parties. I was in my Sakha dress, together with other children dressed up as Teddy Bears and Rabbits, masquerading *koroche* [basically].<sup>3</sup>

The profound changes traditional Sakha dress underwent in the Soviet period were further affected by the lack of demand and the necessity of preparing and sewing ethnic garments. With that came the decline in dressmaking skills and the loss of designs and patterns. Endemic for the socialist era, the widespread deficit of goods, fabric, and haberdashery, was another reason for the decline in the significance of traditional clothes. Limited availability, lack of choice, and often the absence of traditional *khaarys* (silk), *tüü* (fur), and *ürüŋ kömüs* (silver) meant that outfits were compromised in design and patterns made with cheaper substitutes that were more readily available. Expensive silk was replaced with cotton fabric, silver insets with tin or foil, and china beads with plastic equivalents. Ironically, as previously noted, Soviet ethnographers at that time were preoccupied with describing ancient folk dresses found in ethnographic museums, along with old customs, traditions, and ceremonies (e.g., Bogatyrev 1971; Badmaeva 1987).

The decline in the skills of making dresses, jewellery, designs, and patterns had a detrimental effect, which disrupted the passage of knowledge from the older to

the younger generation. Iya Pokatilova, an art historian, described in conversation with us how craft and art traditions diminished during the Soviet period and by the 1980s, people *poteriali navyki* (had lost skills) of ethnic craft. Pokatilova referred to a conference in 1981 where Vladimir Ivanov, a well-known Sakha art historian, alarmed by the fact that traditional arts were in decline, urged local craftswomen to replicate ancient works exhibited in the museums in order to *vernut' navyki* (bring skills of making designs back). This concern was shared by the republican *Soyuz Khudozhnikov* (Artists Union), who started their own campaign to reach local craftspeople. Pokatilova recalls instances when local craftswomen were carefully copying patterns from museum artefacts to replicate in their home embroidery. These craftspeople later became involved in the restoration process and were instrumental in the revival of designs and old traditional patterns, as the programme rolled out wider and engaged more people on the way. Pokatilova argued that the rebirth of crafts was an important element for the revival of *yhyakh*. In her opinion, these two elements were connected and had it not been for the revival of crafts and traditional dress, the revival of *yhyakh* may not have happened as it did (see also [Part 2](#)).

These days most people turn up at the *yhyakh* venues wearing Sakha clothes and traditional silver jewellery ([Figure 1.5](#)). Small children put on dresses made by their mothers and *ebe* (grandmothers); women wear colourful full-length, voluminous, dresses that are perfect for protecting them from the hot sun; men are dressed in tailored coats with handmade leather belts with silver insets. The months leading up to the *yhyakh* celebration are particularly busy with new orders placed to tailors



*Figure 1.5* Women in Sakha dresses dancing at *yhyakh*, June 2015. Photographer M. Unarov.

and jewellery shops. Many people we interviewed during our project explained that while *yhyakh* celebrations take place over a very short time, the preparations for the event take place throughout the year; ethnic fashion designers make new collections for catwalks during *yhyakh*, seamstresses prepare for best clothes and best replica of traditional dress contests. Transformations of Sakha dress and the increased visibility in *Sakha Sire* demonstrate their value and the role ethnic fashion plays in the revival and transformation of *yhyakh*. Every aspect of this complex process of the revival of *yhyakh* plays an important part in the acquisition of Sakha identity and the strengthening of ethnic self-awareness.

### *Yhyakh spatial transformations*

When highlighting the changes in the way the summer festival is celebrated, it is important to analyse the transformations in organisation of space of *yhyakh*, as a venue. Here, we adhere to the concept of space as designed by human activity, which includes countless forms of ordering and is a social concept at its core. It is therefore a significant part of the cultural landscape and built environment (Rapaport 2005). The celebrations of *yhyakh* resumed in Yakutsk in the early 1990s. A newspaper article entitled *Yhyakh Returns to Yakutsk* highlights the celebration of this festival held in the city for the first time in nearly 50 years and describes the excitement of thousands of people who gathered at the local hippodrome, a large open space, in the outskirts of the city (Chertov 1990). Two years later, 21 June was formally made an *yhyakh* day and a public holiday in the Republic. This recognition of the importance of the festival was undoubtedly a turning point in the reinvention of the celebration. The Sakha government, focused on the economic and political agenda, pushed hard to strengthen the image of self-determination by inventing state paraphernalia such as the flag, the constitution, the anthem, and *yhyakh* as the official holiday. These were important state attributes to signal to the federal government a new vision of the future relationship with the centre, increasing autonomy and cultural revitalisation processes in the republic. For the regional government, the main sponsor of the republican *yhyakh*, who dictated the location, form, and content of the event, it was an opportunity to present their political agenda, as “all spatial organization is an attempt, by individuals or groups, to control, affect or influence people, phenomena and relationships” (Rapaport 2005: 489). This vision and the goals of the republican authorities have determined many aspects of the post-Soviet *yhyakh* as an event demonstrating the status of the Republic as an equal member within the Russian Federation and making important economic and political statements. An early celebration of *yhyakh*, one sunny weekend in 1996, captured in Tanya’s fieldnotes from the period helps recreate and reflect on the atmosphere of the celebration after a long break:

An elevated stage in the centre of the field was ready to accommodate performing groups to start their numbers, with microphones and loudspeakers on the ready. A row of stalls and kiosks at the edge of the large field seemed to be the busiest, selling food, including rare treats of *kymys* and boiled meat, as

well as the more standard chocolate and biscuits. Some stalls had a display of traditional beaded embroidery, hangings and rugs with Sakha designs. There was excitement in the air, people smiled, laughed, exchanged a happy chatter. Pairs of elderly women, arm in arm, walked from stall to stall slowly, in a dignified manner, but only a few of them were sporting traditional dresses or silver jewellery. No men wore ethnic clothes, yet, to mark such a special occasion, some of them were dressed in their best *pidzhak* (jackets) with military and labour medals shining off the lapels.<sup>4</sup>

Even this very modest celebration in the city after the decades-long interval was a great revelation for many younger visitors, for whom this was the first *yhyakh* they had experienced; it became a way to embrace their Sakha identity and acknowledge their ancestral roots. In comparison with the flamboyance of the contemporary celebrations, *yhyakh* in 1996 might have been a small but extremely important step towards revitalisation of this festival. More than thirty years on, *yhyakh* celebrations continue and grow. In the remainder of [Part 1](#), we discuss ways the contemporary celebration of *yhyakh* has transformed and what it means today for people in *Sakha Sire*.

These days *yhyakh* is marked by a series of celebrations taking place in towns, *uluuses*, and rural settlements which are organised by different levels of governments, municipalities and *uluus* administrations, large corporations, work collectives, and family clans (cf. [Balzer 2008](#)). Two of these events are the largest: The *Tuimaada Yhyakh*, sponsored by the city of Yakutsk, and The *Oloŋkho Yhyakh*, organised by the republican government. Since 2006 the *Oloŋkho Yhyakh* takes place in a different town every year and each time these celebrations become wider and draw tens of thousands of people from all over the republic, other Russian peripheries, and internationally. Both celebrations are commemorative and are devoted to important dates (e.g., the 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War) ([Donskoi 2012](#): 10). For local people, the renewed contemporary festival has become an opportunity for self-expression and the manifestation of collective Sakha identity and unity ([Nikanorova 2020](#)).

As a significant multi-functional and multi-vocal celebration, *yhyakh* for many people is a secular event nowadays, yet one that retains important elements going back to traditional Sakha beliefs. When the model from the British Museum was on display in Yakutsk, visitors to the exhibition and participants in the *Narrative Objects* project commented on the recognisable aspects of the celebration portrayed more than 150 years previously as part of the model: *algys*, *kymys* drinking, ritual of feeding the fire, and others. All these sacred and ceremonial elements appeared familiar to local people who attend contemporary celebrations of *yhyakh*. For instance, the role of the *algyschyt*, a spiritual leader who addresses the deities and makes a ritual offering, remains the key aspect of the event; no celebration is imaginable without the *algyschyt* opening the event. The opening ritual, like in the past and as depicted on the model, has several young people helping the *algyschyt* in the ritual. The *tühülge*, which originally was the most important area reserved for the sacrifice ritual and opening ceremony, remains a spiritually important place



Figure 1.6 *Tühilge* area at Maia *yhyakh*, June 2016. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

and its significance is usually identified by decorations, marked by *chechir*, cuttings of young birch trees to celebrate new growth and renewal (Figure 1.6).

While there are many similar elements between the old and modern celebrations, there are also many notable changes. An important element of the cultural landscape, *yhyakh* celebrations are a product of human activity and culture, which is purposeful, rational, and strategic (Rapoport 2005: 460–502). The contemporary spatial organisation of *yhyakh* is a good demonstration of changes that took place over a period: its transformed scale, broadened significance, and the way it engages with its audience, are all in all a good example of temporal dynamism, as we argue. Spatial dimensions are used by particular groups to “classify and order domains and settings, thereby structure space and hence organise it. These orderings can then be expressed through physical means, resulting in built environments” (Rapoport 2005: 488). Organisation of space is actively used in cultural processes; renewed spatial organisation of the *yhyakh* venue represents changed meanings articulated by social and political institutions and participating groups.

Since 1998 the *Tuimaada Yhyakh*, organised by the city has been held 30 km north of Yakutsk in the large suburban area called *Üs Khatyη* (Three Birches), an area with ample space to accommodate thousands of people. Finding an appropriate place was a lengthy process, and the organisers considered many practical elements when determining the suitability of the new *yhyakh* location for conducting rituals. A team of archaeologists and historians consulted archival records and planners, whereas architects, craftsmen, and artists sat down to draw initial plans for the *yhyakh* area. Viliam Iakovlev-Tühülgen, director of the *Tuimaada Yhyakh* complex, as well as ethnographer, architect, and craftsman, who travelled extensively in the republic to collect artefacts and designs of Sakha wooden vernacular architecture, has explained that the choice of place was inspired by the archaeological findings confirming that ancient people used this site for ritual celebrations (Iakovlev-Tühülgen 2015: 138–139).

Initially, *Üs Khatyη* started with an area for performing and a slightly larger area allocated for dancing *ohuokhai*, the circle dance. As the festival grew and drew more attendees every year, the area continually expanded to accommodate tens of thousands of visitors; new buildings and wooden sculptures were created, and parking and camping zones were established. It now comprises several parts designated for conducting rituals, *kymys* drinking, performances, sporting competitions, trade and food tents, fun fairs, discos, and a horse racing track. Never in the history of *yhyakh* it had to accommodate up to 150,000 people at one time. This change also led to some significant modifications in spatial understanding of the *yhyakh* place. The purpose of the traditional *yhyakh*, as a local event, was to serve small communities or kin, and this purpose was reflected in the bounded and clearly marked spatial configurations of the festival area. Spatial organisation of the *yhyakh* space was arranged around a *tühülge*, a sacred area where the most important ritual of blessing and offering would take place and where according to traditional belief, *ilge* (blessing and divine milky liquid) would be poured by gods from above for people to enjoy. In contemporary spatial conceptualisation of the *yhyakh* area, however, there are multiple *tühülges* which are allocated for the blessing ritual, as well as separate *tühülges* for singing, sport, *kymys* drinking, dancing, children's games, and many more, as illustrated on the map legend of Figure 1.7. As the event was transforming, the spatial organisation of the event was expanded by adding more segments, which re-ordered traditional concepts and consequently resulted in changed terminology. For instance, the meaning of *tühülge* has now shifted from a traditional understanding of this place as a singular, and the only place on the spatial map of the *yhyakh* venue designated for ritual activity, to an expanded and pluralised spatial term denoting a place of gathering. This broadening of traditional terminology can be interpreted as a process of secularisation of *yhyakh* and its space.

The secularization of the space is also noticeable in the commercialization of the *yhyakh* space in *Üs Khatyη*. Apart from areas for obligatory rituals and traditional activities such as *kymys* drinking and dancing, there are allocated designated areas rented out to larger businesses and companies to install corporate buildings, including *uraha* to accommodate and entertain guests, and hold celebrations during the few days of the festival. Large and small commercial businesses have an area



Figure 1.7 Layout of *Üs Khatyҥ* indicating multiple *tühülges*. Published in *Sakha Sire*, 26 June 2015. Photograph by J. Costin, University of Aberdeen.

designated for trade, with long rows of stalls for selling food, clothing, jewellery, and souvenirs.

Architecturally and artistically, the main design and development of the *Üs Khatyҥ* area have been driven by Viliam Iakovlev-Tühülgen, director of the *Tui-maada yhyakh* complex, who sees his tasks as more than a straightforward recreation and echoing of ancient designs and artefacts. By his own admission, *yhyakh* is a larger cultural and philosophical concept related to ontology and cosmology. For him, Sakha culture is not a unique and isolated phenomenon but connected and related to other world cultures. This approach continues in his designs and visions of the spatial organisation of the *yhyakh* space and lends new conceptualisation to traditional architecture.

On a midsummer night – the small hours of 21 June 2016 – we drove to the *Üs Khatyҥ* complex at the invitation of Iakovlev-Tühülgen to join him for the ceremony of the greeting of the sun and to see his new architectural project at the *yhyakh* site. Viliam brought us and about dozen of his other guests to an open space with large elaborately carved ceremonial wooden gates. The ceremony of the

greeting of the sun on 21 June is an important aspect of the contemporary *yhyakh* to mark the first day of the summer solstice and to conduct a ritual of cleansing and praying. We gathered around the fire to give some offerings and at 2.35 am when the first sunrays aligned with a central point of the beautiful wooden gate, we stretched our arms towards the sun and stood still letting the glimmers of the sun touch our hands and faces, some of us in a silent prayer, some asking for good luck and protection in a quiet whisper (Figure 1.8).

Meanwhile when the first rays of the sun threw a shadow Viliam marked a point on the ground for his new project. The idea of a large sundial at the *yhyakh* venue came to him some time ago. A sundial might not be a traditional Sakha way of time reckoning, yet Viliam justified his project by a strong celestial and solar symbolism of the *yhyakh* celebration, as well as an ancient belief that the Sakha people are “children of the Sun” (Lukina 2018). Stressing the importance of the sundial with these words, he hammered the wooden peg in the soil to indicate the touch



Figure 1.8 The ritual of greeting the sun at *Üs Khatyy*, 21 June 2016. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

spot of the first sun ray on the summer solstice day, as the marked presence of the sun on the *tühülge*. Later in conversation with us, Viliam made references to other ethnic groups worldwide who worship the sun and stressed sun symbolism in the religious, economic, and social life of many ancient cultures, mentioning the Stonehenge monument to support his statements. It is not unusual for people in *Sakha Sire* to make connections and parallels with other cultures and religions, often demonstrating very detailed knowledge of remote countries and their history, which in our mind demonstrates the tendency to see local events as aligned and corresponding to events globally. This vision of Sakha culture contributing to world heritage inspired Iakovlev-Tühülgen to start carving and installing *serges* in many locations abroad, including France, Japan, Iceland, Canada, Germany, Turkey, Spain, and the USA. The Sakha diaspora abroad helped him to reach these destinations and facilitated commemoration of the *yhyakh* celebration by installing *serge* around the world (Iakovlev-Tühülgen 2015: 85–95).

As the crowd returned from the sun greeting ceremony to Viliam's wooden hut on the *yhyakh* grounds, we sat at the long table covered with festive food and Viliam continued his explanation of ancient Sakha philosophy and his future plans for developing the *yhyakh* site. We greeted the new morning by feeding the fire with *alaad'y* (pancakes). *Üs Khatyy*, still quiet, would transform in a few hours to a buzzing place with the voices of singers and dancers echoing far in the valley, and the excitement of many people sharing their joy of the *yhyakh* celebration. On the horizon, the sun was extending its warmth to new plots designated for future *uraha*, many more *serges* and other architectural projects Viliam intended to install in the years to come.

#### *Aal Luuk Mas* (The Tree of Life)

The *Aal Luuk Mas* (The Tree of Life) is an important concept in the Sakha worldview and is an ontological vision of the world as the three-tiered structure, reference to which can be found in *oloŋkho* and many narratives (Okladnikov 1970: 269–270). As noted in Part 1.2, this three-storied world has a place of residence for Gods and heavenly deities in the top crown of the tree, with ordinary people occupying its middle part, and the evil spirits inhabiting the lower tier in the underground. In the Sakha language, the notion of the *Aal Luuk Mas* remained a philosophical and cosmological concept until Mikhail Nosov, a self-taught Sakha artist, made one of the earliest attempts to visualise the *Aal Luuk Mas* in 1946.

A further step in the materialisation of the ontological notion of the *Aal Luuk Mas* was an initiative of a few local artists involved in the revival of *yhyakh*, who proposed to carve an *Aal Luuk Mas* sculpture and make it a centrepiece of the *yhyakh* celebration space. Local art-historian Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova recalled how artists and wood carvers discussed sketches and looked at the early paintings and etchings to help them shape and visualise the sculpture of the Tree of Life.<sup>5</sup> Today, the *Aal Luuk Mas* sculpture is a significant element of the *yhyakh*'s spatial layout and an important aspect of furnishing of the festival's build environment. The sculpture is a mandatory element in designing large, government-sponsored



Figure 1.9 *Aal Luuk Mas* at the Churapcha *yhyakh*. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

*yhyakhs*, together with other required architectural aspects of the festival space, including horse racing tracks, performing areas, and specially designated *tühülges*. When we arrived at the *yhyakh* celebration place in Churapcha in the summer of 2015, like other visitors, we were amazed by the striking sight of a newly carved 40-metre tall *Aal Luuk Mas* commissioned for the *Oloŋkho Yhyakh* (Figure 1.9).

With each new *yhyakh* location, the *Aal Luuk Mas* is getting larger, taller, and more elaborate. Many elders and historians see this problematic, as, in their opinion, the essence and the true meaning of the Tree of Life is getting lost.<sup>6</sup> We heard an opinion that the erection of the *Aal Luuk Mas* on the *tühülge* is not authentic; there were no sculptures of a similar kind found in the past and that such adornment of the *yhyakh* place makes the whole celebration theatrical. There is no trace of *Aal Luuk Mas* on the *yhyakh* model, a point frequently noted by interviewees. Many residents of the city and the republic criticise expenditure of public funds to create these aspects of the celebrations. Others see the extravaganza in the contemporary presentation of *yhyakh* and newly erected *Aal Luuk Mas* trees as an expression of

the creative side of the celebration, a way to combine the old with contemporary, to bring together history and future, to blend local and global. A perceived departure from the authentic vision of *yhyakh* and its celebration can be interpreted as an opportunity to make this festival a part of the world heritage.

### ***Diversity of yhyakh***

The new location at *Ūs Khatyn* provided opportunity for the spatial transformation of *yhyakh* and created new configurations which ensued further modification to traditional architecture, as well as rituals and concepts. Above we demonstrated how new spatial understanding of *yhyakh* provided opportunities for some ontological concepts to be reified in the festival landscape. During our project we visited several celebrations, from small local ones organised by rural communities, to the large *yhyakh* sponsored by the republican government. But the *Tuimaada Yhyakh* at *Ūs Khatyn* would surprise anybody with its large open space, architectural designs, and the richly decorated *urahas*. We argue that new spatial conceptualisation of *yhyakh* was also conducive for opening the festival's geographical borders. An opening ceremony at *yhyakh*, reminiscent of the Olympic Games, with obligatory balloons and fireworks, is normally translated into several languages for international audiences, including the Guinness World Records,<sup>7</sup> evidence of the festival's expanding borders.

From a small celebration at a private, kinship level, *yhyakh* has turned into a large event serving thousands of visitors from different parts of the republic and beyond. The festival is also popular among Sakha diasporas abroad.<sup>8</sup> Facilitated by contemporary technology, the boundaries of *yhyakh* have shifted and it has become possible to connect many more participants from the farthest corners of the world to join *yhyakh* celebrations, which became evident as the celebration of *yhyakh* moved online in 2020 during the Covid pandemic. The recent spatial transformations have demonstrated the truly fluid nature of *yhyakh*, which has outgrown its original scope and turned into a multivocal event addressing many audiences and speaking to many different agendas. While it remains a genuinely Sakha festival, it is also a celebration of many Indigenous, cultural, and diasporic groups residing in the republic illustrating the contemporary diverse composition of the region (Balzer 2012; Nikanorova 2020: 42–44). The *Tuimaada Yhyakh* in Yakutsk, historically a multi-confessional centre, is now an inclusive space where one can meet representatives from various religious affiliations, including Russian Orthodox and Catholic churches, some of which are also involved in organising the *yhyakh* (Nikanorova 2020). For many people, the annual *yhyakh* celebrations of a few days in June stand for cultural awareness and hospitality in broader terms, which defies a narrow, one-sided interpretation and understanding. One such articulate function of *yhyakh* is the celebration of peace and equality (Romanova 2012: 255–259).

Festivals remain an important means of passing cultural traditions from one generation to another, and *yhyakh* continues to be one of the forces consolidating the Sakha community and is a form of self-expression. Yet transformation of *yhyakh* has demonstrated the dynamism of the celebration, which from an event designated

purely for ritual performances turned into a multivocal festival without borders joined by other ethnic and confessional groups. The changes in celebration that we discussed here, demonstrate that *yhyakh* is not just an event, but it is a process continuing to incorporate many new influences on the way, encouraging economic, social, and artistic growth in the Sakha community.

## Notes

- 1 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 1 July 2015.
- 2 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 1 July 2015.
- 3 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 19 July 2015.
- 4 Argounova, fieldnotes, 29 June 1996.
- 5 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.
- 6 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 2 July 2015.
- 7 In the last few years, Guinness World Records have confirmed three records for the largest gatherings of people playing *khomus*, the largest *ohuokhai* dance, and the largest crowd of people wearing traditional Sakha clothing at the *Tuimaada Yhyakh* (SakhaLife 2022).
- 8 Celebrations of *yhyakh* are held by Sakha diasporas in many countries abroad: Germany, Britain, and Thailand to name a few (SakhaLife 2023).

## References

- Antonov, E., A. Borisov, and S. Boiakova (eds). 2003. *Narod Sakha ot Veka k Veku: Ocherki Istorii* [Sakha People from Century to Century: Historical Essays]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Argounova-Low, T. 2007. Close relatives and outsiders: village people in the city of Yakutsk, Siberia. *Arctic Anthropology* 44(1): 51–61.
- Badmaeva, R. D. 1987. *Buriatskii Narodnyi Kostium* [Buriat Ethnic Dress]. Ulan-Ude: Buriatskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo.
- Balzer, M. M. 2008. Beyond belief? Social, political, and shamanic power in Siberia. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 52(1): 95–110.
- Balzer, M. M. 2012. Festivals and celebrations of Russia's peoples: old and new. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 50(4): 3–5.
- Balzer, M. M. 2021. *Galvanizing Nostalgia? Identity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Balzer, M. M. and U. Vinokurova. 1996. Nationalism, interethnic relations and federalism: the case of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). *Europe-Asia Studies* 48(1): 101–120.
- Bell, A. 2014. *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities Beyond Domination*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blitstein, P. A. 2006. Cultural diversity and the interwar conjuncture: Soviet nationality policy in its comparative context. *Slavic Review* 65(2): 273–293.
- Bogatyrev, P. G. 1971. *Voprosy Teorii Narodnogo Iskusstva* [Theories of Folk Art]. Moscow: Iskusstvo.
- Carrithers, M. 1992. *Why Humans Have Cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chattaraman, V. and S. Lennon. 2008. Ethnic identity, consumption of cultural apparel, and self-perceptions of ethnic consumers. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 12(4): 518–531.
- Chevalier, J. F. 2017. School-based linguistic and cultural revitalization as a local practice: Sakha language education in the city of Yakutsk, Russian Federation. *Nationalities Papers* 45(4): 613–631.

- Chertov, A. 1990. Ysyakh prishel v Yakutsk [Yhyakh has arrived in Yakutsk]. *Sotsialisticheskaya Yakutiia*, July 3, p.3.
- Cvetkovski, R. 2014. Introduction: on the making of ethnographic knowledge in Russia. In *An Empire of Others: Making Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, eds. R. Cvetkovski and A. Hofmeister. Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 1–22.
- Donskoi, M., S. Adamova, A. Beloliubskaja, and N. Illarionova (eds). 2012. *Yhyakh Olonkho* [The Olonkho Yhyakh]. Yakutsk: Bichik.
- Eide, E. 2010. Strategic essentialism and ethnification: hand in glove? *Nordicom Review* 31(2): 63–78.
- Elfimov, A. 2014. Russian ethnography as a science: truths claimed, trails followed. In *An Empire of Others: Making Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, eds. R. Cvetkovski and A. Hofmeister. Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 51–80.
- Ferguson, J. 2019. *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practices in the City*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ferguson, J. K. 2020. Don't write it with "h"! Standardization, responsibility and territorialization when writing Sakha online. In: *Responsibility and Language Practices in Place*, eds. J. Ferguson and L. Siragusa. Helsinki: Studia Fennica Anthropologica, pp. 131–154.
- Ferguson, J. 2022. The persistence of antiquity: language ideologies and perception of language vitality among Sakha speakers. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 43(3): 214–227.
- Gellner, E. 1977. Ethnicity and anthropology in the Soviet Union. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, 18 (2): 201–220.
- Gray, C. 1991. Hegemonic images: language and silence in the Royal Thai polity. *Man, New Series*, 26 (1): 43–65.
- Grenoble, L. and L. Whaley. 2006. *Saving Languages. An Introduction to Language Revitalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Iakovlev-Tühülgen, V. 2015. *Tus Ilge. Tiusiulge - Sviashchennoe Mesto* [Tühülge – a Sacred Place]. Yakutsk: Bichik.
- Ingold, T. 2005. What is culture? In *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. T. Ingold. London: Routledge, pp. 329–349.
- Kahn, J. 2001. What is the new Russian federalism? In: *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, ed. A. Brown, A. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 374–383.
- Nikanorova, L. 2020. Religion-making at the Sakha Yhyakh. *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia* 59(1): 29–51.
- Okladnikov, A. P. 1970. *Yakutia Before Its Incorporation Into The Russian State*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Paulicelli, E. and H. Clark (eds). 2009. *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity, and Globalization*. London: Routledge.
- Peers, E. 2019. Soviet *kul'tura* in post-Soviet identification: the aesthetics of ethnicity in Sakha (Yakutia). In *Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North*, ed. J. O. Habeck. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, pp. 257–293.
- Phillips, A. 2010. What's wrong with essentialism? *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 11(1): 47–60.
- Rapoport, A. 2005. Spatial organization and the built environment. In: *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. T. Ingold. London: Routledge, pp. 460–502.
- Riello, G. and P. McNeil (eds). 2010. *The Fashion History Reader: Global Perspectives*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Roach-Higgins, M. E. and J. B. Eicher. 1992. Dress and identity. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10(4): 1–8.
- Romanova, E. 2012. Ysyakh – glavnyi prazdnik iakutskoi traditsii [Ysyakh – main festival of the Yakut tradition]. In: Alekseev, N., E. Romanova, Z. Sokolova (eds). *Iakuty. Sakha* [Yakuts. Sakha]. Moscow: Nauka.

- Rosstat (Federal'naia sluzhba gosstatistiki). 2020. Vserossiiskaia perepis' naseleniia. [All-Russia Population Census]. Tom 5, table 6 [https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom5\\_Nacion-alnyj\\_sostav\\_i\\_vladenie\\_yazykami](https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom5_Nacion-alnyj_sostav_i_vladenie_yazykami) Accessed 7 August 2023.
- SakhaLife 2022. Na ysyakhe Tuimaady byli ustanovleny chetyre rekorda Ginessa [Four Guinness records were established at the Tuimaada yhyakh]. 21 June. <https://sakhalive.ru/na-ysyahe-tujmaady-byli-ustanovleny-chetyre-rekorda-ginnessa/> Accessed 17 August 2023.
- SakhaLife 2023. Iakutskii ysyakh v Kitae i Tailande [Yakut yhyakhs in China and Thailand]. <https://sakhalive.ru/yakutskij-ysyah-v-kitae-i-tailande/> Accessed 7 August 2023.
- Schneider, D. 1995. *Schneider on Schneider: The Conversion of the Jews and Other Anthropological Stories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Spivak, G. 1996. Subaltern studies: deconstructing historiography. In *The Spivak Reader*, eds. D. Landry and G. MacLean. London: Routledge, pp. 203–235.
- Vinokurova, L.I. 2004. Tam prostor i sinee nebo. Esse o iazyke [Space and blue skies. An essay on language]. *ILIN* N36 <http://ilin-yakutsk.narod.ru/2004-1/18.htm> Accessed 7 August 2023.
- Zakon. 1992. Zakon Respubliki Sakha (Yakutia) o iazykakh [Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) Law on Languages]. Accessed 7 August 2023.

**Part 2**

# **Exhibition Narratives**



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## 2.1 Introduction

Anthropologists have studied the relations between people and things since the emergence of the discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. A fascination with technology and the circulation of goods underpinned early scholarship, and it continues to be of interest to those whose efforts to better understand human and environmental connections are viewed through the lens of materials and making. For museum professionals, the complexities of relations between people and things are evident from their daily engagements with collections, yet their experiences of how these relations are manifested are not just matters for theoretical or ethnographic exploration. They are apparent in the ways in which visitors and researchers relate to collections, in galleries and museum workrooms, and which museum staff witness daily as part of their work practices. Such engagements can be challenging, intensely powerful, and are often transformative for those involved; they make clear that meaning does not reside in objects themselves, but in human, other-than-human, and environmental interactions with them.

Some thirty years have passed since Julie Cruikshank (1995: 36) noted that museum anthropology aims to be story-led rather than object-driven. Part 2 of this book extends this observation by focussing on the narratives generated by the interactions of one particular object – the model of *yhyakh* – with people who engaged with it across a variety of exhibition settings. We take the object as the starting point but recognise that, like all objects, the model of *yhyakh* is continually being shaped by the narratives it provokes, by the social relations within which it is enmeshed, and by the materials of which it is composed. As Bell (2017: 245) observes, “objects are processes despite their seemingly fixed nature within museums”. And so, too, are stories. As such, by examining the recollections and the stories that historic artefacts evoke in different contexts, and the ways through which they are created and mobilised, we can begin to see how stories are themselves part of the life-worlds of objects, the social relations, materials, and cosmologies of which they are comprised. In so doing, we can move towards an understanding of historic objects not as fixed containers of meaning, but as mediators between narratives of past and present and, as narrative objects, as active in processes of memory-making and of cultural reclamation.

Our work is further influenced by literature on histories of representation and display of ethnic groups in cosmopolitan settings as well as with work on artistic

and cultural engagement with materials and collections. It also draws on scholarship concerning access to objects, nostalgia, and memory work (Crane 2000; Black 2011; Anderson et al 2016), and that concerning issues of knowledge transmission and ownership (e.g., Fienup-Riordan 2005; Silverman 2015; Morphy and McKenzie 2022). Collectively, Part 2 also speaks to literature in material culture studies concerning the multiple, layered meanings of artefacts, and debates concerning their agency (or lack of) and capacity to act on the world (Gell 1998; Latour 2005). This scholarship is helpful for highlighting the unfixed and unfinished business of the model as a piece which continues to generate knowledge within and beyond museums. While scholarship in museum anthropology has clearly been influential in our approach to this project, as we discuss in Part 2.2, anthropological scholarship on temporality and presence and absence has also inspired our work, and especially that which examines the intersection between the material world, time, and recall (Runia 2006; Bryant 2014).

Constraining how the narratives we present in this book can be unpacked is, of course, the extent to which surviving documentation allows for only a limited reconstruction of the model's display contexts, at least for its early years. The historical narratives are by necessity pieced together from fleeting traces in archival documentation but are situated within the wider intellectual, social, and cultural forces that shaped the interpretive practices in play each time the model has been on exhibit. Underpinning all the narratives we present is the established perspective of seeing objects as biographical (Hoskins 1998), or as having biographies of their own (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999), although we find these analytical approaches rather more useful for structuring parts of this book than for thinking more broadly about the model itself.<sup>1</sup> In essence, a biographical approach charts the routes that objects have taken as they move between different contexts and, in turn, illuminates how objects, persons, and social networks are intertwined and accumulate layers of history in culturally specific ways (Bell 2017: 245). A key critique of the biographical approach is that it presents objects as bounded and thus fails to take on board their material-ness (Joy 2009; Bauer 2019). As Ingold notes, to understand materials and not just materiality, we need "to tell the stories of what happens to [materials] as they flow, mix and mutate" (Ingold 2007b: 14), a point which we have found insightful for thinking about the materials which constitute the model of *yhyakh* and the creative processes within which it is – and has been – entangled. Similarly, if we are to understand objects – including those in museums – not as fixed entities, but as composed of multiple materials with properties that are not stable but are reactive to environmental conditions as well as to the effects of the passage of time, and that these same objects are relational, then the idea of a linear object biography begins to further fall apart even as the possibilities for a deeper exploration of the relations between people, things, and environment becomes apparent. As such, scholarship that draws on concepts of frameworks and mobilities has also influenced our thinking. In this scholarship, the device of object biography has been expanded to encompass the idea of "object itinerary", which aims to disrupt the linearity of the biographical approach, highlights the spatial as well as the temporal, and "does not assume that things are *constantly* travelling or

are defined by their movement” (Joyce and Gillespie 2015: 11). Object itineraries encompass materials as well as things and, as a concept, recognises that “the relations between things and their representations in story, song, image, and memory continue to create new sites, including specialized locales like museums” (Joyce and Gillespie 2015: 11). The approach to object itineraries proposed by Joyce and Gillespie is helpful for thinking about the model of *yhyakh*, given that the combination of archival and ethnographic fieldwork underpinning the *Narrative Objects* project has pointed to the ways in which object-person engagement with this piece continues to be transformed. Moreover, the approach explicitly draws upon ideas of meshworks (Ingold 2012; Harrison 2013) that are neither spatially nor temporally restricted to consider technologies of production as well as of use, which includes the extended circulation of things through their reproduction in other media and academic engagement with them through publications. This point takes us back to Bryant’s (2014) concept of “temporal dynamism” as it relates to things and to memory which we discuss in Part 2.3.

Aligned to this scholarship, and of further influence on our approach to the model of *yhyakh* is Paul Basu’s (2017: 2) discussion of what he terms “the inbetweenness of things”, which builds on ideas of mobility central to the device of object itinerary and which aims to “normalize an understanding of the material world as being constituted by movement and mediation” and to see objects as “entanglements of ongoing social, spatial, temporal and material trajectories and relationships, dislocations, and relocations”. Like object itineraries, Basu’s explication of the inbetweenness of things draws on “lineology” of Ingold (2007a; 2015) and meshworks which together point to the world being a tangle of threads and pathways through which people and things grow their relationships. The *Narrative Objects* project out of which this book has emerged has relied on the mobility of one specific object, from Imperial Russia to Paris, London, and a homecoming to *Sakha Sire*, and it is embedded in a web of relations linking all kinds of people in all kinds of places – exhibitions halls, museum stores, workshops, schools, and more. Meshwork, itineraries and inbetweenness are ways of thinking about things that sit very well with our own observations, both in the archives and in museum settings, of how the *yhyakh* model continues to figure in relations between Sakha people and museums, between artefacts and audiences, and between artists and materials.

We begin Part 2.1 by examining how the *yhyakh* model has been interpreted within display contexts over the last 150 years with a focus on Paris and London. Unlike many other objects now in museum collections, the model was created with the express purpose of being exhibited; in many respects, then, it was always intended to provoke narratives. Methodologically, we draw on trends in historical anthropology and in museum scholarship which utilise an object-centred and archivally informed approach to unpack the strategies that have been used to create and communicate curatorial narratives (e.g., Byrne et al 2011; Dudley 2015). These include fostering state-sponsored narratives linked to progress and civilisation during a period of political instability but increasing technological confidence in Europe (1867); related narratives of social evolution and othering at a time when ethnographic collections were shifting in status in museums (1868);

narratives concerning the imagination and creative skill of a presumed unknown craftsman (2011); and narratives highlighting the adaptability and resilience of people who call the Arctic home (2020–2021). These narratives were informed by, but also shaped, the intellectual histories of the institutions that have presented this enigmatic model to the public. They also expose the model’s slipperiness – its shape-shifting capacity or “inbetweenness” (Basu 2017b) – to defy modes of classification imposed upon it through museum interpretive and curatorial practices, again emphasising that meanings are not fixed and that objects provoke different stories for different audiences.

In [Part 2.2](#) we examine the intersection of this historic object with contemporary narratives of reclamation through an analysis of responses to the model’s display in 2015 in the National Arts Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) where it formed the centrepiece of *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey*, an exhibition about ivory carving as a Sakha arts practice and the model’s homecoming to Yakutsk. The build up to the exhibition and the model’s arrival, after an absence of almost 150 years, generated considerable interest among urban residents of Yakutsk and further afield in villages across *Sakha Sire*. In [Parts 2.2](#) and [2.3](#), we draw upon fieldwork encounters both in and beyond the museum including with visitors who came to see the model for themselves, with educators who used it as the basis of teaching programmes, and with culture workers concerned with the promotion of Sakha ethnic identity. These encounters generated narratives about *yhyakh*, about Sakha engagement with others, and about the political role of historic objects in contemporary cultural movements. They provide a counterpoint to those highlighted in [Part 2.1](#) by foregrounding what historic artefacts can do when they are on their home ground. This discussion is examined with reference to how Sakha responses to the model of *yhyakh* intersect with reclamation projects involving museum collections taking place elsewhere. Collectively, [Part 2](#) illustrates the myriad ways in which the model of *yhyakh* has been mobilised across time and space to produce and promote narratives about Sakha people, narratives which have been challenged both by the model’s display in Yakutsk and by Sakha engagements with heritage and revitalisation processes more broadly.

## Note

- 1 The biographical approach emerged from the material turn of the 1980s and, while not without critics, has been used very productively in museum anthropology scholarship for decades, as well as in archaeology and material culture studies work which has focussed on the trajectories of objects (as examples, see [Turgeon 1997](#); [Tythacott 2011](#); [Hill 2012](#)).

## References

- Anderson, D., H. Shimzu and C. Campbell 2016. Insights on how museum objects mediate recall of nostalgic life episodes at a Shōwa era museum in Japan, *Curator: The Museum Journal* 59(1): 5–26.
- Basu, P. 2017. The inbetweenness of things. In *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds*, ed. P. Basu. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1–20.

- Bauer, A. A., 2019. Itinerant objects. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48(1): 335–352.
- Bell, J. A. 2017. A bundle of relations: collections, collecting, and communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 46(1): 241–245.
- Black, G. 2011. Museums, memory and history. *Cultural and Social History* 8(3): 415–427.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History's remainders: on time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Byrne, S., A. Clarke, R. Harrison, R. Torrence eds. 2011. *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*. New York: Springer.
- Crane, S. ed. 2000. *Museums and Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cruikshank, J. 1995. Imperfect translations: rethinking objects of ethnographic collection. *Museum Anthropology* 19(1): 25–38.
- Dudley, S. 2015. What, or where, is the (museum) object? Colonial encounters in displayed worlds of things. In *Theory*, eds. A. Witcomb and K. Message. *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*. Vol 3. London & New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 41–62.
- Fienup-Riordan, A. ed. 2005. *Things of Our Ancestors: Yup'ik Elders Explore the Jacobsen Collection at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Gell, A. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gosden, C. and Y. Marshall 1999. The cultural biography of objects. *World Archaeology* 31(2): 169–178.
- Harrison, R. 2013. Reassembling ethnographic museum collections. In *Reassembling the Collection: Ethnographic Museums and Indigenous Agency*, eds. R. Harrison, S. Byrne, and A. Clarke. Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press, pp.3–35.
- Hill, K. 2012. *Museums and Biographies: Stories, Objects, Identities*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press.
- Hoskins, J. 1998. *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. 2007a. *Lines: A Brief History*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. 2007b. Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14(1): 1–16.
- Ingold, T. 2015. *The Life of Lines*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Joy, J. 2009. Reinvigorating object biography: reproducing the drama of object lives. *World Archaeology* 41(4): 540–556.
- Joyce, R. A. and S. D. Gillespie eds. 2015. *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*. Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press.
- Kopytoff I. 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp.64–91.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morphy, H. and R. McKenzie eds. 2022. *Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value*. London: Routledge.
- Runia, E., 2006. Presence. *History and Theory* 45(1): 1–29.
- Silverman, R. A. ed. 2015. *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges*. London: Routledge.
- Turgeon, L. 1997. The tale of the kettle: odyssey of an intercultural object. *Ethnohistory* 44(1): 1–29.
- Tythacott, L. 2011. *The Lives of Chinese Objects: Buddhism, Imperialism and Display*. New York: Bergahn.

## 2.2 A model made for display

The starting point for considering the exhibitionary narratives of *Model of a Summer Festival* is the Paris Universal Exhibition for which it was commissioned. Held from 1 April to 3 November 1867, and attended by an estimated seven million visitors, the Exhibition cemented France's reputation as a leader in planning and successfully delivering world's fairs.<sup>1</sup> Located within the Champs de Mars in the centre of Paris, and covering some 215 acres, the Exhibition combined art with industry, flamboyance with excitement, and science with history (Figure 2.1). It is said to have “symbolized the ambitions of the Second Empire” within every aspect of its planning, organisation and design and it proceeded from the single conviction that



Figure 2.1 Bird's-eye view of the Paris Universal Exhibition grounds. Lithograph by Eugène Ciceri and Philippe Benoist, 1867.

DOI: [10.4324/9780429456398-9](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456398-9)

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

“the bounty of nature could be transformed into universal harmony for the human race” (Chandler 1990: 33). The Exhibition aimed to inform manufacturers about technological advances, to educate the working classes, and to instruct the middle classes on matters of taste (Greenhalgh 1988: 19). Like other nineteenth century exhibitions, its mood was celebratory, and its ethos was predominantly concerned with notions of civilisation, progress, and modernity. It has been described as one of the most “hopeful” of the great exhibitions and, that with its “strange mixture of imperial-economic ambition and of Saint-Simonian paternalism, it projected a notion of society as a beautifully turned machine, capable of resolving conflicts and harnessing the world to its own ends” (Greenhalgh 1988: 35).

The Exhibition consisted of a central exhibition hall, known as the Palais, situated within an extensive park and there was much for visitors to admire before they even entered the building, though as Chandler (1990: 34) observes, most contemporary reports imply that the majority of visitors “apparently wandered among the wonders of the park without too much thought for deeper meanings”. They could meander “from a rustic American one-room schoolhouse – representative of the ideal of free education for everybody – to the replica of the Tunisian “Bardo of the Bey” (king’s palace), pass through the underground grottos of the aquarium, then relax beneath an ornate kiosk with its novel zinc roofing, iron railings, and curiously carved wood” (Chandler 1990: 34). There was even a full-size Gothic cathedral which housed a collection of altars, candelabra, and painted glass. The Palais itself was made of iron and glass. Elliptical in design, it extended some 500 m in length and was 40 m wide. The eastern half was largely devoted to France, as the host nation, with other nations, including Russia, occupying the western half. Visitors could criss-cross the building via streets named for participating nations, rest in the central garden, and meander into one of the many courts radiating from this central point. In addition to the displays of art and technology, the Exhibition included a display of currencies from around the world and a special exhibition, the History of Labour, situated in the innermost gallery.

Given the sheer volume of exhibits accumulated for display, the organisers had to devise a classification system that was meaningful for visitors from a multitude of backgrounds, and whose interests may have been neither commercial nor strictly educational. Indeed, for most, the motive for visiting an international exhibition was for entertainment; the public “flocked to them out of curiosity and because they wanted to learn about the way people from foreign lands lived, the skills they possessed and the objects they produced” (Benedict 1994: 28). As a “world event” (Barth 2008), rooted in scientific rigour and civilising forces, the spatial arrangements were crucial. To make the exhibits intelligible, the organisers, led by Chief Commissioner Frederic LePlay, combined a functional and geographical approach that divided nations into sections and industries into concentric zones. The 49 participating nations were free to display what they wanted to, and exhibits were organised into ten groups selected for their capacity “to illustrate the fundamental components of human civilization” (Barth 2008: 24), and then subdivided into ninety-five classes. The groups included clothing, agricultural buildings and livestock, food, industrial machinery and raw materials, and articles with the

purpose of improving the moral and physical conditions of humanity; displays were organised in such a way that objects of the same type, but from different regions, could be compared reasonably easily (see also [Chandler 1990](#): 37). In addition to the industrial innovations on display, visitors could examine archaeological specimens as well as arts, crafts, technological goods, and raw materials produced and used by contemporary Indigenous peoples and ethnic groups. This material was thus intended to offer a point of comparison to chart the rise of humanity ([Müller-Scheessel 2001](#): 391) and to serve the Exhibition's overarching aim of representing "the historical development of civilization from prehistory to 1867" ([Barth 2008](#): 24).

The exhibits from Imperial Russia were organised under the auspices of a central commission, led by Robert de Thal, and named for this purpose by Emperor Alexander II in St Petersburg on 2 April 1865 ([Anon 1867](#): 10). The commission was supported by various government offices, such as the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of State Property ([Nikitin et al 2015](#): 2674). It was further assisted by ten auxiliary committees, including one in Irkutsk, the route through which the model would have travelled before reaching St. Petersburg, where the exhibits from across Russia were sent before being transferred by rail to Paris via Warsaw.<sup>2</sup> Russia contributed 1,382 exhibits in total to the Exhibition, covering an area of almost 3,000 square metres, and spread throughout three sections: the History of Labour exhibition; the Fine Arts; and Industry, with the majority featuring in the latter section. Coming only six years since the abolition of serfdom, collectively, these exhibits were able to present a narrative of a nation which was "full of strength and of an amazing vitality, but much more dedicated to industries of essential needs than to those of luxury" ([Bellet 1867](#): 478).<sup>3</sup> Contemporary reports highlight the natural riches of Russia but also comment on how material objects figured in how this immense Empire struggled to create a sense of unity and lessen the tensions between Russia as a state and Russia as a nation (see also [Knight 2001](#)). Russia was also viewed as key to bridging the gaps between East and West as Asian countries began to modernise ([Bellet 1867](#): 479). Moreover, just as Russia could be the link between East and West, progress and industrial expertise could bring together nations that had previously been at odds; as one commentator confidently proclaimed, "The Russian and French nations are destined to understand each other, and while the Crimean War seems to have damaged their union, this noble and peaceful competition of arts and industries will tighten it again" ([de Castellane 1867](#): 85).

Taken together, contemporary reports of the Russian exhibits and how they were experienced have created a lasting impression of vibrant displays which fascinated and impressed visitors in equal measure. The *Compte de Castellane's (1867)* report, published in *L'Exhibition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée*, is particularly evocative, as this extract, quoted at length in translation, shows:

... The moment you enter, you are in a foreign world, far from the West, to which your mind must get used to. This curious room dedicated to the history of work and labour reminds us of the starting point and the road followed

and is thus of particular interest allowing for the recognition of achievements. There is another room nearby filled with drawings from Moscow's technical school, the only professional school in Russia, and with statuettes dressed in traditional costumes representing different regions of this Empire where they speak thirty different languages. There also are miniature models of various animals as well as paper samples, and photographs fill the corridor which separates this room from the great hall containing works intended to attract the attention of the idle visitors and awaken the interest of people with great taste.

If we take a look at this hall through the distinctive wooden arches, which surround the side of the large passage leading to the [Avenue de] Suffren gate, glimpsing at the magnificent mosaic based on Professor Neff's drawings and completed by Michael Chmielewski at Saint Petersburg's imperial institute, we will soon enter a room filled with elegant consoles and vitrines which contain true jewellery masterpieces by Sasikov, precious stones and unique products, enamels for mosaics created by Léopold Bonafède, cabinets made with lapis lazuli and Florentine mosaic tables coming from Petergov's imperial factory led by Mr Tafimovitch. When you get tired of viewing and admiring these, weapons, carpets, clothes and magnificent embroideries will revive your interest. On the other side of the room, you will find warriors dressed in their national clothes and leather costumes worn by natives in Siberia sent to the Exhibition by Mr Sidorov. You will go on this way from wonder to wonder, from curiosity to curiosity, always surrounded by the unknown, passing by hundreds of these objects – a piece of malachite weighing 2,176 kilos and coming from Mr Paul Demidov's mines is only one of them – instantly stopping to observe elegant collections of wooden vessels from Siberia filled with the Empire's grains and sheaves, and admiring all of these creations that we can hardly name. We cannot emphasise enough the importance of the categorization, clarity and taste with which even the smallest objects are arranged, making it easier for the visitor to examine and explore, which is a huge compliment to the organisers of the Russian Exhibition. Encouraged and driven by your curiosity you will soon reach the frontier where a Russian restaurant invites you in.

(de Castellane 1867: 83)

In a further contemporary report, the author complemented the Russian displays, noting that the country had increased its trade in "fancy goods" since the Crimean War, while at the same time showing some disdain for the craftspeople who produced them:

I will not dwell now in detail on the pretty things she [Russia] makes, and which the Russian peasant willing, good-natured, intelligent, crassly ignorant fellow as he is seems to have a special aptitude for making, as I have noticed Russia separately elsewhere, in the hope of doing justice to a country whose industrial and artistic display must be held as one of the most brilliant successes in the Exhibition of 1867.

(Sala 1867: 311)

In the Parc Russe, curious visitors could enter one of three dwellings: an *isbah*, dedicated to classes 49, 69, and 70, that is hunting and fishing tools and produce, and which had on hand a “keeper” whose role was to provide additional information for visitors (de la Blanchère 1867: 155; see also Sala, 1867: 50–54). This house included a number of items from Siberia, described as “what Yakuts, Chukchis and other people from Don, Arkhangelsk, Siberia, Astrakhan and other areas thought would interest us” which included “sable traps built from birch branches and fitted with bows with gut strings, axes, arrows, tridents, spear heads and bone spoons in one piece. You can also find chairs, some of which are triangular, the others masterfully constructed, and all of them made from wood with little padding but embellished with knife-carved ornaments” (de la Blanchère 1867: 155). This commentator seems to have been both fascinated and repelled by “the scenes of their ordinary life” of the “poor people” described elsewhere in the report as “savages”. Additionally, visitors could see inside a Khirgiz tent, and an *uraha*, or birch bark lodge, from Yakutia<sup>4</sup> (Figure 2.2). This latter dwelling seems to have caught the imagination of François Ducuing, whose report in *L'Exhibition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée* emphasises the perceived hardiness of Sakha people and their responsiveness to their environment, but also indicates that there was interpretation available for this dwelling that went beyond the description in the Catalogue.



Figure 2.2 Birchbark *uraha* in the Russian section of the Paris Universal Exhibition. Archives Nationales, France.

We quote at length, as the report is one of the few that details a visitor's impression of a Sakha exhibit:

The Yakuts wander in these vast steppes by the left bank of the Lena at 900 kilometres from Saint-Petersburg, delimited by the Glacial Sea, China and the Okhotsk Province. There are around 200,000 inhabitants, meaning less than one inhabitant per fifteen square kilometres. Where would you like them to live, in the middle of this inhospitable land and climate, if not along the rivers and by the lakes which, happily, abound in these inclement regions? They are even more welcoming than the Kirghiz, and this is explained by their greater dispersal. Their birch forests serve them as shelter and heating, horses and reindeer are their companions, and the lakes provide them with food.

Can you imagine a region where one cannot find an inhabitant per fifteen square kilometres? Can you understand how a man, isolated in these vast infertile solitudes, must be resilient so as to maintain his own existence?

Here is the Ourassa, his summer house. It is an assembly of birch branches, stacked together like rifles on their bayonets. Between these branches, crossed in bundles, birch bark is passed like a thread. This guarantees sunshine, a bit less wind, but nothing more. Only, if you were lost in the steppes, you would see with an indescribable emotion the hospitable Ourassa appearing on the horizon.

In the winter, the Yakuts exchange the Ourassa for a gourbi in birch planks. These planks are covered inside by fur. Before laying the planks, a deep hole is dug so that, laying down, the Yakut is sheltered from the winds that graze the ground of their icy breath. How would the Yakut not be brave, having to constantly fight against rebellious nature and the neighbourhood of bears?

(Ducuing 1867: 358–9)

These descriptions of the Russian exhibits, and in particular those from Siberia, make clear that Exhibition visitors were intrigued by people whose lifestyles and environment were so different to their own. Such descriptions are tremendously helpful given the brevity of the information about the exhibits provided in the Exhibition's catalogue. Although each item from Russia is listed in the *Catalogue Spécial de la Section Russe*, it is rarely possible to reconstruct precise display information, and this is certainly so for the model of *yhyakh*. What can be said with certainty is that it was located in Group 3, Furniture and Household Goods, and within this, Class 26, Leather goods, tableterie and basketry (Anon 1867: 65).<sup>5</sup> It was one of five items sculpted from bone and ivory exhibited by Gavriil Pavlov, a Sakha merchant from Gornyi *uluus*, who commissioned the model for the Exhibition, was grouped with decorative objects from 12 other exhibitors from across the Russian Empire. At a published cost of 50 *rubles* it was not the most expensive item in the group, but it was nonetheless an extremely valuable piece.

Though specific detail about the display of the model of *yhyakh* is lacking, as we have seen, it is possible to locate visitor responses to the representation of Siberia more generally in contemporary reports. As noted above, visitors to

world's fairs were generally curious about unfamiliar people and places. The display of living people in reconstructed housing that was to become a feature of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century great exhibitions was less prominent in Paris in 1867 (see [Benedict 1994](#)), though there were demonstrations of craftwork by artisans from some nations; according to [de la Blanchère's \(1867\)](#) report, the “keeper” of the annexe of the *isbah* was an illiterate Russian who spoke no French and so his effectiveness was limited. As there were no Siberians at the Paris exhibition, material culture was the sole medium used to represent their lives, and, as [Stepanova \(2009\)](#) has noted, collections made in the Yakutsk Oblast' for these exhibitions tended to be characterised by ethnographic materials (clothing, hunting tools, household items, etc.), and were shaped by the economic conditions of the region which lacked industrial institutions but were rich in folk art, crafts, and technology aimed at meeting the everyday demands of local people. Comments about such items were, not surprisingly, generally framed in terms of cultural difference and hierarchy in keeping with the Exhibition's goal of promoting the idea of progress through which “each nation's rank within the supposedly universal civilization should be determined” ([Barth 2008: 23](#)). Eugene [Rimmel \(1868: 211\)](#), for instance, in his report of the dwellings in the Parc Russe observed that “A tent of Kirghiz Tartars, made of sheep skins, and a Yacoutes' bark hut, remind the visitor that the denizens of the Muscovite Empire are not at all civilized, and do not all inhabit houses, however rude”. Even Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–1897), who purchased the model, referred to the “the wild tribes of Siberia” in his correspondence from Paris (A. W. Franks, 9 October 1867, Officers Reports vol. 79, July–Dec 1867. British Museum Central Archives). What exactly drew Franks' attention to the model is not known, though he had been involved in the acquisition by the British Museum in 1856 of the collection of clergyman and antiquarian William Maskell's Gothic ivory carvings ([Speakman, 2017](#)), and he regularly gave talks about ivory objects from a range of regions and periods that he had collected for the Museum at meetings of the Society of Antiquaries. One of his most treasured gifts to the Museum was an eighth-century carved casket, known today as The Franks Casket (accession number 1867.0120.1), which he donated the same year as the Paris Exhibition. Moreover, as [Eloise Donnelly](#), in her study of Franks as a collector of Renaissance decorative art has noted, he saw a particular value in ivory as a material. In relation to his plans to purchase ivory items from the Soltykoff Collection in 1861 she notes:

Proposing Lot 238, an ivory carving, he writes, ‘sculptures in this material are of great value to the student of the History of Art. They furnish him with the means of tracing successive changes of style more completely than even illuminated manuscripts.’

(BM Original Papers 30 March 1861, cited in [Donnelly 2018: 6](#))

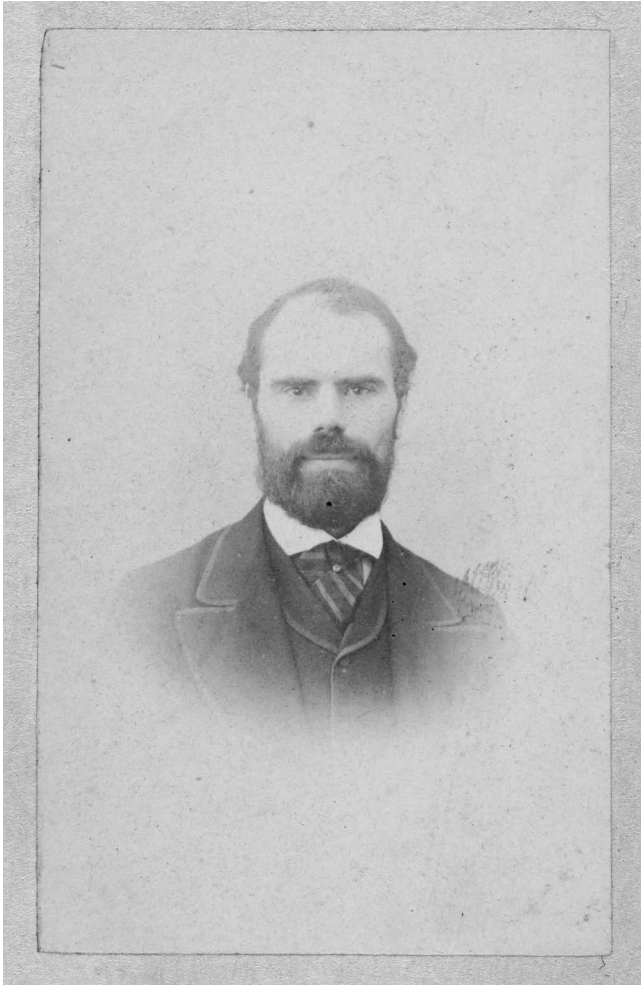
The aesthetics of ivory objects, then, appealed to Franks and while at the Paris Exhibition he made a sketch of the model of *yhyakh* as well as several other

Siberian items that caught his eye. His correspondence from this time makes clear his intention to bring the model to London, where it began the next phase of its exhibition history.

### ***The model within the British Museum***

*Model of a Summer Festival* has spent most of its life in London, yet there are few documentary traces to reconstruct its history in the British Museum. Nonetheless, there are some key moments that can offer clues into how it has been received within the Museum which feed into broader histories of the place of Siberian collections, and indeed ethnographic collections more generally, in the British Museum since the 1860s, as well as into histories of professional curatorship. Although the British Museum had acquired ethnographic material since its foundation in the eighteenth century (Braunholtz 1953; Sloan 2003), it was the second half of the nineteenth century that saw the greatest expansion of these collections in line with the development of anthropology as an academic discipline and the growth of the museum movement, both of which took place within the context of the rise of the British empire and associated colonial forces (see, for example, Stocking 1987; Bennett 1995; Shelton 2000). The expansion of the ethnographic collections within the British Museum specifically was due primarily to the endeavours of Augustus Wollaston Franks, one of the most prominent antiquarians of the Victorian era, whose curatorship spanned the second half of the nineteenth century (Caygill 1997; Donnelly 2018) (Figure 2.3). When Franks joined the British Museum in 1851 the ethnographic collections numbered some 3,700 artefacts, a number which had risen to over 38,000 by the time he retired 45 years later (King 1997: 136). Moreover, the Museum had restructured to form a Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography, of which Franks was appointed Keeper in 1866 (Caygill 1997: 70).

The late 1860s was a critical period for the ethnography collections at the British Museum. In 1865 the extensive collection of the textile manufacturer Henry Christy (1810–1865) was transferred to the care of the Trustees of the British Museum along with a sum of £5,000 for its development (King, 1997: 139–140), with Franks, who had been a friend of Christy and was a Trustee of his estate, assuming curatorial responsibility for the collection, then housed in Christy's home at 103 Victoria Street, Westminster, in London. Though not a field collector himself, Franks was able to use the Christy Fund to buy from dealers and private collectors, and he often took the opportunity to attend international and other exhibitions to make ethnographic purchases. It was thus fortuitous that the Paris Universal Exhibition took place so soon after the transfer of the Christy Collection to the British Museum. Franks spent part of the summer and autumn of 1867 in Paris, partly in connection with his role as a Committee member for the British Section of the Exhibition, but also to keep an eye on potential purchases for both the British Museum and for the South Kensington Museum.<sup>6</sup> The diary of his friend and colleague, Henry Cole, from the South Kensington Museum, records several occasions when they met and visited the Exhibition together,<sup>7</sup> and in his correspondence Franks



*Figure 2.3* Portrait of Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, c. 1870. British Museum Department of Britain, Europe, and Prehistory Archive. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

recorded that he had selected for purchase some “very curious specimens from the Russian section – dresses and implements from the wild tribes of Siberia”.<sup>8</sup> Some of these were illustrated in pencil and ink sketches in one of the notebooks he kept across his career.<sup>9</sup>

Franks’ sketches of the model, which include the entire scene of the *yhyakh* as he saw it, as well as details of activities or individuals portrayed on the wooden board, provide the earliest visual documentation of this piece ([Figure 2.4](#)). Tellingly, his sketch makes explicit that there have been no changes to the model since it was exhibited in Paris. The relevance of this will become clear in [Part 3.4](#) where

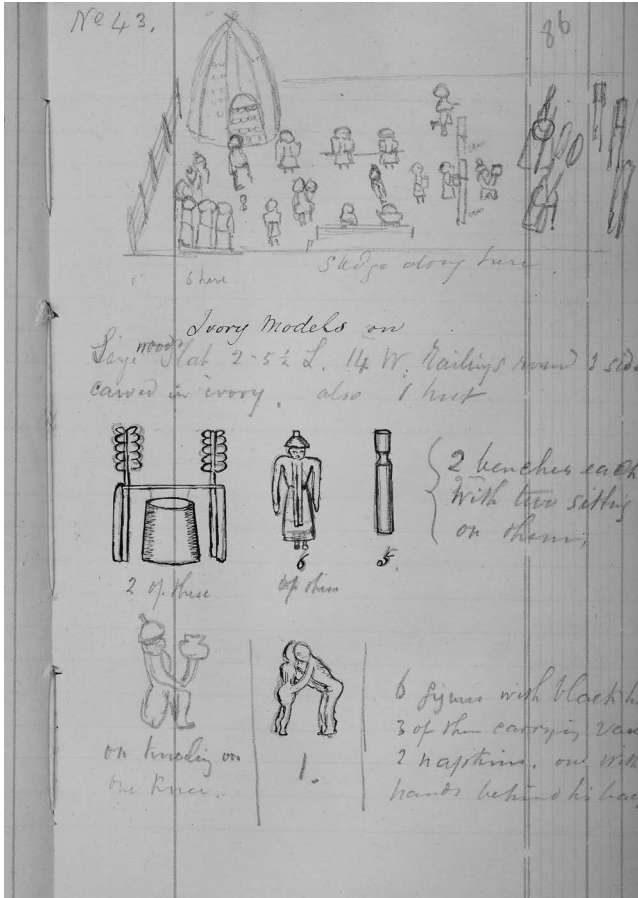


Figure 2.4 Sketch of the *zhyakh* model made by Augustus Franks in his notebook during his visit to the Paris Universal Exhibition. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

we discuss artistic responses to the model which arose from speculation that there are pieces missing and that it may originally have consisted of two wooden boards and figures, rather than the one that exists today. Franks described the piece as “No. 43. Ivory models on large wood slab, 2–5½ L, 14 W. Railings round 3 sides. Carved in ivory. also 1 hut”.<sup>10</sup>

The notebook is evidence that a pair of feet fixed to the model had no body attached to them when it was in Paris and that the model was associated with a second carved ivory model: a hunter with a dog sled upon which lies a bear he has killed (accession number As.5068.b). This second model, which had long been assumed by British Museum staff to have been made by a Sakha carver given that it was described alongside the model in Franks’s notebook, has its own history of

cataloguing and display. Sakha researchers to the British Museum since the 1990s have advised collections staff that it is not part of the *Model of a Summer Festival* in that it shows a winter scene, rather than a summer one, and that, moreover, it is more likely to have been made by a Yukhaghir carver than a Sakha.<sup>11</sup>

Noting that the close of the Exhibition was “a very favourable moment to obtain specimens either as presents or as purchase at reasonable prices”, Franks requested permission from the British Museum Trustees to return to Paris for ten days to complete his negotiations with the “Imperial domain” (i.e., Russian Imperial Commission) to whom the objects belonged.<sup>12</sup> By 21 November he reported that although some items purchased for the Christy Collection had “safely arrived in Victoria St”, the negotiations for other items (which must have included the pieces from the Russian Section) were ongoing.<sup>13</sup> Though there is no further mention in Franks’s reports of how these negotiations were concluded, he successfully purchased the *yhyakh* model, the model dog sled, and several other Siberian pieces illustrated in his notebook.<sup>14</sup> After the Exhibition closed these items were sent to London where the model was catalogued as “Model of a summer encampment of the Yakuts”, given the accession number 5068, and recorded on a slip catalogue, as was then the convention for the ethnographic collections (King 1997: 144). The record included a description based purely on visual engagement with the item rather than any direct ethnographic knowledge, though it is noticeable that the slip catalogue specifies that the piece was “Yakut”, an attribution that Franks had not written in his notebook, and includes one small illustrative sketch to augment the description of the *serge* (hitching posts) which were described as “three cylindrical poles cut round near their tops”. Had Franks, or his assistant Thomas Gay, who may have written the catalogue slip, consulted the Catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Exhibition, they would have established that the piece had been sent to Paris via Gavriil Pavlov from Yakutsk, though little more. As King (1997: 149) has noted, however, Franks’s acquisitions were “characterised by an exceptional eye, pertinacity and, occasionally, a cavalier attitude towards scholarly detail”. Items in ethnographic collections at this time were not always carefully recorded, and sometimes the distinctions between what was accessioned into the British Museum registers and those of the Christy Collection were blurred (King 1997: 144). Many of the pieces which Franks purchased at the Paris Exhibition were, however, included in a list of new accessions to the Christy Collection which accompanied the first report to the Trustees from the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography of 1868. These included “Weapons and implements of the Iakout, and other Tartar races of Siberia including an ivory model of a village”.<sup>15</sup> These items were also included in Franks’s report to the Society of Antiquaries of London on additions to the British Museum collections (Franks 1868a: 133) and indeed he presented the weapons to members during a society meeting in November 1867 (Franks 1867), noting that they had been acquired via the History of Labour section of the Paris Exhibition.

Franks at this time was making a strong case for the importance of ethnography displays given growing popular and scholarly interest. He argued that the British

Museum should not aim to provide “a cosmopolitan exhibition” or “an illustration of the costumes and manufactures of all countries”, but instead should:

illustrate the manners and customs of such races as have not been subjected directly to European civilisation, so as to furnish the student with the means of examining the affinities and differences between such race and also to reconstruct some of the last pages of the history of the world. New materials can only be obtained from some remote districts of Asia, a portion of central Africa, Melanesia and some parts of South America. For aboriginal remains of Polynesia peoples, the North Americans, and many others, it is necessary to search European museums; and the available stock of such objects is daily diminishing.<sup>16</sup>

His reports refer to his work cataloguing and reorganising the Christy Collection at 103 Victoria Street and to making arrangements to transfer the collection to the main British Museum site to join the displays of ethnography that were then housed in Bloomsbury following the relocation of the Natural History collections to the British Museum (Natural History) in South Kensington, which opened in 1881. The *hyakh* model by this time had been incorporated into the displays in Room 2 of the Christy Collection which focussed on the ethnography of Asia and Africa. The collection was open to the public on Fridays, and was arranged geographically, in contrast to the typological and chronological approaches favoured by Franks’s contemporaries, with only 173 square feet devoted to Asia.<sup>17</sup> This relatively small area was explained by Franks as being due to Christy having been primarily interested in the material culture of Indigenous peoples. According to the *Guide to the Christy Collection of Prehistoric Antiquities and Ethnography*, the model was displayed in Central Case B alongside:

...a number of objects collected in the Holy Land by Mr Christy; Persian lacquer work and carved spoons; two carved bowls used by Fakeers of India and made out of Seychelles nuts; a Japanese sword, and two Chinese relics of some curiosity; there are a state seal of the Emperor of China, carved out of a large block of jade, and a set of slabs of jade, seven in number, on which are engraved, in fanciful characters, a poem of the Emperor Kien-lung.

(Franks 1868b: 12)

In the centre of this overcrowded and, to twenty-first-century perspectives, eclectic case, the model was described simply as “a model of a Yakut summer settlement, carved by the natives in ivory” (Franks 1868b: 13). Seemingly, a few other Siberian pieces were located in a case in the Hall.

Once the Christy Collection became fused with the ethnography collections of the British Museum in the early 1880s, and displayed in the former birds and shells gallery, it becomes difficult to locate specific references to the model, though the 1886 edition of the *Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum* reports that “Dresses and utensils of the Yakuts and Tungusk, and other tribes of Siberia” were displayed in cases 163 and 164 of the ethnographical rooms (Anon 1886:

214), located in the upper East Wing of the Museum. Subsequent editions of the *Guide* suggest that these cases were not altered until at least 1910, aside from during the First World War, when some of the more valuable items were removed from the gallery and it was closed to the public from 1916 to 1919 (Braunholtz 1953: 115). These cases were described as part of the “Asiatic series” located in the first compartment of the gallery, and contained artefacts arranged regionally from parts of Asia such as Indonesia, Central Asia, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Though there were a few weapons in the series from Japan and China, most collections from those countries were housed separately in the Asiatic Saloon. The model does not feature in the ethnographic publications produced by the British Museum in Franks’s later years, or during the early twentieth century, such as the photographic series of the ethnographic and Christy collections Franks produced with Stephen Thompson (Franks 1872), or the *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections*, though brief mention was made in that publication to the peoples of Northern and Central Asia (Read 1910: 56–58). It is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from this absence from the documentation, however Siberia, more generally, has been neither an area of curatorial expertise nor a priority for development within the Museum, despite the collection of several hundred objects being the most extensive in the UK. Over the course of the twentieth century the model’s place in the British Museum organisational structure has shifted, first into a short-lived, and apparently “uneasy” Department of Ceramics and Ethnography, then in 1933 to a Department of Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography (Braunholtz 1953: 115–116), and then to an independent Department of Ethnography (founded 1946), housed from 1970 to 1997 in the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens, before returning to the main British Museum site. The model is currently housed within the Asia Department, following further structural changes within the British Museum in 2004.<sup>18</sup> During these decades, and given these structural fluctuations and the Department’s struggle with the problem of how to properly store and display its growing collection, it is likely that the model remained in storage away from public view. The model does not make any further appearance in documentary sources until the production of a draft checklist of the Museum’s Siberian collections in 1977 (Anon. 1977) intended to stimulate research in the collection.

It was in the early 1990s, with increased travel opportunities for Sakha scholars, that the model of *yhyakh* can be located once again in the documentary record. Sakha museum specialists and art historians were beginning to make connections with curatorial counterparts worldwide through participating in gatherings such as conferences organised by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). These, and associated research activities, were contributing to a growing awareness of the location of items that had been acquired in Yakutia and were now cared for in foreign museums, as well as a growing desire for collaboration and a sense of the possibilities following the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the first of these meetings occurred in 1992 when Sakha historian Semen Gorokhov visited the UK to give lectures on Sakha history and culture at several universities around the country. During this time, he visited museum collections originating in Siberia, including those of the British Museum, and reported on his findings in

local publications on his return to Yakutsk. He subsequently published a detailed analysis of the model (Gorokhov 1993) and engaged in discussions with British Museum staff about the potential for research collaboration.

From this point, as is evident from archived correspondence between Gorokhov and other Sakha scholars and British Museum staff, and subsequently in 2008, when Tanya visited the collection and initiated some of the first discussions with British Museum colleagues about whether the model could be exhibited Yakutsk, the model became the focus of narratives concerning access and enhancement of curatorial knowledge.<sup>19</sup> The model's profile was further raised in 2011, when the artist Grayson Perry selected it for the section on "Magick" in *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, his temporary exhibition which juxtaposed new works he created with pieces he chose from across the British Museum's vast collections. Rather than respond through his art to artefacts in the collection, Perry flipped this process, and identified objects which he believed responded to the art he was inspired to create (Perry 2011: 11). All of the pieces delighted Perry in some way, and he selected *Model of a Summer Festival* in part as he was drawn to its "toy-like quality" and colouring, partly because he liked that it showed what he considered to be "an authentic thing" (the *yhyakh*), but also because of his interest in shamanism.<sup>20</sup> For Perry one of the themes driving the exhibition was "seeing oneself, one's personal concerns as a human being, reflected back in the objects made long ago by fellow men and women with similar, equally human concerns" (Perry 2011: 11) and he was also cognisant of the "different readings" to which objects can be subjected throughout time, a theme which is, of course, central to this book.

The later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have thus witnessed a point in the model's history where it is being reevaluated by the British Museum, and this is very much informed by the engagements of Sakha researchers with the model that staff have witnessed from the 1990s onwards. It was chosen by former British Museum Director, Neil MacGregor, for example, for inclusion in his radio series *Living with the Gods*, which aired on BBC Radio 4 in late 2017.<sup>21</sup> In an episode on 10 November on Festivals he used the model as a starting point to examine how such gatherings shape community identity. The broadcast included commentary on *yhyakh* and its meanings from Tanya, bringing together a Sakha perspective with MacGregor's curatorial voice. Most recently, it featured in the British Museum's blockbuster exhibition, *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, which ran from October 2020 to February 2021, and to which Tanya also contributed. The exhibition was curated with direct involvement from communities from across the Circumpolar North and drew visitors' attention to the resilience, ingenuity, and creativity of Arctic peoples focusing on their relationship with the environment and weather worlds (Lincoln et al 2020). The lead curator, Amber Lincoln, had independently visited *Sakha Sire* several years prior to joining the museum staff, was familiar with the *Narrative Objects* project team and our work with *Model of a Summer Festival*, and was keen to incorporate the model into the exhibition. This complex object intersects with several of the themes explored in the exhibition; however, ultimately it was included in a section about seasonal lives and displayed alongside Sakha items in the British Museum's own collections and several objects loaned by the Peter the

Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. As such, visitors could see full-size versions of some of the items depicted in mammoth ivory within the model: specifically, a *choroon* and an *ilin-kelin kebiher* – the elaborate women’s silver necklaces – which are worn by the women observing the wrestling scene. The accompanying text briefly explained the purpose of *hyakh*, its connection with *Döhögöi Toion*, the God of Horses, and the festive foods prepared and consumed at the celebration. Several other items which are not depicted in the model but would have been familiar to mid-nineteenth century *hyakh* participants were displayed alongside, including a decorative horse blanket, a *yaghas* – a birchbark and horsehair container used for storing food, and a hat of a high-status woman, trimmed with wolverine and ermine fur and nickel and silver embroidery. Examples of these hats can be seen in [Figure 1.3](#). The exhibition’s over-arching narrative was shaped by contemporary Indigenous concerns, and the curatorial team drew upon their own extensive fieldwork and personal connections to propose the themes it would cover and develop its structure. Though the exhibition included contemporary items, including an artwork commissioned from Sakha master carver, Fedor Markov, and which was directly inspired by his own engagements with *Model of a Summer Festival* during the *Narrative Objects* project, the artefacts in this section were all from the later nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. An observant viewer would notice the care taken in the text to emphasise continuity with Sakha beliefs and celebratory practices as they are experienced in the present. Additionally, the interpretation included some Sakha language terms, and though these were limited as one might expect given the design constraints and requirements of house style, they are prominent in the accompanying publications ([Argounova-Low et al 2020](#); [Lincoln et al 2020](#)). Nevertheless, it was in this exhibition that the Sakha spelling of *hyakh*, rather than the Russian *ysyakh* was used for the first time in connection with the public interpretation of the model in the UK and, indeed, the first time that the British Museum had displayed this item in such a way as to provide historical and cultural context for its audience directly informed by Sakha people themselves.<sup>22</sup> As we shall see in [Part 2.3](#), there are many documented examples of Indigenous delegations and community groups adopting strategies by which they engage with historic items in order to address contemporary political and social issues that they wish to prioritise. The incorporation of the model and other historic Sakha items into *Arctic: Culture and Climate* was an opportunity to highlight Sakha beliefs and practices within the context of environmental change, and to support a largescale public exhibition which explicitly drew attention to the consequences of the climate crisis across the Circumpolar North and beyond. Critically, and perhaps less overtly, it spotlighted the longevity of Sakha traditions within a major European venue and thus gave them political purchase within the broader context of cultural reclamation.

## Notes

- 1 Estimates of visitor figures vary. The figure of seven million comes from Arthur [Chandler’s \(1990\)](#) article, which remains one of the most comprehensive analyses of the 1876 Paris Exhibition.

- 2 A. Sokolov, personal communication to Argounova-Low and Brown, 4 July 2018; see also [Sokolov \(2005\)](#).
- 3 It is worth noting that the summer of 1867 also witnessed a major ethnographic exhibition in Moscow which used mannequins and included materials from Siberia to illustrate the reach of the Russian Empire (see [Knight 2001](#); [Cvetkovski 2014](#): 214–216).
- 4 This *uraha* was sent to the exhibition by Gavriil Pavlov (1816(?)–1872), who commissioned the model of *yhyakh*, along with a wide range of other Sakha items, including horse tackle, clothing, and domestic furnishings. For a biographical study of Pavlov and his connections with the Paris Exhibition, see [Nogovitsyna \(2017\)](#).
- 5 Tableterie is a category of small objects made of materials such as bone, mother of pearl, and ivory, and often involves techniques such as marquetry, inlay, and sculpture.
- 6 The British Museum loaned several objects from its collection to the exhibition, for example, stone tools and knives which were exhibited in the History of Labour displays ([Royal Commission for the Paris Exhibition 1867](#): 22).
- 7 For example, on 16 August, Franks and Cole went to the exhibition to make purchases and “examined objects in “China, Japan &c” (Henry Cole diaries 1822–1882, typed transcripts. 45.C.113, National Art Library).
- 8 9 October 1867, A.W. Franks. Officers Reports vol. 79, July–Dec 1867, British Museum Central Archives.
- 9 These notebooks contain details of artefacts in other collections which Franks saw during his travels within the UK and mainland Europe, many of which have now been broken up, and which seem to have served as “want lists” designed to allow him “to scoop up material as it became available” ([King 1997](#): 149).
- 10 Franks ethnographic notebook LS 11, “Pars Ex”, p. 86. Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, British Museum. “No.43” does not correspond to the numbering system in the published Catalogue of the Russian exhibits, so it is not clear what this identifier relates to.
- 11 Included in the list of ivory items provided by Gavriil Pavlov and published in the Catalogue of the Russian exhibits is what is described as “Groupe: un schaman Iakoute” ([Anon 1867](#): 65). As we have been unable to trace any other sculpture in the British Museum or other collection that fits this description and originates from the Paris Exhibition, and indeed, any other ivory sculptures from Siberia at the Exhibition other than those sent by Pavlov, it may be that the sculpture of the man with the dog sled that Franks purchased along with the model of the *yhyakh* is indeed this piece, even though Sakha scholars today question the attribution. The original catalogue slip for As.5068 does not distinguish between the model of *yhyakh* and the model of the sled but combines both pieces in one accession.
- 12 9 October 1867, A.W. Franks. Officers Reports vol. 79, July–Dec 1867. British Museum Central Archives.
- 13 21 November 1867, A.W. Franks. Officers Reports vol. 79, July–Dec 1867. British Museum Central Archives.
- 14 These include a wooden *choroon* (As.4471) used for *kymys* during *yhyakh* celebrations, a bow with painted bow case, catalogued as Tungus (As.4472), and several iron lance heads and traps used in hunting ([Anon. 1977](#): 61–62).
- 15 A. W. Franks, date-stamped 07 February 1868, Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography, Officers Reports vol 80, Jan-June 1868, p. 12. British Museum Central Archives.
- 16 A.W. Franks, 10 February 1868. Department of British Antiquities Etc., Officers Reports vol. 80, Jan–June 1868, p. 5–6. British Museum Central Archives.
- 17 A.W. Franks, 10 February 1868. Department of British Antiquities Etc., Officers Reports vol. 80, Jan–June 1868, p. 4. British Museum Central Archives.
- 18 These changes involved the European and Asian ethnography collections being amalgamated with those of the Departments of Pre-History and Europe and Asia respectively, while Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, became a single department. Additionally, a

- Centre for Anthropology was founded (now the Anthropology Library and Research Centre), which involves staff from across the Museum and has close links with the Royal Anthropological Institute (see Gathercole 2004 and the response from Brian Durran, then Acting Keeper of the Department of Ethnography).
- 19 This visit was triggered by discussions between Asia Gabysheva and Mariia Pol'skaia (Tanya's sister) who worked in the cultural sector and had suggested that as Tanya lived in the UK, she could speak to British Museum staff about the potential for a loan. Tanya's comments about the model from this visit were subsequently incorporated into the Museum's database and can be viewed in the online catalogue ([https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/search.aspx](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx)).
  - 20 Personal communication G. Perry to Brown, 12 December 2016.
  - 21 The series accompanied an exhibition with the same name that ran between November 2017 and April 2018, although it should be noted that the *zhyakh* model was not included in the displays (Cook 2018).
  - 22 The online catalogue retains the Russian “*zsyakh*” (accessed 29 March 2021), though it is notable that the English translation of Gorokhov's (1993) booklet about the model uses the Sakha pronunciation.

## References

- Anon. 1867. *Catalogue Spécial de la Section Russe à l'Exposition Universelle de Paris en 1867* [*Catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Paris: Imprimerie Générale de Ch. Lahure.
- Anon. 1886. *A Guide to the Exhibition Galleries of the British Museum*, Bloomsbury. London: Woodfall and Kinder.
- Anon. 1977. *Checklist of the Russian and Siberian Collections in the Museum of Mankind*. London: Ethnography Department, Museum of Mankind, The British Museum.
- Argounova-Low, T., A. K. Brown and S. Jansari 2020. *Model of a Summer Camp*. London: British Museum Press.
- Barth, V. 2008. The micro-history of a world event: intention, perception and imagination at the exposition universelle de 1867. *Museum and Society* 6:1: 22–37.
- Bellet, P. 1867. Promenade en Russie. In *L'Exposition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée* [*The Illustrated Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Vol. 1, ed. F. Ducuing. Paris: Bureaux d'abonnements, pp. 475–479.
- Benedict, B. 1994. Rituals of representation: ethnic stereotypes and colonised peoples at world's fairs. In *Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World*, eds. R. W. Rydell and N. Gwinn. Amsterdam: VU University Press, pp. 28–61.
- Bennett, T. 1995. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Braunholtz, H. J. 1953. History of ethnography in the museum, 1753–1938 (Pt. II). *The British Museum Quarterly* 18(4): 109–120.
- Caygill, M. 1997. Franks and the British Museum – the cuckoo in the nest. In *A.W. Franks: Nineteenth Century Collecting and the British Museum*, eds. M. Caygill and J. Cherry. London: British Museum Press, pp. 51–114.
- Chandler, A. 1990. Paris 1867: Exposition universelle. In *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851–1988*, eds. J. E. Fielding and K. D. Pelle. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 33–43.
- Cook, J. 2018. *Living with Gods: Peoples, Places and Worlds Beyond*. London: The British Museum Press.
- Cvetkovski, R. 2014. Empire complex: arrangements in the Russian Ethnographic Museum, 1910. In *An Empire of Others: Making Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, eds. R. Cvetkovski and A. Hofmeister. Budapest: CEU Press, pp. 211–52.
- de la Blanchère, H. 1867. Annexe de l'isba ou maison Russe. In *L'Exposition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée* [*The Illustrated Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Vol. 2, ed. F. Ducuing. Paris: Bureaux d'abonnements, pp. 154–155.

- de Castellane, 1867. Les installations Russe. In *L'Exposition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée* [*The Illustrated Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Vol. 2, ed. F. Ducuing. Paris: Bureaux d'abonnements, pp. 83–85.
- Donnelly, E. 2018. 'A desire for the national good': Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks and the curatorship of Renaissance decorative art in Britain, 1840–1900. *Journal of Art History* 18: 1–26.
- Ducuing, F. 1867. Les tentes exposee au Champs de Mars, trans. C. Rodriguez. In *L'Exposition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée* [*The Illustrated Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Vol. 2, ed. F. Ducuing. Paris: Bureaux d'abonnements, pp. 357–359.
- Franks, A. W. 1867. Exhibits iron and bronze weapons from Jenisseysk acquired at the Paris Exhibition. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, second series, 21 November, pp. 12–14.
- Franks, A. W. 1868a. Account of acquisitions to the Department of Antiquities, British Museum. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, second series, 21 May, pp. 128–134.
- Franks, A. W. 1868b. *Guide to the Christy Collection of Prehistoric Antiquities and Ethnography*. London: Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, British Museum.
- Franks, A. W. 1872. *British Museum, Pre-Historic, Ethnographical and Christy Collection. Photographed by Stephen Thompson*. London: W.A. Mansell.
- Gathercole, P. 2004. Anthropology and the British museum: on the planned abolition of the Department of Ethnography. *Anthropology Today* 20(4): 23–4.
- Gorokhov, S. N. 1993. "Ysyakh": *Iakuskii Eksponat v Kollektzii Britanskogo Muzeia* [Ysyakh: A Yakut Artefact in the Collection of the British Museum]. Yakutsk: KIF SITIM.
- Greenhalgh, P. 1988. *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- King, J. C. H. 1997. Franks and ethnography. In *A.W. Franks: Nineteenth Century Collecting and the British Museum*, eds. M. Caygill and J. Cherry. London: British Museum Press, pp. 137–159.
- Knight, N. 2001. *The Empire on Display: Ethnographic Exhibition and the Conceptualization of Human Diversity in Post-Emancipation Russia*. Washington DC.: The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research.
- Lincoln, A., J. Cooper, and J. P. L. Looovers (eds). 2020. *Arctic: Culture and Climate*. London: Thames and Hudson and The British Museum.
- Müller-Scheessel, N. 2001. Fair prehistory: archaeological exhibits at French Expositions Universelles. *Antiquity* 75: 391–401.
- Nikitin, Y., V. Goryunov, V. Murgul, and N. Vatin 2015. Russian sections at world and international fairs. *Advanced Materials Research* Vols 1065–1069: 2674–2680.
- Nogovitsyna, E. S. 2017. *Vechnoe Pominovenie... (Pamiati Iakutskogo Kuptsa 2si Gil'dii Gavriila Prokop'evicha Pavlova Posviashchaetsia)* [Eternal commemoration...(to the memory of Gavriil Prokop'evich Pavlov, a Yakutsk merchant of the 2nd guild). Berdigiastikh: Üle Kūuhe.
- Perry, G. 2011. *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. London: The British Museum Press.
- Read, C. H. 1910. *British Museum Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rimmel, E., 1868. *Recollections of the Paris Exhibition of 1867*. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Royal Commission for the Paris Exhibition. 1867. *Paris Universal Exhibition, 1867: British Section: Fine Arts Division: Comprising the Objects Illustrating the History of Labour Before 1800 and a List of the Contributors of the Various Works of Art*. London: Spottiswode and Co.
- Sala, G. A. 1868. *Notes and Sketches of the Paris Exhibition*. London: Tinsley Brothers.
- Shelton, A. 2000. Museum ethnography: an imperial science. In *Cultural Encounters: Representing 'Otherness'* eds. E. Hallam and B. V. Street. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 155–93.
- Sloan, K. ed. 2003. *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century*. London: British Museum Press.

- Sokolov, A. 2005. Sankt Peterburg na vsemirnykh vystavkakh v Parizhe 1867–1900 gg [Saint Petersburg at the World exhibitions in Paris 1867–1900]. In *Triumph Muzeia? [Triumph of the Museum?]*, eds. M. B. Piotrovskii, A. V. Liashko, E. A. Makovetskii, A. A. Nikonova, B. G. Sokolov, E. G. Sokolov. Saint Petersburg: Osipov, pp. 276–303.
- Speakman, N. 2017. “A great harvest”: the acquisition of William Maskell’s ivory collection by the British Museum. In *Gothic Ivory Sculpture: Content and Context*, ed. C. Yvard. London: The Courtauld Institute of Art, pp. 111–124.
- Stepanova, L. B. 2009. Ethnographic collections from the territory of the Yakut Region, 1867–1915. Papers from *Circumpolar Cultures in the Museums Worldwide: Past, Present and Future*, July 29–August 1, 2009. Yakutsk. DVD produced by UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM).
- Stocking, G. W. 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: Free Press.

## 2.3 *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century* **Long Journey: connecting people with collections**

Although this book is based on a specific project that ran for a defined period, it is deeply enmeshed within wider processes of cultural reclamation at play within *Sakha Sire* as well as concerns about access to museums and archival collections expressed by minority groups worldwide. With the visit of Semen Gorokhov to the British Museum in 1992 and the subsequent publication of his encounter with Sakha collections in European museums, many people in *Sakha Sire* were curious to learn more about the model. Indeed, Asia Gabysheva, Director of the NAM at the time of our research, told us many times that it had long been her dream to bring it to Yakutsk so that Sakha people could have the opportunity to see and learn from it themselves. At Gabysheva's request and as noted in [Part 2.2](#), in 2008 Tanya initiated discussions with the British Museum about the potential for a loan. Though the costs involved were prohibitive, it was clear from these discussions, as well as from reports of inter-cultural exchanges between Sakha and UK academics, that the value of such a project was widely recognised by British Museum colleagues.

By the mid-2000s, we had both joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen and had begun to plan a project based around *Model of a Summer Festival* which brought together Alison's research on the mobilisation of museum collections as part of processes of cultural revival, with Tanya's expertise in narrative and identity politics in *Sakha Sire*. After further discussions with colleagues at the British Museum, we visited Yakutsk in April 2013 to meet with NAM staff, mammoth ivory carvers and other artists skilled in Sakha traditional arts, and with staff and students from the P. P. Romanov College of Arts, to seek their advice for a funding bid which responded to issues which they considered to be of most importance. In 2014, our application to the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council was successful, and we were joined by Eleanor Peers, a specialist in ethnicity, aesthetics, and revivalism in Siberia, in January 2015 when the project formally began.

Discussions about the value of Sakha culture and its revival have not taken place in isolation of course. Since the 1980s there have been significant shifts in the relations between museums, Indigenous peoples, and other minority groups worldwide. Politically charged topics such as access to and ownership of museum collections have dominated the museum anthropology sector, shaped primarily by

DOI: [10.4324/9780429456398-10](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456398-10)

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

the demands of stakeholders for a realignment of power with regard to the control of heritage, though debates within anthropology regarding the politics of representation and widespread public demands for equality and social justice have also played their part. There is now an extensive body of literature that has effectively demonstrated the restorative cultural value of accessing heritage items, particularly those located in museums far from home, as well as a multitude of legislative and non-legislative approaches for resolving requests for restitution (see for example, [Clifford 2013](#); [Silverman 2015](#); [Peers and Brown 2016](#)). Additionally, many museums are adopting ways of working which are underpinned by collaborative approaches intended to respond to the concerns of audiences often located at great distance from the museums themselves, as well as of users who have been displaced or have historically been alienated from museums. Such work can be fraught and uncomfortable, and while it challenges museums and their users alike, it nonetheless contributes to addressing the structural inequalities that limit access to cultural heritage, reconfiguring what a museum's role and responsibilities may be (e.g., [Golding and Modest 2013](#); [Schorch and McCarthy 2018](#); [von Oswald and Tinius 2020](#)), and understanding the ways in which museums and their users can together create value ([Morphy and McKenzie 2022](#)).

In their article exploring the complexities of commemorative practices in *Sakha Sire*, [Cruikshank and Argounova \(2000: 114–115\)](#) noted that museums in Russia from the Tsarist period through to the Soviet era mobilised collections to reinforce particular narratives, with evolutionary hierarchies in which peasants were elevated above pastoralists being superseded with narratives that privileged the success of scientific socialism. Since the 1990s, in conjunction with cultural practices such as oral tradition and place-making, museum collections have been interpreted anew to disrupt and, indeed, dismantle the powerful master narratives of the Soviet era ([Zabalueva 2017](#)). The staff of community museums and historical sites have been at the forefront of these activities, with [Alexia Bloch \(2000\)](#) noting that such sites play a central role in articulating how “tradition” is presented for local audiences as well as for outsiders in contexts in which people are exploring what revitalisation means within their local circumstances (see also [Grant 1995](#); [Balzer 2011](#); [King 2011](#); [Davidov 2017](#)). Between us, we visited many such museums during the *Narrative Objects* project and were struck by the interpretive strategies that their dedicated curators have employed to present the strength of Sakha culture and the complexities of local history, notwithstanding the difficulties that [Cruikshank and Argounova \(2000: 115\)](#) identify of such work in the absence of public collective memory.

Julia Kupina, the Director of the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg, has argued that in Russia, debates about access to heritage and the value museum collections can have in contexts where cultural knowledge is threatened are shaped by the opposing doctrines of cultural nationalism and cultural internationalism ([Kupina 2004: 203](#)). As such, she claims that while Russia places great value on retaining its national cultural patrimony within its borders, its complex relations with the national republics, where many Indigenous and ethnic groups reside, are highlighted in discussions about the rightful place of heritage items (see

Plets et al 2013; Tadina 2020). Museum workers in Sakha (Yakutia) are very active in professional associations, such as the Union of Museums of Russia, and routinely contribute to international exhibitions and programmes, so are well aware of such debates, however, the focus of their activities since the early 1990s has been on developing mutually cooperative relations with museums elsewhere in the Circumpolar North, as part of a cultural-political strategy promoted by Sakha (Yakutia) to locate itself as part of a larger society of northern peoples, mostly considered to be Indigenous by the international community (Maj 2012: 213).<sup>1</sup> The aspiration to create connections, share skills and knowledge, and develop scientific and educational programmes with museums in Arctic communities was celebrated in a major conference supported by UNESCO in 2009 at which participants (including Argounova-Low) presented on Sakha collections in European museums (Shishigin 2009). Taking this work beyond the Circumpolar North has been the focus of recent museological activity, with the Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), UNESCO, and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues supporting Sakha scholars to visit European and North American museums as part of an ambitious project launched in 2012 to locate and catalogue all collections in museums worldwide that originated in the territory of present-day Sakha (Yakutia), including those of the Even, Yukaghir, and Chukchi, as well as Sakha. Richly illustrated catalogues have been published of the collections in museums in the United States (Ivanova-Unarova 2017) and Germany (Gabyшева et al 2018), and a volume is planned that will include collections in British museums examined during the *Narrative Objects* project.<sup>2</sup>

This work has its roots in a long-term research relationship established between scholars in Siberia and staff at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, which cares for extensive collections acquired during the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (Bloch and Kendall 2004). Art historian Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova has made repeated visits since 1992 to study these collections, initially with her late husband, Vladimir Ivanov-Unarov, and has written at length about the importance of accessing museum collections as part of revitalising traditional arts practices (Ivanov-Unarov and Ivanova-Unarova 2003; Ivanova-Unarova 2011a; 2011b). Sakha seamstresses have worked with the collections to revive clothing designs that were lost during the Soviet era (Holloway 1997: 87) and artists skilled in a range of Sakha crafts have visited the museum to study examples of their ancestors' work (Kendall 2017: 25; AMNH n.d.1). As is so often the case in such exchanges, the AMNH has also benefitted tremendously. In addition to enhancing collections documentation, the conservation of the collection has been enriched by connections museum staff have been able to make with people from across the Siberian north, supported by Vera Solovyeva, a Sakha scholar and Associate staff member (AMNH n.d.2; Sulyandziga 2020). The remarkable value of the Jesup Collection as a resource for Sakha and other Siberian peoples, as discussed by Ivanov-Unarov and Ivanova-Unarova (2003: 344) has been both an inspiration and a model for the *Narrative Objects* project, just as it is for community-focused research with anthropology collections more broadly, and has provided useful context for understanding local responses to the *Narrative Objects* project as it unfolded.

### The exhibition

It was in early April 2015 that *Model of a Summer Festival* finally arrived in Yakutsk after an absence of some 140 years. In the cool, marble-floored gallery, where the exhibition was soon to open to immense enthusiasm, British Museum Registrar, Jill Maggs, carefully unpacked the transportation crate, while the *Narrative Objects* project team and NAM staff looked on in anticipation. The ivory figures had been removed from their wooden base by British Museum conservators so that they could be securely and individually wrapped for the 7,000 mile journey, crossing multiple time zones and fluctuating environmental conditions, and had rested in their crate for a couple of days following their arrival in order to acclimatise to temperatures which were still around  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  during the day. As they emerged from their packaging one by one, the excitement in the gallery was palpable. Many of those present took the chance to photograph the model before it was encased; others spent the time close looking and commenting on details such as the ochre used to dye the figures' hair, now faded to a rusty brown, and the use of sturgeon glue that would have secured the figures in place. Details such as these were indiscernible from the images they had seen previously, and in these verbal exchanges, triggered by the presence of the model itself, we became aware of the model's capacity to confound, charm, and teach. As with other small-scale objects, it was the very smallness of the figures that captivated those present and drew us in, forcing an engagement with them that piqued curiosity and raised questions that might not otherwise have been asked. Anthropologists who have written about miniatures and models – noting that these are not necessarily interchangeable descriptors – have commented on this capacity of the diminutive to engage us through vision (Davy and Dixon 2019; Lévi-Strauss 1966). Within the context of this loan, in which the model would be in its glass case for the full duration preventing any other sensory engagement, the emphasis on visual connections through close looking shaped visitor experiences and the events and activities developed by NAM staff and educators. We turn to these below, after first briefly outlining the themes and layout of the exhibition.

While the model arrived only a few days prior to installation, as is normal with museum exhibitions involving loans from external institutions, the NAM staff had been planning the layout and interpretation for many months, though they waited for our arrival to finalise the text. As the centrepiece of the exhibition, the placement of the model was crucial (Figure 2.5). Visitors would enter from the adjacent gallery of modern artists of Yakutia and be drawn towards the specially commissioned high-specification display case located towards the rear of the gallery, directly opposite the wooden entrance doors. Following an animated discussion regarding the orientation of the model, which needed to be placed so that the door of the *uraha* faced east towards the rising sun, the model was installed on the central glass shelf so that visitors could view it from all sides. Taller children and adults could look down upon the scene to take in all the activities with close to a bird's eye view while, for many children, the model was at eye level, offering perhaps a more intimate perspective. The exhibition was arranged thematically, with the model contextualised culturally, historically, and artistically in connected



Figure 2.5 *Model of a Summer Festival* on display in the National Arts Museum in Yakutsk, 2015. Photograph by A. K. Brown.

displays that utilised the collections of the NAM itself and the Yakutsk State Museum of History and Culture of the Northern Peoples Named after E. Yaroslavskii (hereafter Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture). In one corner of the gallery, an open display of late nineteenth-century formal clothing of the kind worn by high-status women, *choroons*, *simiir ihit*, and ornamented horse tackle, offered full-size examples of what could be seen in miniaturised form in the model itself. Another section focussed on the model's history and used archival documents and images to trace its journey from a commissioned work for the Paris International Exhibition to its purchase by Augustus Wollaston Franks for the British Museum. Close by, a selection of Jochelson's black and white images taken in the Boturusskii *uluus* (present-day Churapcha and Taatta *uluuses*) at the turn of the twentieth century, were reproduced large scale, to offer visual context for *yhyakh* prior to the Soviet era. In cases leading up to the central display case, visitors could compare the style of mammoth ivory carvers over the last 150 years through observing models depicting subject matter as diverse as a *balaghan* (domestic structure) made of ivory plates, figurative sculptures including a man with an oxen drawn cart and a high-status woman with a horse, and more recent compositions of participants celebrating *yhyakh*. Finally, a selection of works from the NAM's contemporary fine art collection, all of which were connected to *yhyakh*, adorned the walls. Interpretative text was minimal, aside from panels concerning the model's history, yet with each grouping of objects and artworks connecting to the model in a referentially hub and

spoke layout, the continuities between this historic item and contemporary Sakha ethnic expression were apparent.

### **Engaging with the model**

*Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey* was the first time the NAM had engaged in an exhibition project with an international museum partner on its home turf, and while it was certainly its most high-profile exhibition, drawing over 20,000 visitors across its run,<sup>3</sup> in many other respects it was typical of the museum's dedicated culture work. Founded in 1928 and intimately connected to the "self-realisation of the Republic as a nation" since its inception, the NAM has displayed extensive collections of the arts of Yakutia from the eighteenth century to the present day, as well as Russian and European fine and decorative art collections dating to the sixteenth century (Gabysheva 2005).<sup>4</sup> It has been based in its current building, a former publishing house in the centre of Yakutsk, since 2005. Its 20 or so core curatorial, education and research staff are involved in a diverse set of innovative initiatives, including running acquisitions and exhibitions programmes, fieldwork, the curation of travelling exhibitions in satellite venues across the Republic, and the delivery of specialist Museum Pedagogy and publishing programmes.<sup>5</sup> In our preliminary meetings in which we worked through the goals of the *Narrative Objects* project, our partners at NAM explained that they envisioned the primary aims of the exhibition as first, to raise the profile of Sakha arts and second, to generate interest and pride in Sakha culture and history within the context of the NAM's wider mission to provide access to the treasures in its collections to people across the Republic. As such, the exhibition was aligned with the wider aspirations of the Republic to become the cultural centre of the Arctic, with Yakutsk as its cultural capital, formulated in a specific Cultural Policy Concept of the Republic announced in 2015 (Kuklina and Shishigina 2020: 109).<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the museum, education specialists working with students of all ages viewed the project as an opportunity to plan lessons linked to the model and its history. Indeed, in collaboration with the Institute of National Schools, the NAM has developed a manual for teaching thematic lessons within the Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia programme. Additionally, Tanya and Eleanor liaised with staff of the Ministry for Education in the lead up to the exhibition to develop bespoke materials for use in the gallery, hard copies of which were subsequently sent to schools across the Republic. Mammoth ivory carvers and their supporters, meanwhile, as we discuss in more depth in Part 3.4, saw the project as potentially beneficial not only given their precarious economic circumstances, but also because of their desire to foster a distinctly Sakha style of art. For many of them, the exhibition's focus on such a unique object, and the attendant media interest, drew attention to the status of Sakha carvers as skilled chroniclers of culture. It was their hope that the exhibition would bring the recognition that they believe their art form is due, and would ignite interest in distinctly Sakha carving practices among younger generations of carvers.

As part of the planning for the wider *Narrative Objects* project we proposed several engagement events and activities that we would attend and which would

help us to better understand the ways in which the model acted as a pivot around which conversations about *yhyakh* flowed, including workshops with carvers, and panel discussions. All three of us participated in some of these, whereas others were attended by either Tanya or Eleanor, both of whom undertook extended periods of fieldwork in relation to the project.<sup>7</sup> Additional events were organised by the NAM staff, intended to widen access to the debates being generated by the model's presence in Yakutsk, and we attended these where possible. These included a panel discussion for the National Broadcasting Company television show, *Kul'turnaia Evolutsiia (Cultural Evolution)*, hosted by Andrei Borisov, former Minister of Culture, and Adviser to the Head of The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), which was filmed during the week of the exhibition opening and involved art historians, culture workers, carvers and ourselves; a masterclass for students led by carver Vasiliï Amydaev, chairman of the Union of Artists of The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia); and sessions hosted for master carvers to discuss the model and the techniques the artist had used (Figure 2.6).

The NAM staff worked tirelessly to promote the exhibition and there was considerable media interest in the model and the project more generally. As such, the model captivated the attention of citizens across the Republic, not just the cultural elite based in Yakutsk; this interest was sustained across the duration of the loan with each subsequent event or new development associated with the project being disseminated widely. Whether we were in Yakutsk or further afield, we were keenly



*Figure 2.6* Vasiliï Amydaev leading a carving master class for art students. Photograph by I. Neustroev, NAM.

aware that many people were deeply interested in the model and were contributing to discussions at a local level about its carver and its multiple meanings.<sup>8</sup>

### **Temporality and the emergence of object narratives**

Material culture has long been understood to serve as a trigger for recall and as a means of memorialising both persons and events (Hallam and Hockey 2001); however, much recent scholarship has pointed not only to the capacity of objects to connect with memory at individual and collective levels, but also to reorientate our relationships with the past, present, and the future. Rebecca Bryant (2014), for instance, has noted in her ethnographic case study situated in northern Cyprus, that it is the very presence of an object from the past in the here and now – in her case, appropriated and redistributed “enemy” property – that collapses time. “While an object, in its form, may be radically other to me, stubbornly and solidly representing a time not my own” she writes, “in its materiality, what Aristotle would have called its ‘potentiality,’ it contains a temporal dynamism capable of exploding, imploding, twisting, or braiding the past” (2014: 684). Bryant’s discussion of what she calls “temporal dynamism” and its relation to materiality and belonging offers a theoretical framework for thinking about how certain types of objects not only act as carriers of knowledge from the past as they are often characterised in much of the museum anthropology literature, but also may be suffused with temporal meanings that link them to possible futures. It is because objects from the past both relate to a specific point in historical time but also have lifespans that extend well beyond that point in time (and often beyond the lifespans of the people and materials connected to them), that they can usefully be mobilised for thinking about individual and collective experiences of the past (see also Turkle 2007). Her insights into how people in northern Cyprus “give historical meaning to their everyday worlds” through their relationships with appropriated objects in a context in which “conflict histories are anxious and incomplete and much is at stake in their resolution” (2014: 684) and in which “dispossession, loss, and appropriation of homes and property is central to many people’s narratives” (2014: 683) resonate with many of our conversations with Sakha individuals. This is despite her ethnographic material being explicitly linked to conflict narratives and the objects associated with them, significant regional and historical differences, and the objects she discusses being utilitarian items, rather than commissioned artwork. The “houses and gardens, dowry chests and wardrobes, dining tables and workbenches” of which she writes so evocatively “became the objects and conduits of work, memory, and social interaction” (2014: 683). Similarly, through history work, *Model of a Summer Festival* operated as a narrative object in that it mobilised discussions both of Sakha cultural expression prior to and during the Soviet period, an era associated in part with cultural loss and repression (Balzer 2011), as well as reflections about the capacity of objects to support current and future Sakha cultural practices at the individual and collective levels.

Bryant’s work is usefully read in parallel with literature describing the many museum-based projects which have brought together historical collections with people who have witnessed trauma or who are experiencing the legacies of colonisation or

other forms of cultural, linguistic, and religious suppression. Such work makes clear that access to objects which have come to symbolise collective identity can aid cultural recovery and strengthen resilience (e.g., [Krpmotich and Peers 2014](#); [McGaw 2014](#); [Jordan 2015](#)). Early in the planning for the *Narrative Objects* project, when we first visited Yakutsk together in April 2013 to ask about what the work might encompass, people frequently related to us in detail what *yhyakh* meant to them as individuals, as well as about how they understood it to be distinctly Sakha. The museum staff advising us explained that the festival is not just something that happens over a few days, mid-summer, but that people “live and prepare for it all year round”.<sup>9</sup> We were told often that being able to see a model which depicts scenes of *yhyakh* as they were illustrated by a mid-nineteenth carver was a unique opportunity, if not to experience, then at least to better appreciate what the celebrations at that time might have involved, what had changed, and which elements have continued into the present day. The return of the model, we were told by one individual, would be “like the return of memory”.<sup>10</sup> At that point, of course, we were using photographs of the model as the focus for our discussions, rather than the model itself, but even so, as people discussed the possibilities of the project with us, it was apparent that there was considerable interest in how the model might stimulate technical knowledge about carving, as well as generate historical and cultural knowledge about *yhyakh* itself. This became even more striking once the model arrived in Yakutsk. Regardless of whether we were using as the focus of our discussions images that could be enlarged on an iPad, or the model itself encased in glass in the NAM gallery, our questions about it generally concerned what people saw – or did not see – within it, but then broadened out to other matters of which our interlocutors wished to speak and which were often triggered by discussions the interviewee had participated in elsewhere, or had read or heard about in the media. Some semi-structured interviews, specifically those carried out by Eleanor and Tanya, took place in the gallery with the model mediating the conversation; others involved teachers who had brought their students to the museum and who had incorporated the model and the exhibition into their classes; we also interviewed museum staff and artists in their place of work. Additionally, we all spent time in the gallery in order to get a sense of how the museum staff and visitors engaged with the exhibition and, as noted above, across the project we attended many cultural events, *yhyakh* celebrations both large and small, visited museum and heritage sites in rural and urban settings, and participated in events organised by the NAM to showcase the model both during the exhibition’s run and in the two years immediately afterwards within the timescale of the broader *Narrative Objects* project. At all of these we engaged in stimulating discussions with local people about the model, about heritage, and about the capacity of objects from the past to mobilise creative responses into the present and potentially into the future.

### **The model, access, and restitution**

Before presenting both direct and indirect ways in which people narrated the model, we draw attention to how its return to Yakutsk was framed within wider discussions regarding matters of access to heritage objects, given that these underpinned the

*Narrative Objects* project's broader concern with the role of museum collections in cultural revitalisation. As discussed above, since the 1990s arts and culture workers in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) have developed strong working relationships with colleagues in museums beyond the Russian Federation as part of a long-term cataloguing project supported by the Parliament of Sakha (Yakutia), Ministry of Culture and Spiritual Development, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the International Council on Museums (ICOM): the *Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in World Museums*.<sup>11</sup> This work has involved publishing high quality images and associated information, supporting curatorial research, and participating in conferences and exhibitions nationally and internationally. Beyond these engagements, we learned through our observations and conversations during fieldwork that, independently, skilled craftspeople are finding inspiration in historic collections. We saw for ourselves examples of such work in an exhibition of contemporary beaded clothing and textile arts from northern regions of *Sakha Sire* in the Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture in the final visit we made to Yakutsk in connection with the *Narrative Objects* project in the spring of 2019 (Figure 2.7), as well as in the homes of seamstresses whom we visited in villages in rural regions.

Further, in a series of memorable discussions with people in Taatta *uluus*, we learned of one woman who, following a visit to the American Museum of Natural



Figure 2.7 Contemporary Dolgan clothing by Arsent'eva Miroslava inspired by traditional designs. Photograph by A. K. Brown.

History, instigated a competition for seamstresses to replicate historic Sakha clothing in museums, and we regularly saw reproductions of the early twentieth century images of *yhyakh* made by Jochelson in buildings as well as on people's phones, which we'd be shown as if to emphasise a point about how "traditional" clothing today differs from that of the past.<sup>12</sup> The vibrant pinks, blues, greens and orange satins and other synthetic fabrics used nowadays for women's festive clothing, are "like bright flowers" we were told, rather than the more muted shades of the past, and contribute to the impression that *yhyakh* is too theatrical, inauthentic, and "just a show", a critique we heard frequently alongside recommendations that we should be sure to witness smaller scale festivities, and not only the extensive celebrations of the *Tuimaada Yhyakh* held at *Üs Khatyy*.<sup>13</sup> Wearing Sakha clothing is considered to positively affect people's behaviour and instil feelings of pride and, for some, getting the details accurate matters a great deal. As we learned more about the very significant changes that have taken place in the material forms associated with *yhyakh* since the 1990s described in [Part 1.4](#) – be this clothing itself and the sheer number of people choosing to wear it, or the architecture and spatial layout of the festivities – we also began to appreciate just how fragile knowledge of traditional Sakha material practices had been prior to the revival, and how much has been painstakingly put together by dedicated individuals, even though some were criticised in the early days of this work for supporting revitalisation efforts.<sup>14</sup> Of course, acquiring and using the skills to sew and carve takes time and effort, and as it is possible nowadays to purchase ready-made Sakha-style clothing and accessories produced in China, such imported goods are regarded as a threat to "authentic" Sakha crafts, as well as a violation of cultural copyright. We also learned of local initiatives aimed at reviving national culture through Sakha crafts and arts, such as wood carving and embroidery, but which have ceased to operate due to a lack of materials or funds.<sup>15</sup> Within this context, whereby access to the finances necessary to support such ventures is often controlled at the local level, we were told that the work we were doing mattered precisely because it had been initiated from outside the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), and that, as such, municipal, regional, and federal officials would have to pay attention. "If we really want to keep our culture", we were told by one official, "we should learn from projects like this. It is not a secret that we all work on the instructions of the people in charge. That's why it is all turning into a show. Instead of drinking *kymys* we start doing fireworks, to make it spectacular, so people will be impressed".<sup>16</sup>

Often in relation to these discussions about how and why people are seeking out historic collections we would ask about their hopes for the longer-term legacies of the model returning – albeit for a short period – to Yakutsk, and how that sat with views on access to collections housed outside the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) more generally. Restitution is a topic that few of those in the museum sector that we spoke with have direct experience of, though they are certainly familiar with the debates.<sup>17</sup> During one of our first visits to the Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture in 2013, for example, our guide shared their thoughts on the internal repatriation the year previously of the so-called Altai Princess or Ice Maiden, a 2,500-year-old Scythian woman whose mummified remains were excavated in 1993 and held for almost two decades in the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, Siberian

Branch, Russian Academy of Science, Novosibirsk, despite the protests of Indigenous Altaians in the Ukok Plateau region who argued that the remains should be returned to the earth. Failing to do so was (and remains) potentially dangerous, as evidenced by a 2003 earthquake in the Kosh-Agach region near the Ukok plateau, which caused significant damage and was linked to local people's beliefs about the woman not being at rest. Local criticism of the treatment of the Altai Princess has intensified in the years since, following further weather-linked environmental disasters which are believed to have been caused by the continued failure to rebury the remains (Tadina 2020: 114).<sup>18</sup> In this high-profile and emotive case, the remains were returned to the National Museum of the Republic of Altai, following its renovation with funds from Gazprom, the state-backed energy company which plans to construct a pipeline that will pass through the Altai Republic to China and has invested significantly in local infrastructure as part of its bid to gain the support of local inhabitants (Plets et al 2013: 84). While many Altaian archaeologists, officials, and the public would have preferred that the Altai Princess be reburied, her return was considered a step forward. As Plets et al (2013: 80) have noted, local authorities continue to insist that all archaeological materials from the region and now in repositories in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk, should be returned.

The Altai Princess case and the heritage politics within which it is embedded have been discussed at some length in archaeological and anthropological literature, with scholars commenting on its significance for repatriation politics globally, yet recognising the limits of its impact in terms of shifting archaeological practice in post-Soviet Russia towards the more collaborative model adopted in many other contexts, particularly given the current political framework in which recentralisation policies from Moscow are, according to some, undermining local decision-making (Plets et al 2013: 84). Meanwhile, in Yakutsk we learned of another case in which political strategies and latterly ethnonationalism contributed to the movement of material goods. In the late 1980s, following pressure from Sakha journalist, Dmitrii Bubiakin, a mammoth tusk *choroon* encrusted with diamonds and embellished with silver, carved by the artist T. V. Ammosov, and which had been presented to Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party, as a gift on his 70th birthday in 1976, was returned to Yakutsk. This *choroon*, according to Arzyutov (2019: 148), exemplifies the way in which Soviet-era officials actively promoted the region's association with mammoths through diplomatic gifts. While the original is not on display – a decision that may seem surprising, given its cultural value – it featured as part of a presentation of 3D imagery of mammoth tusk artworks in the Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture which we saw in 2019. There are clearly divergent views on this topic, with one museum worker suggesting that returning the *choroon* to Yakutsk was a wasted opportunity, given Sakha peoples' familiarity with such items, and that the chance to promote the resources of the Republic, and the skills of its artists, had been lost.<sup>19</sup>

We emphasise that most of our conversations on the topic of restitution and repatriation were with museum professionals, educators, and officials who are part of the cultural elite, and we fully recognise that this positionality (as well, of course, our own) shaped what were measured, circumspect responses. Nonetheless, what

emerged was a very clear distinction between items in museums, including those far from the Sakha (Yakutia) whether in the Russian Federation or beyond, which were legitimately acquired by collectors in the past, and those which were either removed illicitly or were relocated during the Second World War and for which there is no surviving documentation. In one of our museum visits in Yakutsk, for instance, we were told by the guide that many women gave their silver jewellery to the government in support of the war effort, and we were often told by museum colleagues that collections such as those in the United States and Germany were acquired legitimately. Indeed, as one colleague put it, as there are many examples of similar items in museums in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (and on display in peoples' homes and, in some cases, in use in rural *uluuses*), it is a good thing that Sakha art and material culture can be found in museum collections worldwide and shared with people who may not otherwise be exposed to it.<sup>20</sup> Underpinning this view was the idea of curiosity as it relates to histories of collecting in Siberia as they are understood by Sakha museum specialists, and particularly how it influenced nineteenth and early twentieth-century travellers who came to the region. We saw for ourselves how curators have incorporated these histories into displays through the inclusion of images of objects in distant museums paired with local examples and interpretation.<sup>21</sup> Though colleagues involved in the international cataloguing programme noted that physical access to pieces for which there are no duplicates would be enormously valuable for groups and individuals trying to learn the techniques of the past, we were also reminded of the ubiquity of images of Sakha traditional crafts circulating on social media and the greater ease by which people can now secure craft materials and access to books and other resources, all of which were contributing to what one colleague described as a “renaissance in Sakha craft”.<sup>22</sup> While acknowledging the range of opinions on the topic of where the model ‘belongs’, one colleague commented that even though some people might argue that the presence of Sakha items in museums in other countries was related to historic imperialism, their own view was to respect the museums and those whose curiosity in the wider world and the peoples within it had brought them to Yakutia.

On multiple occasions, we also came across the idea that items like the *yhyakh* model are ambassadors for Sakha culture and people, akin to the observations of museum anthropologists who have noticed a similar narrative in connection with specific collections or items and in which the terminology and associations are used to speak to nation to nation relations (e.g., Knowles 2011).<sup>23</sup> One of our interlocutors, for example, explained that while the composition embodies the living spirit of Sakha people, and that they considered it to be very important that the model had returned temporarily to Yakutsk, they were emphatic that it should not stay permanently. In their view, the model exemplified to people from around the world what Sakha people could do. “This is *uluu d'yala* (a great act) – to make something like that 150 years ago and show it to the world. I feel pride for the people of my *uluus* [who made it possible to be made]”.<sup>24</sup> While the idea of an “ambassador object” can be critiqued on a number of levels, it seemed to make sense to many of the individuals with whom we spoke, not only with regards to the perception that the model’s location in London spoke to the presence of the Sakha people on the global

stage, but also due to its underpinning history as a piece specifically produced to represent Sakha culture in Europe. As [Balzer \(2021\)](#) has noted, in post-Soviet Russia, recognition of having one's own Republic is advantageous, thus an item with a lengthy documented history representing Sakha people many decades before the Soviet era has the potential to be politically useful as well as culturally symbolic. In essence, the model was viewed not as contested heritage, but as an item that has had, and continues to have, a role in mobilising Sakha culture and history, and Sakha relations with a world beyond the Circumpolar North. We explore how this mobilisation played out during the *Narrative Objects* project in [Part 2.4](#).

## Notes

- 1 NAM staff, for example, have participated in professional development opportunities co-ordinated via the British Council.
- 2 As part of the *Narrative Objects* project, in 2016 the Pitt Rivers Museum, National Museum of Scotland, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and the British Museum, hosted a delegation of researchers with expertise in Siberian material culture to share information about the collections and consider potential future collaborations. The delegation consisted of Asia Gabysheva and Tanya Baskhardyrova from NAM, Tatiana Sem of the Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg, and the *Narrative Objects* project team.
- 3 The final exhibition report prepared by NAM staff states that 20,217 visitors attended the exhibition, and over 250 guided tours were presented (Gabysheva 2015: 3). The NAM has a ticketed entry system and charges a small entrance fee.
- 4 A detailed history of the museum is available on the NAM's website: <https://sakhmuseum.ru/o-muzee/istoriya/>. Accessed 09 May 2025.
- 5 As the Republic's premier cultural and arts organisation, the NAM is supported via legal protections with regards to arts and national heritage and by financial resources via the Ministry of Cultural and Spiritual Development of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Nevertheless, funding remains tight, and the museum experiences challenges with regards to maintenance of its buildings and collections that would be familiar to museum staff in many parts of the world.
- 6 [Kuklina and Shishigina \(2020: 109\)](#) note that this strategy has emerged from the experience of culture workers in the Republic in hosting international events, including conferences and workshops, maintaining connections with international researchers, and hosting events such as the Children of Asia Games.
- 7 Interviews led by Tanya were undertaken in either Sakha or Russian and translated for Alison's benefit; interviews by Eleanor were undertaken in Russian.
- 8 Examples of events and programming linked to the project across its duration include a 2017 photography exhibition curated by students at the North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk based on research undertaken in their own *uluus* about how *yhyakh* is celebrated, a further photography exhibition – *Bright Sun Shining* – curated by the project team using the work of Maxim Unarov and held in Aberdeen from 2017 to 2018, and a workshop with inter-generational artists at the British Museum devised by the Community Partnerships Team drawing on the Talking Objects methodology which used the model as a focus for new work ([Cruickshanks and van der Vaart 2019](#); see also [Cruickshanks 2015](#)).
- 9 Brown, fieldnotes, 4 April 2013.
- 10 Brown, fieldnotes, 9 April 2013.
- 11 The Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the North-Eastern Federal University named after M. K. Ammosov, and the Arctic State Institute Culture and Arts have also contributed to this work.

- 12 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 23 June 2015.
- 13 Nikanorova (2020: 35), whose fieldwork coincided with our own, contrasts the claims that *yhyakh* is theatrical and inauthentic with the experiences of some of her interlocutors whose understanding is that the contemporary *yhyakh* can be traced directly to the very first *yhyakh* arranged by Ellei Bootur, the legendary forefather of the Sakha, a claim that she notes is legitimised by other scholars and is widely accepted by the general public. For Nikanorova, this connection “conveys an important claim to the historical continuation not only of a specific Sakha practice, *yhyakh*, but also of Sakha peoplehood itself”. See also Balzer’s (2021: 59) discussion of local concerns that the large-scale, extravagant cultural revival events of recent years are a distraction that “diverts attention from important self-determination policies”. Balzer’s critique is placed within the context of a wide-ranging discussion of activism, sovereignty, and Indigenous rights in Siberia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and most especially since the recentralisation policies of Vladimir Putin.
- 14 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.
- 15 During a visit to Magaras, Gornyi *uluus*, for example, we learned of an art initiative inspired by the presence of *Model of a Summer Festival* in Yakutsk, and spear-headed by local officials, but which collapsed due to lack of financial support (Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 29 June 2016).
- 16 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 23 June 2015.
- 17 Bloch and Kendall (2004) report on the perspectives of museum staff they encountered during their visit to the Russian Far East in 1998 with regard to issues of “sovereignty” over artefacts within the wider context of the professional practices of museum workers in this region and their institutional relationships with the state. In relation to one of the museums they visited, they note staff pride in its displays of local history, but that the removal of excavated archaeological items in the 1940s to Moscow leaving only catalogue images “clearly rankles” (p. 77).
- 18 See also Thubron (2008: 75–78) for an account of local responses to the Altai Princess controversy. Balzer’s (2021) discussion linking local pride in archaeological discoveries in the Republics of Sakha (Yakutia), Buriatia, and Tyva (Tuva) with nostalgia and historical symbolism provides additional insight into the way in which materials from the past have become politicised in Siberia (see especially Chapter 1.4).
- 19 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 10 April 2019.
- 20 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 10 April 2019. Indeed, Balzer (2011: 34) describes how in response to a query regarding the future of items in the Jesup Collection from Mikhail Efimovich Nikolaev, the first President of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), made at the afore-mentioned 2009 UNESCO conference on *Circumpolar Civilization in Museums of the World*, their legal acquisition was noted. Balzer also notes, however, that the contexts for dispossession in this case were complex, with many individuals suffering from the effects of nineteenth century taxation policies linked to Tsarist expansion, as well as from the limitations on hunting, and increased dependence on trade goods. As with others who have examined the entangled histories of colonial collecting (e.g., Thomas 1991; Brown 2014; Franz 2019), her work highlights that during periods of unequal power relations while items may well have been acquired legally, the wider contexts may have played a significant role.
- 21 One such example relates to the English nurse Kate Marsden (1859–1931), who travelled to Yakutia in 1890 to seek a cure for leprosy, and who subsequently founded a hospital in the village of Viliuisk, Viliuisk *uluus* (Marsden 1892; Baigent 2014). A small collection of items Marsden used on her journey is in the British Museum and was examined by Sakha scholars as part of the *Narrative Objects* project during a research the 2016 research visit referred to in endnote 2 above. In 2019, the Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture hosted an exhibition on Marsden which focused on her life, her travels, and her legacy in Viliuisk, which included images of the items in the British Museum.
- 22 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 10 April 2019.

- 23 Chantal Knowles, in her discussion of engagement work between the National Museums of Scotland and the Tłı̨ch̨ Nation, for example, has noted the Tłı̨ch̨ perception that Tłı̨ch̨ items in Scotland functioned to give Tłı̨ch̨ a presence and identity on the world stage. Moreover, “The Tłı̨ch̨ were satisfied even though the placement of their cultural property within a space in the National Museum of Scotland also situated them very firmly in a Scottish national context, inscribing the objects as agents of Scotland’s past and its engagement with the rest of the world” (2011: 232).
- 24 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 18 July 2016.

## References

- American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), n.d.1. Delegation from Sakha Republic visits AMNH. Available at <https://www.amnh.org/research/anthropology/news-events/sakha-delegation-visits-amnh>. Accessed 22 September 2023.
- AMNH, n.d.2. Shelf life: the guts and glory of object conservation. Available at <https://www.amnh.org/explore/videos/shelf-life/siberian-anthropology-collection-conservation>. Accessed 22 September 2023.
- Arzyutov, D. V. 2019. Environmental encounters: woolly mammoth, indigenous communities and metropolitan scientists in the Soviet Arctic. *Polar Record* 55(3): 142–153.
- Baigent, E. 2014. Travelling bodies, texts and reputations: the gendered life and afterlife of Kate Marsden and her mission to Siberian lepers in the 1890s. *Studies in Travel Writing* 18(1): 34–56.
- Balzer, M. M. 2011. *Shamans, Spirituality, and Cultural Revitalization: Explorations in Siberia and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Balzer, M. M. 2021. *Galvanising Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bloch, A. 2000. Authenticating tradition: material culture, youth, and belonging in Central Siberia’. *Museum Anthropology* 23(3): 42–57.
- Bloch, A. and L. Kendall 2004. *The Museum at the End of the World: Encounters in the Russian Far East*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brown, A. K. 2014. *First Nations, Museums, Narrations: Stories of the 1929 Franklin Motor Expedition to the Canadian Prairies*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History’s remainders: on time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Clifford, J. 2013. *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cruikshanks, L. 2015. Talking objects at the British Museum: breaking down barriers between collections and communities. *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 28: 122–132.
- Cruikshanks, L. and M. van der Vaart 2019. Understanding audience participation through positionality: agency, authority and urgency. *Stedelijk Studies* 8: 1–15.
- Cruikshank, J. and T. Argounova 2000. Reinscribing meaning: memory and indigenous identity in Sakha Republic (Yakutia). *Arctic Anthropology* 37(1): 96–119.
- Davidov, V. 2017. *Long Night at the Vepsian Museum: The Forest Folk of Northern Russia and the Struggle for Cultural Survival*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Davy, J. W. and C. Dixon 2019. What makes a miniature?: an introduction. In *Worlds in Miniature: Contemplating Miniaturisation in Global Material Culture*, eds. J. W. Davy and C. Dixon. London: UCL Press, pp. 1–17.
- Franz, M. K. 2019. A Gathering of Names: On the Categories and Collections of Siberian Shamanic Materials in Late Imperial Russian Museum, 1880-1910. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Toronto.
- Hallam, E. and J. Hockey 2001. *Death, Memory and Material Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Gabyshева, A. 2005. Nesmetnye sokrovishcha na blago obshchestva [Countless treasures for the benefit of society]. *Poliarnaya Zvezda* 5: 5–12.

- Gabysheva, A. et al 2018. *Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in World Museums (17<sup>th</sup>–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*. Vol. 1. *Siberian Collections in the Museums of Germany*. Yakutsk: Salama.
- Golding, V. and W. Modest eds. 2013. *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Grant, B. 1995. *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Holloway, M. 1997. The paradoxical legacy of Franz Boas. *Natural History: The Magazine of the American Museum of Natural History* 106(10): 86–87.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2011a. *The Siberian Collections in the American Museum of Natural History: Circumpolar Civilization in the World Museums: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. Yakutsk: The National Committee of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) for UNESCO.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2011b. Traditsionnoe iskusstvo narodov Arktiki: problemy sokhraneniia [The traditional art of the Arctic peoples: the problems of preservation]. *Dialog: Muzei i Obshchestvo. Noiabr' 2009*. [A Dialogue: Museum and Society. November 2009]. Yakutsk: National Arts Museum.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2017. *Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in World Museums (17<sup>th</sup>–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*. Vol. 2. *Siberian Collections in the Museums of the USA*. Yakutsk: Bichik.
- Ivanov-Unarov, V. and Z. Ivanova-Unarova 2003. The revitalization of the traditional culture of Northeast Siberian peoples: the role of the Jesup Expedition. In *Constructing Cultures Then and Now. Celebrating Franz Boas and the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Contributions to Circumpolar Anthropology*, Vol. 4, eds. L. Kendall and I. Krupnik. Washington DC: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, pp. 336–347.
- Jordan, M. 2015. Documenting and revitalizing Kiowa knowledge: material culture studies and community engagement. *Museum Anthropology Review* 9(1-2): 80–95.
- Kendall, L. and I. Krupnik eds. 2003. *Constructing Cultures Then and Now. Celebrating Franz Boas and the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Contributions to Circumpolar Anthropology*, Vol. 4. Washington DC: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.
- Kendall, L. 2017. The American Museum of Natural History and its collections. In *Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in World Museums (17<sup>th</sup>–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*. Vol. 2. *Siberian Collections in the Museums of the USA*, ed. Z. Ivanova-Unarova. Yakutsk: Bichik, pp. 14–31.
- King, A. 2011. *Living with Koryak Traditions: Playing with Culture in Siberia*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Knowles C. 2011. Objects as ambassadors: representing nation through museum exhibitions. In *Unpacking the Collection*, eds. S. Byrne, A. Clarke, R. Harrison, and R. Torrence. Springer: New York, NY, pp. 231–247.
- Kuklina, V. and N. Shishigina, 2020. Yakutsk: culture for sustainability. In *Urban Sustainability in the Arctic: Measuring Progress in Circumpolar Cities*, ed. R. W. Ortung. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 101–128.
- Krmpotich, C. and L. Peers 2014. *This Is Our Life: Haida Material Heritage and Changing Museum Practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kupina, J. A. 2004. Heritage and/or property: ethnographic collections in Russian museums. In *Properties of Culture – Culture as Property. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*, ed. E. Kasten. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, pp. 203–215.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966 [1962]. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marsden, K. 1892. *On Sledge and Horseback to the Outcast Siberian Lepers*. London: Record Press.
- McGaw, J. 2014. Mapping ‘place’ in Southeast Australia: crafting a possum skin cloak. *Craft Research* 5(1): 11–33.
- Maj, E. 2012. Internationalisation with the use of Arctic indigeneity: the case of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Russia. *Polar Record* 48(3): 210–214.

- Morphy, H. and R. McKenzie eds. 2022. *Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value*. London: Routledge.
- Peers, L. and A. K. Brown 2016. *Visiting with the Ancestors: Blackfoot Shirts in Museum Spaces*. Edmonton: University of Athabasca Press.
- Plets, G., N. Konstantinov, V. Soenov, and E. Robinson 2013. Repatriation, doxa, and contested heritages, *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 52(2): 73–98.
- Schorch, P. and C. McCarthy eds. 2018. *Curatopia: Museums and the Future of Curatorship*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Shishigin, E. (ed). 2009. *Circumpolar Civilization in the World Museums: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. Yakutsk: The National Committee of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) for UNESCO and Yakutsk State United Museum of Northern Peoples History and Culture named after Ye. Yaroslavsky.
- Silverman, R. A. ed. 2015. *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges*. London: Routledge.
- Sulyandziga, V. 2020. Reconstruction of the mo5ol-uraha of the Sakha people of Siberia. Available at <https://batani.org/archives/1437>. Accessed 22 September 2023.
- Tadina, N. A. 2020. A native anthropologist’s view on covering the “Altai Princess” problem. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 59(2): 112–127.
- Thubron, C. 2008. *In Siberia*. London: Vintage Books.
- Thomas, N. 1991. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Turkle, S. 2007. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- von Oswald, M. and J. Tinius (eds) 2020. *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Zabalueva, O. 2017. Cultural policies in Russian museums’, *Museum International* 69(3-4): 38–49.

## 2.4 Narrating the model in *Sakha Sire*

In [Part 2.3](#) we began to unpack what a narrative object might be with reference to the culture work of Sakha museum specialists and art historians aimed at re-connecting people with historic collections as part of wider cultural revitalisation processes. This work is informed by and relates to ethnonationalist cultural politics in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and feeds into a worldwide movement in which engagement with museum collections is viewed as central to recovering technical, artistic, and cultural knowledge which was suppressed, deliberately abandoned, or went underground during challenging and transformative periods of colonial disruption, civil strife or during totalitarian regimes. Through culture work in the present, heritage items are viewed as having the capacity to reorientate relationships with the past, present and the future through their triggering of memory, and we suggested that Rebecca [Bryant's \(2014\)](#) conception of 'temporal dynamism' is helpful for thinking through how historic collections and culture work in the present intersect.

As we witnessed across the *Narrative Objects* project, the return of the model of *yhyakh* and its display in the National Arts Museum in Yakutsk, if only for a short period, offered many possibilities for people in *Sakha Sire* to engage with this historically and culturally significant item and to use it to regenerate narratives of their own. Though certainly not exclusively, these narratives often centred around an individual's experiences of *yhyakh*, and the recognition of absences—both physical and metaphorical—characterised many of our discussions with local people. Sometimes these absences concerned a lack of memories of *yhyakh* given that, as we describe in [Part 1.3](#), some of those with whom we spoke had grown up in Yakutsk before the *Tuimaada Yhyakh* was held for the first time at the city's hip-podrome in 1991.<sup>1</sup>

At other times the absences were connected to the possibility of identifying specific cultural information about *yhyakh* which, some people suggested, was encoded in the layout of the model, given that it was created by a person who had presumably participated in these celebrations at a time before their religious and shamanic associations were disrupted by the antireligious policies of the Soviet era.<sup>2</sup> As we discuss in [Part 3.4](#), absences or gaps in skilled artistic knowledge remain a key concern for carvers, as well as for art historians and culture workers, many of whom expressed their hope that access to the model would help them

to better understand the techniques of their ancestors with a view to informing their own practice. Finally, the absences were physical and relate to the intriguing possibility that the model was incomplete when it was sent to Paris for the 1867 Exhibition. From our very first discussions in 2013, when we visited Yakutsk as part of project development, many Sakha people expressed surprise at what was absent from the model: no horses, no fire, for instance, as well as a certain ambivalence about how the artist had depicted the participants. This incompleteness, as we also discuss in [Part 3.4](#), resulted in creative responses to the model which were unplanned but played a significant role in highlighting what objects can do when they are on their home ground, and supports the claims of [Bille et al \(2010: 10\)](#) that “even if absence is only perceived absence – [it] may have just as much effect as material presence”. As we noted in the introduction to this book, absence and temporal dynamism coalesce very usefully in the concept of ‘presence’ articulated by Eelco [Runia \(2006\)](#) and which has been effectively mobilised by scholars working with case studies covering a broad range of materials, from hide shirts ([Peers 2013: 144](#)), to photographs ([Geismar and Morton 2015](#)), to everyday objects from school classrooms ([Rasmussen 2012](#)). For [Runia \(2006: 5\)](#), presence means “‘being in touch’ – either literally or figuratively – with people, things, events, and feelings that made you into the person you are” and this understanding of ‘presence’ [as] (“the unrepresented way the past is present in the present”) is at least as important as ‘meaning’ ([Runia 2006: 1](#)). By applying this concept to historical objects which are both of the past and of the present, such as the model, we see that time relations are contained within the object but are also suggestive of absence; absences which become meaningfully present when the object is narrated.<sup>3</sup>

To explore these ideas further and to build upon our analysis of what makes a narrative object, [Part 2.4](#) focuses on responses to the *yhyakh* model by drawing upon fieldwork encounters both in and beyond the NAM with educators who used it as the basis of teaching programmes, with visitors who came to see the model for themselves, and with culture workers who have been engaged with the revival of *yhyakh*. Collectively, these encounters generated a range of narratives about *yhyakh*, about Sakha engagement with others, and about the political role of historic objects in contemporary cultural movements. To tease out these narratives as a way into thinking about the narrative capacity of heritage objects, we draw on three examples of engagements between local people and the model. We have chosen them out of the many possibilities not to imply there was any sort of unified response to the model—which there certainly was not—but to highlight the variety of ways in which people who found it engaging used it to reflect upon what mattered to them. It is well-established that engagements with heritage objects often elicit responses that are framed within narratives that point to present-day concerns and hopes for the future rather than being grounded in the past. The classic account of this phenomenon is James [Clifford’s \(1997: 188–191\)](#) evocative retelling of an encounter he witnessed between Tlingit Elders and museum staff in the basement of the Portland Art Museum in the United States. Rather than describe the objects which were the focus of that consultation in functional terms, “what transpired was a series of complicated, moving performances, by turns serious and lighthearted”

in which the assembled Elders used them as aides-mémoires. The emphasis was less on the objects themselves, but on the stories and songs they evoked. “They were referred to as ‘records’, ‘history’, and ‘law’, inseparable from myths and stories expressing ongoing moral lessons with current political force” (Clifford 1997: 191). The case Clifford describes involved objects with very specific sets of meanings and associated protocols for the Tlingit. While the *yhyakh* model is by no means comparable in that it was an object made for sale and intended for an external audience rather than one linked to specific genealogies and protocols, it too generated multiple narratives that were performative in some instances and were inextricable from broader discussions about the mobilisation of Sakha culture and identity in the present in a locale where, during the Soviet period, that mobilisation had to be strategically managed, and where discussions about heritage and its links to contemporary identity politics continue to be shaped by a multitude of external forces. The first of these engagements concerns how teachers and museum educators used the model within their classes; the second focuses on a chance meeting between Tanya and a dentist which led to efforts to explore parts of the model invisible to the naked eye; the third involves the incorporation of the model into the *yhyakh* performance at Berdigestiakh, Gornyi *uluus*, the year following the exhibition. We use these examples to highlight the variety of questions raised by the model for people in *Sakha Sire* and to illustrate how engagements with historic objects on their own ground can lead to extraordinarily creative responses and meditations on lived experience.

### Teaching with the model

“It was a very big gift for us all to be able to see this object without going to Britain. That it arrived *here* and was shown was a very significant gift for us”. With these words, Nadezhda, a history teacher based in a Yakutsk school, concluded a speech about how access to the *yhyakh* model led her to create what she considered to be her most successful lesson—a class in which her primary school-aged students used close looking, comparison, and group work to critique the model and discuss what it could teach them about Sakha culture across time. Nadezhda made this point in late June 2016 at a gathering with a small group of teachers hosted by the NAM, where we talked about how they had used the model with their students and why access to historic collections matters. We met the day following our return to Yakutsk from the small town of Verkhoiansk, a two-hour flight north of the city, where we had attended the republican *Oloŋkho Yhyakh*. As usual, the performances from that year’s celebrations had been televised, and so even those who had not had the resources or time to attend themselves were able to watch them unfold. Our interest in how these teachers had worked with the model was paralleled by their curiosity as to why we would commit ourselves to doing this kind of work and to travelling to a place so far from our own homes. As late afternoon slipped into evening, we sipped tea and nibbled on biscuits in the comfort of NAM Director Asia Gabysheva’s office—a welcoming space with a large central table in an airy room with walls adorned with a series of commemorative photographs and

certificates which cemented the director's place as a leading player in the national and international museum scene and which, as well as being the centre of operations for the museum staff, had from our very first visits to the NAM in 2013, been the site of many of our interactions with Sakha education and culture workers and artists. In this setting, the teachers shared their experiences of engaging their pupils with a museum object to which they clearly felt deeply attached.

What came out of these discussions was a series of reflections of how material culture could be used to break down barriers, not only in terms of student awareness of Sakha cultural practices, but also more broadly in that, we were told, the project enabled students to see that museums were places that were dynamic rather than stagnant, and that their boundaries could be extended through international loans of cultural items to places where they matter. As she enthusiastically described her own process of teaching with the model, Nadezhda explained that her students were mostly raised in the city and were not necessarily familiar with Sakha rituals, and so the physical presence of the model gave her an opportunity to teach on this topic in a way that allowed for embodied engagement, which she found to be much more effective than looking at images on a screen or in a book. Having the students walk around it, peer into it, and get a sense of its proportions fostered a direct connection with the model for both teacher and pupils. Small-scale objects necessitate close looking in a manner less pronounced for other material forms, given the way in which they draw the viewer towards them. They can also, as Davy (2018) notes in his work on miniaturisation, operate as part of a deliberate communication strategy, in that despite being essentially functionless, they have the capacity to transmit ideological information from maker to viewer, a point which, he argues, museums have failed to adequately recognise due to embedded categorisation practices which have historically devalued miniature objects and deemed them inauthentic.

Nadezhda's experience of teaching with the model supports Davy's claim. With her encouragement, the students discovered details which, she told us, amazed them and generated questions about how and why things are done the way they are, allowing them to talk about how traditions change rather than stay the same. Examples she provided of the children's observations included the triangular shape of the collars of the men's coats, which they compared with the rounded shape of contemporary collars with which they are more familiar, and that the people wore *eterbes* (soft boots with straps). The students also noticed how the artist depicted the women without braids but with elaborate silver *ilin-kelin kebiher* (necklaces); historically these would often be worn both across their front and back which is rarely seen today (Figure 2.8).<sup>4</sup> Finally, like many Sakha observers, the children were fascinated by the physical features of the figures, such as the shape of their eyes and oval faces and the colour of their hair, which has faded over time from the original black to a reddish brown, the combined effect of which makes them appear distinctly not Sakha, but rather as Europeans in Sakha clothing.<sup>5</sup> After describing the positive response of the children and their parents to the class, Nadezhda made the comment paraphrased above about the display of the model in Yakutsk being "a gift" and, with feeling, remarked (and we paraphrase again): "We need to teach our children to think, ponder, speak out and analyse".



Figure 2.8 Detail of the women's *ilin-kelin kebiher*. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

The need to encourage students to think and “speak out” was reinforced in April 2019 when we held a follow-up gathering with the same small group of teachers to reflect further on their experiences of teaching with the model and to ask if they were still using the educational resources produced as part of the *Narrative Objects* project with their pupils. Almost three years after we had met previously, we reconvened in NAM Director Gabysheva’s office, and resumed our conversation over the customary tea and sweet biscuits. On this occasion, Liubov’, a teacher at one of the city high schools, reflected on teaching with the model to a generation of students which she described as visual learners. Her pupils were familiar with *yhyakh*, as the school runs a course on the Culture of Peoples of Sakha (Yakutia) focussing on traditions, and especially those related to *yhyakh*, and so she and her colleagues were able to incorporate the display of the model into their lessons very effectively, knowing that their students already had at least some background knowledge. As the children she works with are very young, while the model was on display in the NAM, she focussed on its content and encouraged her pupils to look carefully and use their numerical skills, for example, to count how many people were seated. She also asked them to think about what and who was missing from the wooden board and offered suggestions for the children to consider later on when they returned to the classroom, such as: Where were the children? Should there be a bride? Where were the horses? Visual learning, she explained, can be connected to the ability to make speech. “They need to be able to narrate”, she told us firmly.<sup>6</sup> Most strikingly, while the language of the classroom is normally Russian, the lessons connected to the model and *yhyakh* were delivered in Sakha.

The examples we have highlighted emphasise what these educators recognised as a need for their students to have the ability to appreciate and articulate Sakha cultural practices (regardless of whether the students themselves are Sakha). Being able to “speak out” and “to narrate” it seemed, was strengthened by physical access to a relevant object, a point made explicit when we were introduced to a student in her early teens who had recently returned from St. Petersburg having won third place in a national children’s science competition. This student had seen the model in the summer of 2015, and had become so intrigued by it, by the identity of the artist (which at that time was still a point of public discussion), and by how it came to be in London, that she was encouraged by her teacher to enter the competition. With great poise, she set up her PowerPoint presentation and delivered it to us in English, explaining what she had learned from the model, and how she had carried out her research. Almost three years after her first encounter with the model, it was continuing to play a significant role in her understanding of Sakha cultural expressions and had given her an opportunity to travel to St. Petersburg and share her knowledge on a national stage.

Why did it matter so much to these educators that their students were able to speak out and to narrate, and specifically, to speak about Sakha cultural forms? Part of the answer lies in broader conversations we had across the project with educators working in a range of institutions in the city and villages and with students at varying levels, many of whom told us of the continued need to support cultural confidence in young people and linked this to the place of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) on the international stage. One museum educator, for example, told us that when she gave tours of *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey* she would emphasise that Europeans were able to learn about Sakha people from their art, and that this mattered given that Siberia is perceived as both remote and unknown by outsiders—something that she observed Sakha children themselves learn when they travel even now. In her view, it was important that children know that Sakha arts and people were represented in such a major exhibition well over a century ago, and that there were Sakha who had the wealth and connections to support these international activities. By drawing on her interest in history to illustrate her tours, she noted that her audience seemed to like hearing about the opening up of countries and of Russian and Sakha participation in such significant cultural events as the Moscow and Paris exhibitions.<sup>7</sup> Cultural confidence and historical presence on the world stage, then, were closely linked in the experience of the educators who devoted so much energy to thinking through how to effectively integrate the model into their classes and museum tours, and it is this point that may well have influenced the tendency of Sakha museum specialists (in particular), but also teachers, to emphasise the diplomatic capacity of the model, and the value of retaining it in Europe that we noted in [Part 2.3](#). A comment made by a staff member during one of our evaluation sessions at the NAM, and paraphrased, here is a good example: “Museums are the territory of diplomacy. This is an untouchable area. Let it stay that way forever”.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on the educational benefits to museum visitors of all ages, this same staff member commented on the potential for the project to influence other prominent museums to loan collections to the NAM. No

single object, she told us, had generated as much discussion in *Sakha Sire* as the *hyakh* model, and so perhaps the interest that it had generated throughout the Republic, and the care with which it had been treated within the NAM, could be harnessed to support future professional links. The overarching theme that came out of our engagements with teachers and museum educators, then, was the capacity of the model to act as a bridge, one that could build relations in the present beyond *Sakha Sire*, but one that could also potentially act as a narrative bridge to the past and the future in a way that stimulated reflection on past practices and their contemporary manifestations.

### Looking within

By mid-July 2015, the pace of life in Yakutsk was settling down after the busyness of the past few weeks, when so many people had been on the move attending *hyakh* celebrations at *Üs Khatyy* on the outskirts of the city, or further away at Churapcha *uluus*, which had hosted that year's republican *hyakh*. Our team had split up by this point, with Alison and Eleanor having returned to Aberdeen, while Tanya remained at home in Yakutsk for the summer, continuing with fieldwork. It was during this period that a chance meeting with a friend who is a practicing dentist presented an unexpected opportunity. A feature of the model which had intrigued the carvers we had been meeting with was the *uraha*—the domed lodge placed at one corner of the base. This is a miniature version of the large birchbark structures or, indeed, individual tents made of synthetic, waterproof material with a simulated birchbark design, that we had recently seen located along the far edge of the *tühülge* at both Churapcha and at *Üs Khatyy* and in which people gather to eat, listen to the *oloŋkho* recitals, make formal speeches, and enjoy each other's company. Due to lack of time and sufficient material with which to experiment, the carvers had been unable to work out how the artist had constructed this scaled-down *uraha* from so many thin, curved slices of tusk, getting the angle just so; less technically-inclined observers had a more direct question: they wanted to know what, or who, was inside.<sup>9</sup> The doorway to the ivory *uraha* is attached by a twisted horsehair string, but as there is no way to keep it securely open to one side without modifying the model in some way, the NAM and British Museum staff had agreed that it should be displayed with the door closed. Though we peeked inside when the model first arrived at the NAM before it was installed in its glass case, the angle made it impossible to see in any detail what, exactly, was going on behind the door.

Like many Yakutsk residents, Tanya's friend had been following the publicity about the exhibition and was keen to take his family and colleagues to the NAM so that Tanya could give them a tour. By this time, the question of whether the model was complete or missing its second half dominated many of the conversations of which we were part and was also influencing wider public discussion. This was amplified by a project then being undertaken by two young carving students at the P. P. Romanov College of Art in Yakutsk who, having been intrigued by that question themselves, were making a 'second half' for their final diploma project. As discussed in [Part 3.4](#), their response to the model was receiving considerable media

attention at this time, and so speculation of what was and was not visible in the model, what it contained and what was perhaps absent, was common. During his visit to the NAM at the end of the month, Tanya's friend and his colleagues joined in the speculation, yet while most visitors had been content to accept with a shrug our explanation that we couldn't see inside the *uraha* without dismantling the model, the dentist proposed a novel suggestion. Would it be possible, he wondered, to use a dental camera on a flexible extension handle to get a better view? If the British Museum were agreeable, perhaps when their representative de-installed the model at the end of the summer, he could bring along his equipment and give it a try.

By late September, Tanya was back in Yakutsk to assist with the de-installation, along with a colleague from the British Museum Loans team. The brief window between taking the model out of the display case and packing it up for its return to London offered the opportunity both to see what was inside the *uraha*, and for the carvers to take precise measurements of the individual components. A small group of museum staff and carvers gathered in the gallery after lunch on de-installation day, and patiently watched as the dentist gently inserted his camera inside the doorway of the *uraha*. As the images came into focus on the screen of Tanya's attached laptop, it was finally possible to see inside – something no one had been able to do well since the artist assembled the model in 1866. What came into view was a male figure dressed like the other participants and absorbed with the responsibility of preparing *kymys* in a *simiir ihit* (a large container made of leather) (Figure 2.9). This process involves the regular stirring of large quantities of mare's milk with a long wooden stick to aid fermentation. During the ritual, *kymys* is sprinkled as an offering to the deities and is consumed from *choroons* which are passed between guests of honour, as well as being enjoyed throughout the celebrations by the rest of those present. Given the temperature in late June, the preparation of *kymys* takes place in the shade, as the director of the ethnographic museum in Churapcha had explained to us while showing us a display of *choroons* and *simiir ihits* and other historic items during a visit we made following the 2015 *yhyakh* to one of nine *balaghans* established that year to showcase the work of local museums in commemorating the *uluus*' history and culture.<sup>10</sup> Containers like these were the full-scale prototypes for the miniaturised versions appearing on the laptop screen to the delight of those present.

The dental camera revealed something which was formerly hidden. Making *kymys* is a skilled but not a secretive act, but it is one which by necessity takes place out of open view. The revelation of what was happening inside the *uraha* resonated with how some people with whom we spoke over the course of the project reflected on their own experiences of attending *yhyakh* celebrations, or their understanding of how it was commemorated during the Soviet era. It also serves, in its own understated way, as a metaphor for the revival of *yhyakh* itself: in small-scale format, the effort to look within the *uraha* showed that what was hidden, missing, or absent could indeed become known. As explained in Part 1.3, people have experienced *yhyakh* and the sentiments it encompasses in divergent ways across the Republic over the last century, with much depending on their individual circumstances and how their families responded to the social upheaval of the mid-Soviet period, in



Figure 2.9 Interior of the *uraha*. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

particular, and which continues to influence Sakha society. Silences remain heavy in a social and political context in which memory and commemoration are allied and extraordinarily complex processes (Connerton 2010; Balzer 2021). In urban areas, such as the Yakutsk of Tanya's own childhood, the public celebration of *yhyakh* did not happen for decades or took place using a modified, secular format designed to honour Soviet officials rather than Sakha deities. In more rural areas, many people participated in small-scale social gatherings and picnics around the time of the summer solstice, and while these may not have involved overt ritual elements led by an *algyschyt*, the consumption of holiday food and *kymys* and taking part in games and fun were very much part of people's recollections shared in interviews and recorded in the Visitor Book in the NAM gallery (see also Nikanorova 2020). Regardless of whether a person was raised in a rural or an urban environment, and the extent to which they considered themselves to be well-versed in Sakha ways of understanding the world—including what that means in terms of spiritual understanding and practice—in our conversations which stemmed from the model, people regularly compared their early memories of *yhyakh* or the stories they had heard about it with their more recent experiences. The theatrical,

colourful, and immensely popular event it has become is a transformation of something that mattered but could not be fully on view to something that, once revealed, has become visibly celebrated by thousands of people each year. The ambivalence that some people expressed concerning what they see as the commercialisation of *yhyakh* and what that says about its authenticity, as well as the attendant ambiguity of the material manifestation of *yhyakh* within the model, further complicates how it might function as a narrative object.

### **Performing narratives**

On 29 June 2016, our team returned to Yakutsk from Verkhoianskii *uluus*, a region known for the remains of mammoths emerging from the melting permafrost, and its extremes of temperature. While attending that year's republican *yhyakh*, and along with hundreds of other visitors from across the Republic, the Sakha diaspora, and honoured guests from neighbouring Republics and other parts of Asia, we were based in Verkhoiansk, located along the Yana River and one of two Sakha towns that compete for the title of northern Pole of Cold.<sup>11</sup> During our absence, our NAM colleagues had arranged for us to visit Berdigestiakh, in Gornyi *uluus*, home to Gavriil Pavlov, the Sakha merchant who, 150 years earlier, had commissioned the *yhyakh* model for the Paris Exhibition (Nogovitsyna 2017). Later that afternoon, Alexei, the NAM driver, expertly navigated the dusty, bumpy and, what seemed to us, quite treacherous road, to take us to our destination almost four hours away: a new building which showcased the culture and arts of Gornyi *uluus*. Television cameras from the regional media organisations recorded our arrival as we entered the auditorium where a receptive audience was waiting. Efrosinia Nogovitsyna, the NAM senior researcher who was studying Pavlov's role in the model's history, was part of our group and presented her research on the *uluus*' famous son first, after which we described the logistics of bringing the model back to Siberia and answered questions from the audience, many of whom shared their responses to seeing the model in the NAM gallery in formal speeches. "It is a beautiful treasure" one woman remarked, as she explained her compulsion to see the model because it was brought from the United Kingdom. It was much smaller than she had anticipated, and she had been struck by the similarity of the expressions on the faces of the figures, having expected them to be different from one another and more like those of the Chinese Terracotta Army, which are not identical.<sup>12</sup> A musical instrument maker commented on the condition of the materials and that they are in excellent shape after all these years. One person asked whether the British Museum might consider selling the model to the Sakha Government. At one point, the director of the Berdigestiakh People's Theatre, Elizaveta Martynova, got up to speak: for her, the model was "multivocal" with information about *yhyakh* and Sakha culture condensed within it, and it was the inspiration for the *yhyakh* performance held just days before.<sup>13</sup>

Each year, a theme is chosen for *yhyakh* and is interpreted at a local level by performance directors and choreographers who develop a script for the opening event, an act which draws on the Soviet practice of controlled celebrations which, as noted in Part 1.3, relied on the production of centralised scripts which were then

modified at the regional level. The national themes are not only devices around which to plan the performance; they are also intended to stimulate reflection on Sakha identity across the several days of the celebrations. The theme for 2016 was *Olonkho*. In Gornyi, proud of their connections to the model which had been the focus of so much attention the previous year, Martynova drew on Pavlov's story and his link with the model to make this the focus of the performance. This was their *uluus'* story to tell about what it means to be Sakha, and it reflected a local interest in the journeys the model had made from *Sakha Sire* to Europe and back again, and the significant role of local personalities in making these journeys possible. After the formal presentations ended, the Head of the Administration, Nikita Andreev, took us on a tour of the village's *yhyakh* site, located alongside a birch grove planted some forty years previously at a time when, he said, there were no *yhyakhs* in the village, only social gatherings organised by the Head of the Collective Farm. The compact layout, with *kürüö* (fence), *serge*, and *uraha*, resonated with the features of the model, and Andreev explained it was based on local people's own interpretation of the *yhyakh* model, which many people had gone to see while it had been on display. While Nikolai Belousov, the model's carver, had scaled down these features from those with which he would have been familiar to make them manageable for carving from tusk, here the process had been reversed, with the model the prototype for the full-sized wooden structures. The only exception was the central *Aal Luuk Mas*, the Tree of Life and Knowledge, which links the three worlds of the universe of Sakha religious belief—Lower, Middle, and Upper—with its roots, trunk, and crown, which was part of the architectural structure of all the *yhyakh* celebrations we attended, yet is not a feature of the model, something which was routinely pointed out to us, with its absence being noted almost as frequently as the lack of horses.

Well over a century since the model was carved, its connection to Gornyi *uluus* through the actions of Pavlov was commemorated in the 2016 *yhyakh*. Basing the script of the performance on his story was not, however, just an opportunity to reflect upon a well-regarded citizen; as we were told during our visit, he is fondly remembered in Berdigestiakh as someone who generously contributed to the construction of the Yakutsk-Aiaan road as well as to churches in Yakutsk (see also [Nogovitsyna 2017: 5](#)). Centring the performance around Pavlov's role in commissioning a model which was subsequently judged by Sakha cultural specialists to be a unique treasure was also an opportunity for Gornyi *uluus* to make apparent in a very public way, their pride in their *uluus'* connection to the model's return and, by extension, their role in strengthening Sakha culture.

Later that summer, Tanya was able to discuss this creative response to the model with Elizaveta Martynova. Writing the *yhyakh* opening performance script is one of Martynova's main responsibilities, and following all the attention in 2015 on the model and its link with Pavlov, she explained that she was eager to draw on this connection in some way in her interpretation of the 2016 theme of *Olonkho*. Her inspiration came in the form of a dream in which Pavlov sang *toiuk* (traditional songs), and she realised that song would be the device through which she could tell her story. Martynova further explained that it was very likely that Belousov

had sung *toiuk* as he worked, and in her eventual script, Pavlov was embodied by the figure of the carver—a role taken by the village doctor, an amateur actor, on the day of the performance. The performance began with a narrator relating how, 150 years earlier, together with the governor of *Iakutskii Krai*, Apollon Lokhvitskii, Pavlov presented some items to the 1867 Moscow Exhibition of the Peoples of Russia (see [Knight 2001](#)). Based on this, and according to the Order of Alexander II, Pavlov then had the honour of taking part in the Paris International Exhibition to which he presented the model of *yhyakh* as well as a mammoth ivory comb, Sakha and Aleut reindeer skin clothing, a rifle, and other hunting and fishing equipment. There is more to the story, however, and the narrator continues with a celebration of Pavlov’s achievements and his generosity to his *uluus*, manifested in his financial contributions to support the building of roads and churches, as well as his donations to those who were less affluent than himself. Listing these accomplishments, the announcer proclaims, “We are very proud to have such a person from our region who comes from Odunu district. His bright name is part of a history of which we are very proud” ([Martynova 2016](#), trans. Argounova-Low). As with the previous section of the performance, this part of the story draws on documented fact, evidenced within archival records, the published catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Exhibition (Anon 1867) and newspaper articles summarising the historical research of our NAM colleague, Efrosinia Nogovitsyna. Martynova created a parallel performance so that as the narrator explains the historical context, a carver (Pavlov), seated in front of the raised stage, slowly brings the model to life ([Figure 2.10](#)).



*Figure 2.10* The opening performance of the Gornyi *yhyakh*, June 2016. Photograph by Elizaveta Martynova.

As he carves each detail, he quietly sings *toiuk* about the figures on the wooden board, the *Döhögöi Toion* (God of the Horses), and about each of the key elements and structural features in the model in turn: *choroon*, *kürüö*, *simir ihit*, *serge*, and *chechir*, using his words to describe his actions, thus “Here I will make a man; Here I will make an *algyschyt*” (Martynova 2016, trans. Argounova-Low). The wooden model used as a prop in the performance was made by the staff who teach crafts at the Centre of Pre-School Education, who had copied it from illustrations of the model in the British Museum that had circulated during the project. As such, this wooden version of the model of *yhyakh* had its own specific narrative and performative purpose.

A fictionalised telling of how the model came to be, which focuses—with some artistic licence—on Gavriil Pavlov, the merchant who arranged for the model to come into being for the Paris Exhibition, was thus unveiled through a combination of *toiuk*, performance, and the wooden structures we had been shown by Nikita Andreev in Berdigestiakh. As things transpired, on the day of the performance, poor weather and the delayed arrival of the guest of honour meant that it ended abruptly with the appearance of Augustus Franks arriving at the Paris Exhibition to buy the model. Yet with this creative response to the model, intended to be performed just once, Martynova hoped her work reinforced the very positive value of generosity which local people associate with Pavlov, while explicitly linking the narrative to the *oloykho* theme.<sup>14</sup> Basing her script on the model—its features and associations—allowed for an interpretation of the *yhyakh* theme that foregrounded local pride in the *uluus*’ connection with what had become, over the course of the *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey* exhibition and the debates and discussions inspired by it, a nationally and internationally recognisable Sakha treasure.

Each of the examples raised in Part 2.4 has pointed to ways in which people responded to the model of *yhyakh*, with a particular focus on how it both stimulated and was incorporated into narratives of discovery that drew respectively on pedagogic practice, technology, and performance. What they illustrate is how the model was active in these responses, inspiring creative engagements through words, arts, and stories that were not just located in the NAM but were distributed beyond to the *uluus* with which the model is connected by virtue of its history. That it continued to be used resourcefully, even after it had returned to London from Yakutsk, as evidenced by the young student whose research project took her to St. Petersburg several years later and by the storyline of the *yhyakh* opening performance in Gornyi *uluus*, reminds us that even relatively short-term encounters can have longer-term influence. This matters in a world in which culture, the arts, and museums are often under threat, but it also reminds us of the productive possibilities for engaging with historic objects on their own ground. The narratives we have highlighted here are overwhelmingly positive, in spite of the silences, or ‘common unsaids’ to use Gavrilova’s (2019) term, that became normalised during the later nineteenth century and subsequently during the Soviet period and which still shape how some people in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) feel able to articulate their own lived experiences and how

they relate to others. We continue with this theme in [Part 3](#), which focuses on creative and material encounters between the model and contemporary mammoth carvers.

## Notes

- 1 We want to be explicit that lack of memories of *yhyakh* is not universal among the city dwellers with whom we spoke, many of whom, as noted in [Part 1.3](#), told us of their recollections of visiting relatives during the summer and taking part in picnics and other *yhyakh*-like events, or of attending *yhyakh* celebrations in their ancestral *uluus* which were, in Nikanorova's terms, "reconceptualized within the appropriate communist frameworks" (2020: 30). It is, however, the case, that a person's age, social background, and family experiences shaped their exposure to the festival, as does whether they were from an *uluus* which experienced significant pressure to conform to Soviet ideals. As such, some of our interlocutors who were raised during the later Soviet period told us that their lack of knowledge and memories of *yhyakh* was at least in part due to having had no exposure to it while growing up. There was nothing for them to remember.
- 2 It is worth noting that those who commented on the model's potential as a source of information were as interested in what it could offer in terms of supporting other historical sources (be they material, written or oral), rather than as challenging the now well-established conventions for the public ritual aspects of *yhyakh* which are very much connected to local discussions of authenticity.
- 3 See also essays in a recent volume of *Museum Anthropology* which focus on absence and presence ([Turner 2022](#)), and in those in [Shehade and Stylianou-Lambert \(2024\)](#) which explore presence by highlighting how VR, AR and other immersive technologies balance interpretation and meaning and embodiment and immersion in encounters between audience and display in museum settings.
- 4 Most women at *yhyakhs* we attended wore their *ilin-kelin kebiher* either in front or behind but not both, though Tanya did assist one woman who was staying in the same accommodation as ourselves in Verkhoiansk in 2016 and who had sufficient jewellery to wear it in the old style to adjust the fastening (Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 30 June 2016). There are several related possibilities which may account for the change in style. First, many families who had such jewellery in the past gave it to the authorities during the Second World War to support the war effort; second, the expense of rebuilding a family collection of silver takes time. We saw multiple examples of young women wearing less expensive birchbark jewellery that replicated the style of traditional Sakha silverwork.
- 5 The facial expressions of the figures were considered to be especially intriguing, and raised a number of questions related to authenticity, the ethnic origins of the artist, Nikolai Belousov, and his intended audience. None of these questions can easily be resolved, but all of them fed into the sense of ambivalence about the model which some people expressed in conversation with us.
- 6 See [Ferguson \(2019\)](#) for a detailed analysis of Sakha language practices and communicative norms with a focus on urban environments. Tracing the adaptability of Sakha speakers within the context of the immense social and political changes of the twentieth century she notes (2019: 61–63) that during the Soviet era there was a shift towards Russification which intensified under Stalin's rule, and that by the 1960s, even with the de-Stalinisation policies of Khrushchev, the Russian language was promoted in schools at the expense of other Indigenous languages. Accordingly, and as can be seen in other contexts where Indigenous languages have been threatened, many parents recognised that fluency in the dominant language would bring opportunities to their children that they did not have themselves. Ferguson reports that many of her own interlocutors had

- attended Russian-speaking schools and still considered these to provide linguistic capital for their own children.
- 7 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 03 July 2015.
  - 8 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 03 July 2015.
  - 9 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 24 June 2016.
  - 10 We toured several of these with our local guide during our visit.
  - 11 The town is also home to the Museum of the Pole of Cold which, at the time of our visit, was run by its energetic octogenarian Director-Curator who had dedicated decades of her life to collecting and preserving local history. As with many of the visits we made to museums and heritage sites across the project, we were warmly welcomed and given an extensive tour of the galleries, which housed displays of the region's flora and fauna, as well as displays pertaining to the town's history as a site of political exile from the 1860s through to the 1917 Revolution, and its subsequent links with the GULAG. This tour, like so many others we experienced, was a way for our host to draw our attention to prominent Sakha personalities, but also to the interwoven histories of exile, dissent, passivity, and silence that continue to cast long shadows.
  - 12 Intriguingly, this comment contrasted with the observations of several of the teachers from Yakutsk schools who noted that their students repeatedly remarked that the facial expressions were dissimilar. One teacher, for example, drew our attention to the drawings her students made in response to a close looking exercise she initiated with the model and in which the children commented on the different facial features. (Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 30 June 2016). Regardless of what viewers saw or thought they saw (similarities, differences, familiarities, otherness), across the project the ambiguous physiognomy of the figures and what that might mean in terms of the model's authenticity was a recurring theme.
  - 13 Regrettably, we did not witness this performance, which took place the same week as the republican *yhyakh* in Verkhoiansk.
  - 14 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 18 July 2016.

## References

- Anon. 1867. *Catalogue Spécial de la Section Russe à l'Exposition Universelle de Paris en 1867* [*Catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867*]. Paris: Imprimerie Générale de Ch. Lahure.
- Balzer, M. M. 2021. *Galvanising Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bille, M., F. Hastrup, and T. Flohr Sorensen eds. 2010. *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*. New York: Springer.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History's remainders: on time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Clifford, J. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Connerton, P. 2010. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davy, J. W. 2018. Miniature dissonance and the museum space: reconsidering communication through miniaturisation. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24(9): 969–983.
- Ferguson, J. K. 2019. *Words Like Birds: Sakha Language Discourses and Practices in the City*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gavrilova, S. 2019. The present taxidermied: Soviet 'common unsaids' in Russian krayevedcheskiy museums. Unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford.
- Geismar, H. and C. Morton 2015. Introduction. *Photographies* 8(3): 231–233.
- Knight, N. 2001. *The Empire on Display: Ethnographic Exhibition and the Conceptualization of Human Diversity in Post-Emancipation Russia*. Washington DC.: The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research.

- Martynova, E. I. 2016. *Uluusput saidyyta — barybyt kyaiyybyt*. [Success of our uluus is everyone's achievement]. Unpublished script of the opening ceremony of the jubilee *yhyakh* devoted to the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gornyi uluus.
- Nikanorova L. 2020. Religion-making at the Sakha *Yhyakh*. *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 59(1): 29–51.
- Nogovitsyna, E. S. 2017. *Vechnoe Pominovenie...Pamiati Iakutskogo Kuptsa 2-oi Gil'dii Gavriila Prokop'evicha Pavlova Posviashechaetsa* [Eternal Commemoration...to the Memory of Gavriil Prokop'evich Pavlov, a Yakutsk Merchant of the 2nd Guild]. Berdigiastiakh: *Üle Kiiühe*.
- Peers, L. 2013. Ceremonies of renewal: visits, relationships, and healing in the museum space. *Museum Worlds* 1(1):136–152.
- Rasmussen, L. R. 2012. Touching materiality: presenting the past of everyday school life. *Memory Studies* 5(2): 114–130.
- Runia, E., 2006. Presence. *History and Theory* 45(1): 1–29.
- Shehade, M. and T. Stylianou-Lambert eds. 2024. *Museums and Technologies of Presence*. London: Routledge.
- Turner, H. 2022. Absence and presence in museum anthropology. *Museum Anthropology*, 45: 93–95.

## **Part 3**

# **Craftsmanship and Creativity**



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## 3.1 Introduction

Multiple dynamic temporalities are an overarching theme of the *Narrative Objects* project. The juxtaposition of the past, present and future becomes tangible when thinking about the journey the carved mammoth tusk model made from Yakutsk to Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and its return to Yakutsk from London some 150 years later. First, the time-space dimensions became literal and physical when considering the fragility of the object for arranging its transportation and ensuring the right conditions for its display. Second, a temporal effect this carved model from the past has produced on the contemporary artistic community in Sakha and younger generation of carvers. As we have noted elsewhere in this book, Rebecca Bryant's (2014) thought-provoking article on time and the movement of personal objects in post-conflict Cyprus resonates with many of the themes which emerged from our work. She discusses what she refers to as the 'lifespan' of objects and argues that they do not only encapsulate the past and carry it into the present, but they also bring out multiple temporalities of our relations with the past, present and future. Objects accumulate and present different accounts of the time of various actors: human, animal or material. They do not only gather but also help unravel these different temporal accounts and time-space connections (Schatzki 2009).

'Temporal dynamism', as already mentioned, relates to the capacity of objects and materials from which they are made 'to bring other possible futures into our present' (Bryant 2014: 684). This concept serves as an overall foundation for this Part, where we build on different dimensions of time. In Part 3.2 we examine the material from which the model was made: mammoth tusk that comes from an extinct animal. We also look at historical accounts of how ivory was used and the range of objects made from mammoth ivory in the past. Although emerging from the deep past, ivory is not a dead material; due to its structure, it is reactive to environmental and atmospheric fluctuations and continues to expand or shrink. We explain how ivory carvers engage with this ancient material and rely on a range of senses to feel and assess the creative opportunities it offers. Close engagement with this ancient material allows ivory carvers to refer to mammoth tusks as living, breathing, and responsive, thus demonstrating the fluidity of the temporal dimensions of their creative projects. The carvers acknowledge that ivory is dynamic and agential, and its behaviour dictates respectful treatment, as this material does not

tolerate any enforcement or imposition. A carving project, therefore, is relational and starts from careful consideration and assessment of what a particular piece of mammoth ivory can offer.

Carving projects and artistic engagement with thousand-year-old ivory also relate to the future. Raw materials have continual promise of a future object, and, as such, they become part of the complex web of temporal connections. Mammoth tusk, an ancient material, therefore, presents temporal alterity, where the past and the future co-exist in attainable propinquity. The remains of mammoths might be an object from the past, but the extraction of ivory, its evaluation and understanding of its artistic potential are associated with the future. Taking both the physical fluctuations and the future possibilities of mammoth tusk into account, we therefore propose that mammoth ivory demonstrates what we refer to as ‘material dynamism’, a concept that sits alongside Bryant’s (2014) temporal dynamism. Material dynamism highlights the evolving and fluid qualities of mammoth ivory and its ability to hold the past and the future together.

In this Part we address the present within the context of art, craft and creativity to examine how working with mammoth ivory is affected by contemporary social demands and economic circumstances. Here, we trace the history of carving in *Sakha Sire*, including its socialist heritage, and discuss the commercial side of mammoth ivory carving and the growing popularity of mammoth ivory souvenirs. Souvenirs are often considered mass-produced kitsch (Binkley 2000), and souvenir production is seen as a simplistic commercial activity aimed at generating economic profit (Graburn 1976). For artists in *Sakha Sire*, however, ivory carvings made for tourists are nevertheless a valid cultural form of artistic expression, which supports artists in economically precarious circumstances who rely on the availability of commissions, small contracts, and side work with a range of media from ivory and wood to metal and ice carving. Part 3.4 builds on the discussion of contemporary carving practices by considering the future of ivory carving in *Sakha Sire*. When we started the project, we had not anticipated that the loan of the model of *yhyakh* would inspire two young college students to create an imaginative art project aimed at producing a continuation of the original model. This case study is an excellent illustration of temporal and material dynamism that presents multiple flows of temporalities, meandering and disorganised like in real life, where the past, present, and future meet and collide. What the case study illustrates is that many versions of the past co-exist and cooperate to create multiple narratives: the past of the material is put side by side with the past of the model and its maker – the master carver from the nineteenth century; the traditional carving skills performed by *uus kihi* (craftsman) are contrasted by the socialist past that dictated conformity of artistic styles.

The present and future in Part 3 of the book are evoked by the effects on the public that the model continues to produce, which point to connections that are still dormant and potentialities yet to be realised (Lincoln et al 2020; Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021), as well as the debates about the Sakha style of carving that the model is generating within artistic circles in *Sakha Sire*. The study of futures is a grappling and uncomfortable area of research in anthropology, for it is

difficult to handle in its intangibility, relation to speculation, and lack of concrete observations that constitute the core of anthropological research. “The future resides in or draws in the present” (Bryant and Knight 2019: 14). While the future is linked to anticipation, expectations, hope and destiny, it is these very notions that connect the future to the present and emphasise how temporally dynamic the processes in which we are immersed are. Thus, the future of the model is tangible; it will continue to draw the attention of artists, art historians, and museum practitioners, and to be discussed and written about by others. We are confident the model will continue to generate responses in entangled time-space connections between people and objects. We agree with Bryant’s (2014: 683) view that “objects acquire this explosive power not only because of the changing historical circumstances in which they are embedded but also because they have different ‘lifespans’ from the human and so elicit, evoke, or emit other possible futures”. The possible scenarios of the future for the model and of future creative projects associated with it, are impossible to foretell.<sup>1</sup>

In Part 3.4 we complete the temporal line presented in this book with thoughts about the future of the carving art in *Sakha Sire*, which brings us back to the younger generation of carving artists, like Maksim and his peers. Arjun Appadurai argued for anthropology to move beyond studying only the past and calls for the investigation of humans ‘as future-makers and of futures as cultural facts’ (Appadurai 2013: 285). The younger generation of carvers trained by the College of Arts will indeed be taking the carving art into the future. Appadurai asserted that ‘imagination, anticipation, and aspiration’ need to be considered social facts, practices, and forms of work and should be put ‘at the center of cultural activity’ (Appadurai 2013: 286). For the young carving artists, the future, with its economic and political uncertainties, is a time of anticipation upheld by their creative imaginations and boosted by ambitious artistic aspirations.

## Note

- 1 Indeed, as noted in Part 2.2, another unexpected creative engagement with the model was the commission from master carver, Fedor Markov, of a further ‘second half’ which he produced for the *Arctic: Culture and Climate* exhibition held at the British Museum in 2020–2021 (Argounova-Low 2020: 80). Readers wishing to learn more about this model can find information about it on the British Museum’s online searchable collections database, using accession number ‘2020,3016.1’.

## References

- Argounova-Low, T. 2020. Sakha summer festival. In *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, eds. A. Lincoln, J. Cooper and J. P. L. Loovers. London: Thames and Hudson and The British Museum, pp. 78–81.
- Appadurai, A. 2013. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London, New York: Verso.
- Binkley, S. 2000. Kitsch as a repetitive system. A problem for the theory of taste hierarchy. *Journal of Material Culture* 5(2): 131–152.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History’s remainders: On time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.

- Bryant, R. and D. Knight 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graburn, N.H. 1976. Introduction: Arts of the fourth world. In *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, ed. N. H. Graburn. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1–32.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. and L. Alekseeva 2021. Ivory carving in Yakutia: National identity and processes of acculturation. *Sibirica* 20(2): 76–101.
- Lincoln, A., J. Cooper, and J. P. L. Loovers eds. 2020. *Arctic: Culture and Climate*. London: Thames and Hudson and The British Museum.
- Schatzki, T. 2009. Timespace and the organization of social life. In *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, eds. E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk. Milton Park, Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, pp. 35–48.

## 3.2 Mammoth ivory as material

Part 3.2 is devoted to mammoth ivory, a material derived from an extinct ice-age mammal which takes a prominent place in this book. Harries (2017), in his theoretical and ethnographic study of tactile memory, refers to the notion of ‘touching the past’. This concept, which is very popular in historical engagement and re-enactment projects, highlights the importance of handling objects from the past. The tactile experience helps dissolve the distinction between past and present and brings history closer. In Part 3.2 we extend this notion to the work of ivory craftsmen and discuss how ‘touching the past’ happens in craftsmen’s workshops when they handle ancient mammoth tusks not to be affected or to have an experience of the past, but out of appreciation and to build relations with this unique raw material. The notion also emphasises that a sense of touch is an important aspect of any carving project and is fundamental for understanding the material prior to engaging with it. An ivory carver needs to feel this thousand-year-old material to know its specific qualities better before giving it a new life.

### Ivory craftsmanship

Palaeolithic mammoth ivory carvings are found in ancient settlements across Europe and demonstrate the thriving art traditions of early hunter-gatherers (Mithen 1998; Wengrow 2011; Oliva 2021), yet in the territory of *Sakha Sire* there is no evidence of ivory use at the early settlements; instead, these sites have revealed large amounts of pottery objects and items made with birch bark as well as a variety of richly decorated and filigree silver jewellery and other silver items (Savvinov 2001: 10). Based on these findings, archaeologists have proposed that craftsmen in the early settlements preferred working with metals, wood and clay, and that familiarity with these media was an important precursor for working with ivory. The skills of early silversmiths, wood carvers, and pottery makers have roots in many artistic traditions of the Scythian, Altaian, Mongol and Turkic ancient cultures (Gumilev 1960, Ksenofontov 1992 [1937], Okladnikov 1978, Gogolev 1993, Struchkova 2014). Later, by the end of the nineteenth century, *Sakha* were familiar with iron, copper, bronze, silver, lead and gold (Seroshevskii 1993 [1896]: 366). The production of metals from ore was well established, and small-scale iron smelters were common and often mobile, so smiths could travel to places on request. Silver

foundries were also widespread, producing a large quantity of very popular silver objects and jewellery (Seroshevskii 1993 [1896]; Savvinov 2001: 75).

Monuments of wooden vernacular architecture preserved on the territory of *Sakha Sire* from the seventeenth century suggest a rich wood-working craftsmanship. These fortresses, churches, mills, and burial decorations have allowed researchers to identify a distinctly Sakha style of carpentry based on a fusion of artistic traditions of Russian and Sakha cultures (Opolovnikov and Opolovnikova 1983: 10). Besides architecture, many utilitarian objects were made with timber by local craftsmen, from wooden bowls and cups used every day to ceremonial dishes richly decorated with symbolic ornaments for ritual practice at the *yhyakh* celebrations. These crucial skills of working with wood were successfully transferred by craftsmen to decorating mammoth ivory when this material became available in the seventeenth century (Ivanov 1979).

As mammoth ivory excavation, trade and carving steadily grew into a significant branch of the economy in the region (Digby 1926; Pfitzenmeyer 1939; Smirnov 2003; Kirillin 2009), the use of mammoth ivory for carving by Sakha people became more common. As a tradition, ivory carving in *Sakha Sire* was formed under the strong influence of passing tradesmen and merchants from the Russian North who purchased large quantities of mammoth tusk in Yakutsk and who brought back objects made with mammoth ivory, usually of a utilitarian and decorative nature (e.g., jewellery boxes, frames, combs) carved in the village of Kholmogory of the Archangel region. Sakha craftsmen did not just copy these objects, but incorporated the Northern Russian fashion of carving, with its filigree elegance of ornaments, in their work and created their own unique style of carving (Korol'kov 2012; Ivanov 1979; Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021). The fear of handling the remains of mammoths due to long-standing beliefs about the power of underground beasts, which prevented local people from engaging with this material for a long time, was assuaged by carvers with a ritual asking for forgiveness from the spirits and offering a sacrifice (Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021: 78). Despite acquiring this skill relatively recently, historically speaking, Sakha craftsmen took to ivory carving confidently, so much so that mammoth tusk carving has become recognised as Sakha traditional material culture.

### **Sensing the life of material**

In anthropological studies, the prevalence of objects is tangible. It is through objects and things that we learn about culture and social relations. Materiality, which encompasses all aspects of human interactions with material and artefacts, including “the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical” is an important part of conceptualisation of culture (Miller 2005: 4). Yet, materiality is a much-debated concept and one of the critiques of the concept is its focus on consumption and the end product, ignoring the importance of material itself. Once materials have been turned into an object or goods, the material from which they are made stops being of interest, and the object overwhelmingly takes centre stage (Ingold 2011). While we agree that materials should receive more attention in

anthropology, we do not wish to repudiate the concept of materiality entirely. In [Part 3.2](#) we want to bring together important aspects of materiality and to draw attention to the material from which carved objects are made, as indeed materials give birth to objects, reminding us of the root of the word, which comes from ‘mater’, meaning ‘mother’ in Latin ([Ingold 2011](#): 27). In the discussion which follows, we highlight three aspects of materials that we have found especially helpful to think with. First, we emphasise the importance of materials and the point that materials often outlive the objects made from them. The form might disappear, but the material from which they are made, even at a dissipated and particle level, will remain to be material. Second, as [Ingold \(2011\)](#) notes, materials are always transforming and are in constant flux, even if they appear static and fixed. Mammoth tusk is an active material and an intriguing one to follow and observe its behaviour. As we discuss later in [Part 3.2](#), the term ‘material dynamism’ is useful for encapsulating this capacity of materials to behave in this way. The third point we want to make is about the relations carvers establish with the ivory and how they feel the ivory from the moment they come in close contact with it. Fedor Markov, master carver, demonstrated this interactive behaviour of ivory during our visit to his workshop one afternoon in 2019. Mammoth ivory, he explained, interacts with atmospheric conditions and different substances found in the surrounding environment; it takes on a great variety of colours, it swells from being exposed to ice and water, and it cracks if touching salt in the soil. [Figure 3.1](#) below shows how the tusk absorbed



*Figure 3.1* Carving of a mammoth with the change of ivory colour visible. Photograph by J. Costin, University of Aberdeen.

the pigment from the peat and, over time, created a pattern of colours that Fedor Markov was able to utilise for this sculpture.

Mammoth ivory displays a diversity of shades from white to yellow and dark brown due to its absorbent properties. Naturally occurring dyeing of ivory from touching clay, peat, or moss can also reveal a subtle texture of veins and threads visible on the surface that makes it particularly attractive and appropriate for certain kinds of artistic work. A craftsman will carefully consider the change in colour and shades of the raw material from the start and focus on these natural variations when thinking about an emerging object. Due to its distinctive structure, ivory can noticeably expand and shrink depending on the humidity of the environment. While carvers understand this rational explanation, it seems they understand the material from a different, relational perspective. When working with ivory, the carvers often speak about the behaviour of the material in active and agentive terms. They describe the swelling and contracting of ivory as ‘breathing’, comment on ivory’s behaviour, and refer to fluctuations as movements, implying that the tusk is responsive. In many conversations we heard the carvers talking about the importance of feeling and listening to the material. These references confirm the idea that the properties of materials, although seemingly fixed attributes, are active and relational and can be grasped only through engagement and interaction. Carving artists enjoy talking about the materials and their properties, explaining what happens to the mammoth ivory in the process of work, and often, such explanations turn into a storytelling session, as we witnessed on many occasions in the workrooms we visited.

Mammoth ivory’s properties are similar to those of elephant ivory and when cut into smaller pieces, it becomes hard to distinguish them unless under a microscope (Bending 2019). The similarity between the two is such that, on the international trading market, mammoth tusk, although its quality<sup>1</sup> can be variable, is equal to the lower grades of elephant ivory (Kirillin 2009: 58). The structure of the tusk reveals layers of dentine that grow on top of each other in a cone, or ‘blades’ as they are called in biology (Figure 3.2). A wide range of archaeological findings in early Upper Palaeolithic sites in Central Russia confirms that ancient people used to separate layers of tusk by splitting them into small, curved, funnel-like (‘sugar cones’) segments using a knapping technique (Khlopatchev 2001: 446). The size of split and separated tusk cones would predetermine the size of objects made from them. Only with the technological advancement of tools did it become possible to work with larger and thicker pieces of ivory.

Compared with other bone material (walrus tusk, moose horn, etc.), mammoth tusk has particular qualities that make it excellent for carving. It is a relatively soft material which enables detailed carving and, when polished, provides a warm shine or glow. Mammoth ivory can modulate more than any other bone material due to its structure, often described by carving specialists as a *setka* (mesh) (Figure 3.3). The mesh structure allows ivory to fluctuate, swell and expand, or reduce and shrink, depending on the surrounding environment.

The mesh structure also provides ivory with a hygroscopic property. Tusks that are found in the ground are saturated with water, which constitutes 8–10% of their weight (Kirillin 2009: 58). In the past craftsmen utilised this property to their



*Figure 3.2* Segment of mammoth tusk with ‘sugar cone’ structure clearly visible. Photograph by James Costin, University of Aberdeen.

advantage; as part of their preparation for carving, they would soak tusks in water, making the ivory even more supple and much easier to carve with a knife. Contemporary carvers equipped with mechanised tools can work with dry ivory, and indeed they prefer dry material to assess the overall condition of the tusk and see its splits and cracks. But prolonged exposure to dry air will create lateral splits of the tusk, which makes carving more difficult and increases the risk of breaking. Craftsmen can also exploit tusk’s structural properties; for instance, hair-like cracks can be fixed by simply putting an object in a more humid environment,<sup>2</sup> which closes the cracks through swelling.

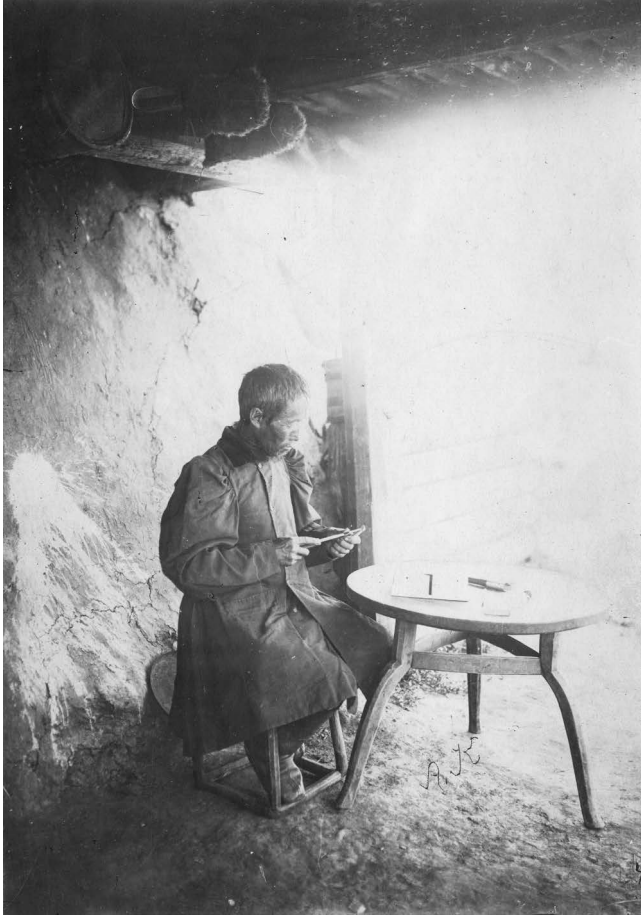
In the summer of 2016, Tanya Argounova-Low and Eleanor Peers accompanied by Ul’iana Vinokurova, a sociologist from Yakutsk, made a short visit to Namtsy, a rural settlement located 80 kilometres from Yakutsk. We made this trip to meet, interview, and see some works of Roman Petrov, a carving artist residing in Namtsy. Roman recommended that we start our visit from the Sivtsev Museum of History and Ethnography, where a small permanent exhibition displayed old carving tools, scrapers, and other implements for wood working. These tools, as the museum guide explained, were also used for tusk carving. Missing from the display is a sharp *sakha byhakh* (Sakha knife) (Seroshevskii (1993 [1896]: 382; Jochelson 1933), the most universal tool, which was commonly used for carving from the



Figure 3.3 *Setka* (mesh) structure visible on a carving. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

beginning of the twentieth century (Figure 3.4). From a distance, it is easy to mistake a chunk of ivory for a piece of wood. Once it is in one's hand, though, then the solidity, weight and coolness of the ivory surprises and creates a completely different tactile experience. For craftsmen in the past, mammoth ivory would have been comparable to wood, and so it would not have been difficult to apply their wood carving skills to this material.

By the end of the eighteenth century, additional technological implements were introduced for processing ivory: saws, files, drills, and clasps, as well as manufactured tools (Ivanov 1979: 6). While the oldest samples of carving do not have the fine detail of later works and were carved using basic tools, with the development of technology, the complexity of carving projects increased. Later still, Sakha craftsmen were equipped with a range of carving tools, including rotating equipment to cut cylinders and hand-operated drills. The model of *yhyakh* in the British Museum made in the 1860s surprises with its finish and detail. It demonstrates the use of well-established technologies, such as the use of a turning lathe for making cylindrical shapes, which was used to make details on the model, such as fences, *serges*, and poles for the *uraha*, while the figures would have been made using a knife and saws. Even with this simple technology, which cannot compete with modern power tools, the work of the old craftsman continued to surprise contemporary ivory carvers, who marvelled at the artist's precision illustrated by the very delicate carved details of the model.



*Figure 3.4* Sakha ivory carver at work, early twentieth century. Photograph by A. Kurochkin. Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture.

### **Following the material**

In some artistic processes, the idea comes first, following some inspirational moment, and a material with the capacity to hold the idea is found to match it. An artist, enthralled by a creative idea, will be able to find the right material and tools and will start introducing their idea with the help of material, for instance, canvas, paints, and brushes. In other creative projects, the consideration of the material comes first, and the idea or the project emerges from what the material can offer. Contemporary professional carvers in Yakutsk, for example, make it very clear in discussions of their practice that consideration and evaluation of material is of utmost importance to them. In carving, most of the time, the raw material is an absolute starting point for envisaging an artistic idea. There are certainly occasions when the idea needs to find the material and then, provided there is suitable raw

material, the artists will be able to execute their idea; this is what happened with the students' project we describe in [Part 3.4](#). More often, consideration of the material precedes the idea. Vasilii Amydaev, a professional carver in Yakutsk, articulated this during an interview with Tanya in which they focussed on his creative practice, and which we quote at length here:

The quality of material already predetermines the object. The project mostly depends on the quality of the material and whether it has cracks or flaws. Top-quality material gives more freedom in deciding what will come out, more room for creativity. One needs to avoid cracks and think about various ways, shapes, and scales of the end work. For carvers, it is more difficult in this sense, than say, for gold or silversmiths. They can implement any idea, provided they have enough gold and silver, whereas with the carvers, the material dictates pretty much what will happen. So, in all respects, one starts with the material, the colour, the quality, and the shape. Moose antlers, for instance, are dark and grey, and mammoth tusk can be of different shades, ranging from absolutely white to yellow or brown. Again, moose antlers are flat, so it is impossible to give lots of dimension to the objects made with the antlers.<sup>3</sup>

A carving artist, as Vasilii explained, will start the process with a careful inspection of a piece of material, noting quality, colour and shape, and paying special attention to the tiniest of cracks. Every aspect of the material is carefully considered as they will predetermine the result. He will then start visualising the designs, shapes, and forms this material can be turned into. As such, the artist 'follows the material' ([Ingold 2007](#): 314), and the material dictates what the object is going to be. Such dependence on the material might appear restrictive and imposing, but artists do not see such considerations of the material's qualities as limiting and describe this process differently. For them, the process of evaluation is an assessment of possibilities and opportunities, rather than restrictions. It is not a straightforward and direct application of the craftsman's plans and ideas into carving, but instead a careful contemplation, listening, and attunement to the material.

Often carvers refer to the material as one that needs to be related to; a common expression among them is *pochuvstvovat' material* (to feel or sense the material). Therefore, the process of carving, even more so at the initial stages of the process, can be better described as relational, involving careful negotiation with the material. As [Ingold \(2012](#): 434) notes, "The experienced practitioner's knowledge of the properties of materials ... is not projected onto them but grows out of a lifetime of close engagement in a particular craft or trade". The artists relate to the material and establish a connection with it, so that maker and the material contribute together to the creative project, as explained by Blanes et al, "[a]rt is thus a social means and end, and is not confined to artists themselves, or the objects they produce... Moreover, from this perspective, relational art becomes legible as a 'social environment'" (2016: 9). To start a project, one has to understand the material and the potentialities the material offers and be able to attend to them. It is therefore not simply just the material that concerns artists but, rather, that the

raw material and the idea are inseparable, as demonstrated in this vignette from our fieldwork:

Fedor Markov is showing us around his workshop. In the corner of his studio by the window is a workbench with tools and electric equipment for sawing, grinding and polishing. Various ivory pieces are stacked on the desk. Some are small pieces, some large, some clearly cut by an electric saw, with precise and clean angles. Still, some pieces are less uniform, with rugged splits and fragments that separate easily. Fedor has something to say about each piece, commenting on its quality, how it acquired its colour, and how he might use it. From now on, this chunk of ivory will start transforming from an anonymous piece to an item with identity, from raw material to a thing with lines of significance, and from something of general description to an object with a particular story and its own voice.<sup>4</sup>

Attunement to the material when working with mammoth tusk means the craftsmen must be flexible and open to diversions and unscripted scenarios. In other words, the carvers see their work as a process, not as a goal, and are ready to improvise when they create a new piece. Indeed, improvisation is a fundamental part of working with mammoth ivory. Forcing fixed ideas onto this material might not be possible due to the flaws and cracks that need to be circumvented. Moreover, an imposition of the idea onto the material does not respect the agency of the material and treats it as passive and inert. Superimposed or dictated ideas are against the logic of a relational attitude to the material. Vasilii Amydaev described the process of carving effortlessly as intuition:

*Ruka idet na podsoznanii* (the hand moves subconsciously). It does it itself, it is like breezing, it happens itself. I wonder myself sometimes how it just goes. And yet when I try to rationalise and think about it [the carving process], it comes out worse. This ability to work *neprinuzhdenno* (freehand) comes with practice and experience ... And the work continues on its own.<sup>5</sup>

To make things, then, is not to transfer and impose a form onto material but instead to engage, to work with, and to relate to the active material. Sakha carvers believe that ivory has a soul and is alive, indeed, it is much in the power of the ivory to allow itself to be cut and polished. “When the tusk behaves, the work goes smoothly, the process is fast. If it [the ivory] does not want to obey, then the work is stalled, the material is misbehaving, ivory can split or break altogether. While working, the craftsman sings Sakha tunes, asking the tusk to cooperate and turn out well” (Ivanov 2023). Mammoth tusk serves as a good illustration in support of the thesis that material is, in fact, an agent in such creative work (Gell 1998: 16). Malafouris’ (2008) proposition contributes to this vision by focusing on ‘material agency’ in order to redress anthropocentric perspective and imbalanced notion of human agency. He states: “If human agency *is* then material agency *is*, there is no way that human and material agency can be disentangled” (Malafouris 2008: 22).

Close observation of carvers' working practices and the objects they create demonstrated again and again the great importance of material for carvers and how it pre-determines many outcomes. Malafouris argues that agency and intentionality are not properties of things, nor are they properties of humans: agency and intentionality emerge through material engagement, relations between maker and the material (Malafouris 2008). Agency is, therefore something that develops in the process of creation; it is not a given and does not exist a priori. From the moment a carver's hands start touching the tusk and feeling the rugged edges, the uneven surface of the outer layer and the smallest of gaps, the agency of the material becomes felt in "sensuous realization of the peculiar qualities of this material" (Harries 2017: 125).

Despite the perceived superiority of sight in the sensory hierarchy, a number of anthropologists have demonstrated how other ways of sensing and understanding the world can be more prominent than vision in people's experiences (Howes 2003; Classen 2005; Howes 2005; Law 2005). Scholars have also highlighted how touch is important for visually impaired people (Paterson 2007: 37–57). Speaking to the carving artists in *Sakha Sire* emphasised their dependence on haptic appreciation of the material. Through touch, the artist is getting acquainted with the material, learning to know it better, and becoming attuned to it. Carving artists rely on touch to appreciate the quality and texture of the ivory in 'palpable artefactual terms' (Bronner 1982: 3). Truly, carvers are active 'manipulators' accompanying their visual grasp with haptic experience, as touch provides ascertainment and better apprehension (Bronner 1982; Paterson 2007). American folklorist and anthropologist Alan Dundes once allegedly said: "Seeing is believing, but feeling is truth" (in Bronner 1982: 352), emphasising how handling becomes essential in understanding the objects.

Mark Paterson discusses tactile and spatial experiences of visually impaired people and refers to the early works of philosopher Descartes, who hypothesised that blind people 'see with their hands' (Paterson 2007: 38). This analogy is applicable in the ivory craftsman's workshop too. There, like for visually impaired people, seeing with hands turns into a prerequisite and a tool. Of course, for a carver, his vision is important, but it is not sufficient on its own: the carver needs to complement his visual grasp by touching the material and the object as he continues working on it. Without this tangible sensory experience, our ivory carver will not have exhaustive information about the material to operate with; he will lack a complete understanding of the scope of his project and, therefore, will not be fully equipped for his work.

Furthermore, as we discovered, carving artists see their relationship with the material as multisensory, not only through vision and physical contact, because they refer to their experience as auditory too. The initial phase of forming a relationship with the material, that of establishing a dialogue, was captured in the words of Oleg Solov'ev, a teacher and a carver, who stressed the importance of being attuned to the material and the ability to 'listen with one's hands', which conveys well the full range of sensory engagement and involvement with ivory. Oleg Solov'ev emphasises the significance of acute perception in carving work. He often instructs his students to *slushat' rukami* (to listen with one's hands). By this, Solov'ev highlights the importance of tactile engagement with ivory, feeling the material, its shape, dents, and cracks. 'Listening' to the material, which is, of course, silent, implies a correspondence aspect between the carver and the material.

Visual perception, tactile appreciation, and listening with hands are ways of establishing a relationship with the material and its aspects, corresponding with the material, which inevitably responds to the artist's engagement. This short scene we observed during fieldwork describes 'listening with hands' best:

We are in Fedor's workshop, having a chat over a cup of tea. Fedor has received a batch of ivory for a new artwork he has been commissioned to make. These chunks of ivory are in a bashed brown cardboard box which is about to fall apart under the weight of the ivory. Fedor, who initially opened the batch to demonstrate to us the variety of material he gets and the different shades and textures, suddenly finds a piece that catches his attention. He is taking it in his hands and becomes silent and absorbed, forgetting about our presence in the room for a moment. He is twisting and turning the piece in his hands, running his fingers against the uneven and rough surface of the unpolished ivory. Fedor peers into the cracks and rubs his thumb on them, he then lifts the piece up to the light to see the brownish colour clearer. It is very quiet in the room, and we can hear retro music being played on the radio in somebody's workshop along the corridor. He then, as suddenly as he stopped talking to us, turns back to us with a smile and announces that this piece will be used to make a bird, and the gradual change of brown from very dark to lighter, almost beige, will become a widely spread wing. "This will be a Luo bird. Do you know this mythical creature?" he tilts his head inquisitively. Disappointed at our negative response, Fedor starts retelling the *olonkho* part in relation to this mythical semi-dragon, semi-fish, semi-bird creature.<sup>6</sup>

The process of carving by Inuit, described by Edmund Carpenter, implies a process of contemplation and relation to the unworked material, looking at it by turning it in the hands, trying to see who is hiding behind this piece of ivory. Finally, once a carver is able to see a figure, an animal, for instance, the carver is able to 'bring it out'. As Carpenter argues, the carver did not make the figure but helped it to come out (Carpenter 1966 in Ingold 2000: 126). Importantly, it is not an imposition of an idea on the material but a release of the idea, figure, and design.

The way carvers describe and perceive senses for producing their creative work can be described by some as synaesthesia or experiencing one sense through another, yet others would argue that eyes, ears, and hands do not participate in perception separately from other sensations because our whole body takes part in the process (Ingold 2000: 268). Moreover, Mark Paterson (2007) questions our assumptions of the priority of some senses over others when we switch from vision to touch and to hearing. He asks whether our sensory perception is cross-modal or amodal from the start. If our perception is indeed amodal, the distinction we make between sensory modalities used in perceiving the world around us does not really matter, and it then makes perfect sense for the carvers to understand, evaluate and judge the material with which they are working as listening with their hands. Listening and being responsive is essential in the relationship between the ivory carver and the material with which he works. While chiselling ivory, the carver not only shapes an object but also creates a respectful balance between the idea he is in the process of realising and what the material affords.

Bryant's (2014) concept of temporal dynamism is apt here; mammoth tusk is an interesting material that encapsulates the past and connects it with the present and the future. The capacity of this material to bring these temporal dimensions together is not by all means exclusive; many other raw materials possess this capacity, yet a material as ancient as mammoth ivory emphasises the stark contrast between different temporalities and lifespans like few other materials can. Like any raw material destined to be turned into an object, mammoth ivory has an alluring promise of a future object, as we demonstrated in our ethnographic vignettes from artists' studios. The rugged pieces of tusk take the carving artists into the prospective visions of an object to be, creating instant complex webs of temporal connections. Before these considerations of its artistic potential and prior to the material landing in the artist's hands, this raw material from the past, even before it has been excavated from the ground, is already linked to the future by its prospectors. Exploration, finding, extraction, and its evaluation, all these aspects are linked with the future. Mammoth tusk in this sense presents temporal alterity, where the past, present, and future co-exist in attainable propinquity and continuously trigger and supersede each other. We thus propose a term, material dynamism, (echoing Bryant's temporal dynamism), that can be ascribed to mammoth ivory for its evolving nature and due to its ability to alter the past into present and the future. In what follows, we further explore temporalities we encountered in this project.

## Notes

- 1 The quality and value of excavated mammoth tusks have been defined by Sakha government agencies and classed according to two types: collectible and ornamental (Potravnyi et al 2020; Kirillin 2009). The collectible tusk, according to the technical classification, should have a pristine or near-pristine primordial shape with damage constituting only 10–30% of its surface (Kirillin 2009: 59). The ornamental tusk is further classified into four grades. The price for raw tusk will depend on the quality of the material.
- 2 Dry conditions present a conservation concern for museums when storing and exhibiting mammoth ivory objects. Museums in Sakha (Yakutia) respond to this by placing small dishes of water in the glass cabinets to increase humidity and protect the objects from becoming brittle.
- 3 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.
- 4 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 11 April 2019.
- 5 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.
- 6 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 11 April 2019.

## References

- Bending, Z. 2019. Why we need to protect the extinct woolly mammoth? *The Conversation*, 28 August, <https://theconversation.com/why-we-need-to-protect-the-extinct-woolly-mammoth-122256>. Accessed 3 April 2023.
- Blanes, R., A. Flynn, M. Maskens and J. Tinius 2016. Micro-utopias: anthropological perspectives on art, relationality, and creativity. *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia* 5(1): 5–20.
- Bronner, S.J. 1982. The haptic experience of culture. *Anthropos* 77 (3/4): 351–362.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History's remainders: On time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Classen, C. (ed) 2020. *The Book of Touch*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Digby, B. 1926. *The Mammoth and Mammoth-Hunting in North-East Siberia*. London: H.F. & G. Witherby.
- Gao, Y. and S.G. Clark 2014. Elephant ivory trade in China: Trends and drivers. *Biological Conservation* 180: 23–30.
- Gell, A. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gogolev, A., 1993. *Iakuty. Problemy Etnogeneza i Formirovaniia Kul'tury* [The Yakuts. Ethnogenesis and Culture Formation]. Yakutsk: Yakutsk State University.
- Gumilev, L.N. 1960. *Hunnu* [The Hunnu]. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury.
- Harries, J. 2017. A stone that feels right in the hand: Tactile memory, the abduction of agency and presence of the past. *Journal of Material Culture* 22(1): 110–130.
- Howes, D. 2003. *Sensual Relations. Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Howes, D. (ed) 2005. *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford: BERG.
- Ingold, T., 2000. *The Perception of the Environment. Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. 2007. Materials against materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14(1): 1–16.
- Ingold, T. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. 2012. Towards an ecology of materials. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 427–442.
- Ivanov, E. 2023. *Yhyakh, Krugovorot Zhizni. Kostorez Fedor Markov* [Yhyakh, The Circle of Life. Ivory Carver Fedor Markov]. Documentary film. Yakutsk: UStar studia.
- Ivanov, V. 1979. *Iakutskaia Rez'ba po Kosti* [Yakut Ivory Carving]. Moscow: Nauka.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. and L. Alekseeva. 2021. Ivory carving in Yakutia. National identity and processes of acculturation. *Sibirica* 20(2): 76–101.
- Jochelson, V. 1933. *The Yakut. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*. New York: The American Museum of Natural History.
- Khlopatchev, G.A. 2001. Mammoth tusk processing using the knapping technique in the Upper Palaeolithic of the Central Russian Plain. In: *The World of Elephants. Proceedings of the 1st International Congress*, eds. G. Cavarretta, P. Gioia, V. Mussia, and M. Palombo. Rome: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, pp. 444–447.
- Kirillin, N.D. 2009. Iskopaemaia mamontovaia kost' - osobyi geokriogennyi prirodnyi resurs [Fossil mammoth ivory as a particular geocryogenic natural resource]. *EKO: Vserossiiskii Ekonomicheskii Zhurnal* 2(8): 54–63.
- Korol'kov, S.V. 2012. Traditsii severnoi rez'by po kosti u sovremennykh masterov [Northern ivory carving traditions in contemporary craftsmanship]. *Vestnik KGU* 4: 71–75.
- Ksenofontov, G.V. 1992 [1937]. *Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: Ocherki po Drevnei Istorii Iakutov* [The Uraangkhai-Sakhalar: Essays on Ancient History of the Yakut People]. Vol. 1. Yakutsk: Natsional'noe Izdatel'stvo Respubliki Sakha (Iakutiia).
- Law, L. 2005. Home cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong. In *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. D. Howes. Oxford: Berg Publishers, pp. 224–241.
- Malafouris, L. 2008. At the potter's wheel: An argument for material agency. In *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, eds. C. Knappett and L. Malafouris. New York: Springer, pp. 19–36.
- Miller, D. 2005. *Materiality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Mithen, S. 1998. The supernatural beings of prehistory and the external storage of religious ideas. In *Cognition and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Symbolic Storage*, eds. C. Renfrew and C. Scarre. Cambridge: McDonald Institute Monographs, pp. 97–106.
- Okladnikov, A.P. 1978. Skify i taiga [The Scythians and the taiga]. In *Problemy Archeologii. Vypusk 2* [Questions of Archaeology. Issue 2], ed. L. Klein. Leningrad: Leningradskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, pp. 101–109.
- Oliva, M. 2021. Mammoth remains, burials, and art (30-15 ky ago): Anthropological perspective. *Anthropologie. Special Issue: Hunters-gathers and Early Farmers – Searching and Finding of Archaic Societies* 59(3): 225–250.

- Opolovnikov, A.V. and E.A. Opolovnikova 1983. *Dereviannoe Zodchestvo Iakutii* [The Wooden Architecture of Yakutia]. Yakutsk: Iakutskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo.
- Paterson, M. 2007. *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies*. London: Routledge.
- Pfizenmeyer, E.W. 1939. *Siberian Man and Mammoth* (Translated by M. Simpson). London: Blackie and Son Limited.
- Potravnyi, I., A. Protopopov, and V. Gassii 2020. Dobycha bivnei mamonta kak vid traditsionnogo prirodopol'zovaniia [Mammoth tusk harvesting as traditional land use]. *Arktika: Ekologiya i Ekonomika* 1(37): 109–121.
- Savvinov, A.I. 2001. *Traditsionnye Metallicheskie Ukrasheniia Iakutov: XIX - nachalo XX veka* [Traditional Metal Decorations of the Yakuts: 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> Century]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Seroshevskii, V. 1993 [1896]. *Iakuty. Opyt Etnograficheskogo Issledovaniia* [The Yakuts. Ethnographic Study]. Moscow: ROSSPEN.
- Smirnov, A.N. 2003. *Iskopaemaia Mamontovaia Kost'* [Fossil Mammoth Ivory]. St. Petersburg: VNII Okeangeologia.
- Struchkova, A.V. 2014. Vliianie skifo-sibirskogo etapa na kul'turu iakutov [The influence of the Scythian-Siberian period on Yakut culture]. *Molodoi Uchenyi* 20.2 (79.2): 53–54. <https://moluch.ru/archive/79/14025>. Accessed 26 July 2023.
- Wengrow, D. 2011. Gods and monsters: Image and cognition in neolithic societies. *Paleorient* 37(1): 153–163.

### 3.3 Carving as art and craft

During his travels in Yakutia between 1901 and 1908, the German scholar Eugene Pfizenmayer recorded a range of items carved from mammoth tusk:

In Yakutsk in one craftsman's workshop I found an ivory model of the old Cossack fortress, models of a Yakut summer yurt, and miniature sledges with an ox and reindeer harnessed to them. There were rings and combs too, and boxes in fine fretworks. Powder horns, matchboxes, knife-handles, parts of the harness for horses and reindeer and dogs, and many other articles were also made from the tusks.

(Pfizenmayer 1939: 185).

Pfizenmayer described these carved items as “various kinds of domestic articles and *objets d'art*” (Pfizenmayer 1939: 185), having distinguished between objects of practical usage and those of aesthetic value. The distinction he made points to an important designation of carving in Yakutia, both as a long-rooted craft and established art.

A definition that separates craft from art has been provided by Becker (1978: 864): “craft can and does exist independent of art worlds, their practitioners, and their definitions. In the pure folk definition, a craft consists of a body of knowledge and skill which can be used to produce useful objects: dishes one can eat from, chairs one can sit in, cloth that makes serviceable clothing, plumbing that works, electrical wiring that carries current”. This definition makes an important distinction between craft and art in that objects of craft are of practical and utilitarian nature. Wendy Salmond (1996), who studied the history and origins of *kustarnichestvo* (handicraftsmanship) in Imperial Russia, describes *kustar'* (a craftsman) as one who could produce useful things, but also a variety of things from different materials and for different purposes (Salmond 1996: 15–16). The main distinctions between art and crafts are in their meaning and intention. For Salmond, art is a form of work that expresses emotions and feelings and serves an aesthetic purpose. Conversely, craft refers to the creation of a tangible object that predominantly serves a functional or decorative purpose. Another significant distinction is between an application of an inner quality or aptitude, referred to

as talent in the case of art, and skill or experience in the case of craft. Yet, it is not always that clear-cut as both concepts are related and “refer to ambiguous conglomerations of organizational and stylistic traits” (Becker 1978: 863), and these distinctions can be rather fluid.

In this book, we navigate between linguistic aspects of the Sakha, Russian, and English languages, and so dealing with the distinctions between the terms ‘art’ and ‘craft’ becomes trickier still. For instance, the English word ‘craft’, widely used in this book, can be translated into several Russian equivalents. The issue is about the broader meaning and local connotations of the native words. Ivory carving in *Sakha Sire* is often referred to as *iskusstvo* (art) by some art historians, museum curators, and art gallery dealers (Pokatilova 2012: 472–476). Yet often one can hear references to professional ivory carving as *promysly* (crafts), *narodnoe iskusstvo* (folk art), or *dekorativno-prikladnoe iskusstvo* (decorative art) (Ivanova-Unarova 2005). That ivory carving is often perceived as craft is evident from this translated quote from a popular media site: “Today the sphere of *narodnye promysly* (folk crafts) employs more than four thousand people: silversmiths, jewellers, ivory carvers, wood carvers, seamstresses and craftswomen” (Starostina 2019). Some will still insist that ivory carving is both a form of art and a traditional craft (Pokatilova 2012; Ivanova-Unarova 2019). Indeed, institutional recognition, professional and state awards acknowledge ivory carvers with professional titles of distinction for their art and craft achievements as both *Zasluzhennyi Khudozhnik* (Honoured Artist) and *Narodnyi Master* (Folk Craftsperson).

Following local interpretations, we treat mammoth ivory carving in this book both as craft and art, rather solely one or the other. This is not to discriminate against craft or art, or the carving itself, but to demonstrate an interesting duality in perception of carving by the public and by the artists themselves. In our understanding, the distinction in the ways carving is ascribed as craft or art is not about the hierarchy of the types of material and artistic expressiveness but about the importance of traditional roots in this form of engagement. Ivory carvers, among whom there are many professional artists, often describe themselves as both artists and craftsmen. They see their own works as deeply rooted in folk traditions and themselves as a part of an ethnic cultural system (Ivanova-Unarova 2005). Traditions and knowledge of their own roots serve as a source of inspiration, energy and vision of their work as a part of the Sakha ontological perspective. This is why these works can often be found at the craft, decorative art, and folk-art exhibitions showcasing contemporary Sakha works, which are more inclusive and open to professional and amateur artists alike. We therefore refer to ivory carving as both art and craft interchangeably with exceptions where we need to make a specific distinction between these terms, for example, later in this part, where we discuss how the institutionalisation of ivory carving has influenced its recognition as art.

Whether ivory carving is described as a craft or art or even as kitsch, the notion of creativity brings them together. The term creativity has been discussed by many, although without consensus on what it implies (Hirsch and Macdonald 2007: 187). It is understood that creativity infers subjective qualities of imagination, originality,

and personal identity (Hirsch and Macdonald 2007; Ingold and Hallam 2014), but it becomes objectified and implies intricate connections with temporality, precise faculties and a specific mental location. Creativity needs to be demonstrated. It is expected from people of certain occupations and even demanded. Additionally, the use of the term is extended to other spheres, such as science and even finance, so the notion of creativity is becoming blurred. Despite all the ambiguities around this term, we cannot do without it in this book, as we use the ‘creativity’ as a direct translation of the Sakha word *aiar* and the Russian word *tvorchestvo*, which is often used by the carvers. In conversations with us, their point of reference was that creativity was presented as a process and a path, even, very often akin to the life of an artist. From this perspective, we find the most sympathetic way to explain the creative process of carving artists is to follow Ingold and Hallam (2014) and describe it as growing, which certainly implies and incorporates the process of professional development.

Growing, although implying some form of movement of organic matter, when applied to the process of creation and making, acknowledges the power of transformation, not just physical but ontological as well. A tusk, which is a unique organic material, was, of course once growing together with the mammoth for several decades in the distant past. When it was collected a thousand years later, it might have been presented to the carver as a dead fossil and ossified material. But, for the carving artists, ivory is not dead, as it is constantly moving, swelling, shrinking, and splitting. In other words, ivory breathes and continues to be active, as we explained earlier. We adopt this perspective of thinking about creativity in ivory carving as a process of growing for our research for several reasons. Firstly, it emphasises a relational approach between the carver and the material. As we have shown earlier in this book, artists always treat mammoth ivory as a reactive material, and indeed as a material that demands and dictates certain responses. Understanding ivory carving as growing also highlights the fluidity and dynamism of this creative process. Ivory can behave in the most unpredictable ways and often prompts a great deal of thinking and improvisation. Ivory carving is a social process which emerged from a long-standing engagement with this raw material and the associated history of ivory excavation and trade. As a tradition, it developed from the crossroads of practices that journeyed in the North from the White Sea to the shores of the Arctic Ocean, Indigenous beliefs, and knowledge about the material. These social encounters contributed and enriched creative carving traditions in *Sakha Sire*. We concur that “creativity is a profoundly social fact” (Hastrup 2007: 193). And finally, ivory carving is often related to narratives, and it is indeed a form of storytelling, as discussed further.

A general description of a craftsman used widely locally is *uus kihi* (Ivanov 1979: 59). It stands for a male who is good at making things and designates not only their dexterity but also mental capacity and clever thinking, which earned an *uus kihi* a respected standing in his community. Traditional Sakha craftsmen were polyhedral and rarely specialised in a specific medium; on a mundane level, one had to do many things and engage with different materials. One of the characteristics of *uus kihi* was the ability to easily switch between carving silver, wood, or

ivory. Another very important part of what it means to be an *uus kihi* is his close association with the native *uluus*, the local community where he belongs and is ordinarily well-known for his active contribution, positive influence and creative works. Anatolii Savvinov comments on the role and high esteem of the nineteenth-century iron and silversmiths, and craftsmen in general (Savvinov 2001: 75). The continuing relationship of artists with their community and rootedness highlights the essence of craftsmanship and what it means to be a craftsman. His persona, as is often the case with public figures, is proudly claimed by his native kin. And so are his artistic outputs, which belong to him as an individual artist but, at the same time, are claimed by his community on the grounds of shared origin (“he is from our *uluus*”). Contemporary Sakha craftsmen, many of whom are professional carving artists, have their preferred medium; for instance, the carvers we worked with would introduce themselves as *muostchut* (an ivory carver). Yet they maintain their multifaceted crafting skills which enable them to remain open to new opportunities often dictated by economic prospects. The income of a carving artist is unpredictable, and many ivory carvers tend to switch between working with wood, silver, steel (e.g., making Sakha knives) and even ice carving.<sup>1</sup> Ivory carving might have originated from traditional and practical ways of engaging with raw material and for a long while, craftsmen created utilitarian objects. As it developed and incorporated new trends, responded to new demands and changed directions, it became more professional and more individualistic, demonstrating how, as a skill and aesthetic endeavour, ivory carving is fluid and variable.

### **The development of carving**

Mammoth ivory carving as a form of artistic expression has always been responsive to larger societal and political transformations. It also serves as a reflection of local ideologies and continuous dialogues with emerging cultural practices and forms of Indigenesness. The establishment of ivory carving as a branch of art in *Sakha Sire*, however, was not always smooth and has been characterised by periods of growth and stagnation. Our aim here is to demonstrate the influence of social processes on the transformation of ivory carving and to highlight its dynamism as tradition and as an artistic form. Art historians and scholars who study ivory carving analyse its development and the transformation of its stylistic distinctiveness. They acknowledge the influence of the North Russian style in the early stages of ivory carving in the eighteenth century and emphasise its strong practical function at that point. A characteristic of this period is the lack of depiction of people. Sakha craftsmen avoided creating representations of humans in sculptures, considering it a harmful and dangerous activity that could instigate the anger of spirits and gods. The only person who could carve figurines of human beings was the shaman, and only in relation to rituals (Seroshevskii 1993[1896]: 396–397; Ivanov 1979: 10). The realistic portrayal of humans emerged under the influence of the Russian carving art techniques. Human figurines were incorporated into miniature models, a format that soon became very popular. This development in carving is important as craftsmen moved away from individual objects of practical use to

a depiction of scenes where various carved items were brought into a single narrative. These models presented a compact story and served as good illustrations of the traditional and material culture of Sakha people, their economy, important celebrations, and other aspects of their lifestyle.

Between the 1920s and late 1930s, as the Soviet authorities gained power in the territory of Yakutia and the country recovered from the Civil War, the attention of the government was on restoring the economy, education, and elimination of poverty. Arts and crafts did not receive much attention from the Soviet government. During this period, carvers continued their preoccupation with the production of utilitarian objects and goods: smoking pipes, knives, boxes, and combs (Ivanov 1979: 60). This assortment of goods was simple, lacklustre and practical, with only a few exceptions of more complex artistic works, including miniature models. Overall, as some art historians point out, during this period, ivory carving as an artistic pursuit was on the brink of disappearing (Ivanov 1979: 60).

A shift in mood and enthusiasm for the development of all forms of art, including carving, took place in the 1940s and was initiated by patriotic sentiments during WWII. This energetic revival laid the foundation for the opening of the *Khudozhestvennoe Uchilishche* (Art College, which in 1995 was renamed to P. P. Romanov College of Arts) in Yakutsk in 1945, which offered comprehensive education for ivory carvers, an important step towards the professionalisation of the craft of carving (Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021). College training helped young carvers turn a hobby into a full-time occupation. However, the academic approach advocated by the College had both positive and negative repercussions for how ivory carving was to develop in subsequent years. The classical educational model removed the focus from traditional ways of passing carving skills. Instead of practice-orientated training, it introduced young craftsmen to foundational knowledge of composition, style, and proportions. The craft of carving became a sub-branch of the discipline of sculpture, and the work of carvers was evaluated according to the norms and standards of sculptural art (Ivanov 1979: 78). Two distinct directions of ivory carving developed at this point, one represented by the older generation of carvers who continued with the decorative and applied style of carving in the traditional manner, and the other included younger professional artists, graduates of the Art College, creating smaller sculptural forms.

During this period, works produced by local craftsmen reflected ideological messages, and some portrayed military events or historic symbolism, for example, a carving of Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Borodino in 1812 depicted on a carved box and an ivory sculpture of a Yakut soldier (Gurvich 1951: 159; Ivanov 1979: 62–63). The carving artists were exploring and inventing new forms of expression. Bas-reliefs were widely used at that time for creating a narrative frame but also for carving portraits. Several carved works produced during this period contained portraits of leaders and thinkers: Lenin, Stalin, Marx, and Engels (Gurvich 1951: 159).

In the Soviet period, when all cultural and artistic areas of expression were subservient to politics, all artistic works significantly changed in terms of content. In the Soviet cultural landscape, especially in the early stages of socialist art, the

message of artwork had to be direct and clear, which defined the relationship between the artist and people who were viewers rather than owners of decorative art objects. Personal possession of art objects “came under the category of ‘bourgeois relics’” (Sidorov 1991: 12). The Communist leaders alone decided on the artistic merits of the works produced, serving as ultimate critics of the cultural value of any artistic work. Often, the ideas of what should be expressed in commissioned works of art were sent from above to the artists. But, most of all, the role of art in the Soviet Union was to promote the propagandist ideas of the Soviet state and its socialist values.

The most significant concept of Soviet aesthetics, socialist realism, was introduced to define these values. Two key points of socialist realism are important to mention: the class nature of Soviet art and the obligations of art to the society, hence the ideological content of the art (James 1973: 1). Socialist realism, sometimes referred to as socialist idealism rather than a genuine reflection of reality, projected the desired visions of future life under Soviet rule. During this period, the genre of mammoth ivory carving changed drastically, together with its narrative theme, which included scenes of everyday life of fishermen, farmers, and haymakers. Some carved compositions included scenes of modern life in Yakutia: houses made of bricks, tractors, and combine harvesters in the fields, and factory buildings with smoking chimneys, as symbols of industrialisation, progress, and economic prosperity (Ivanov 1979: 71).

*Choroons* carved out of a solid block of mammoth tusk take a special place in the history of carving during the Soviet period. A talented craftsman, Terentii Ammosov, was the first to introduce a traditional *choroon* in mammoth ivory and to add contemporary content. In his and the works of other carving artists, *choroon* becomes incorporated into a socialist realism narrative with engraved scenes of highly politicised content. Two carved ivory *choroons* prepared as gifts to the country leaders deserve some attention. The first was created in 1948 by a Sakha craftsman, Mamaev, who carved a *choroon* which, together with other ivory objects, was presented as a gift to the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, on his 70th birthday (Nogovitsyna 2019). The *choroon*, 24 cm tall, had three vignettes depicting a kolkhoz *yhyakh*, a new power station, a new village with power lines over the modern houses, and a tractor working in the field. A second *choroon* was commissioned from the artist T. V. Ammosov in the mid-1970s and was made as a gift in 1976 for Leonid Brezhnev, the then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This large *choroon* was carved from a single piece of mammoth ivory. The legs of the *choroon* were carved as horse hooves, with each one decorated with traditional Sakha designs. Three bas-relief vignettes depicted the state emblem of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; reindeer caravans, a traditional dwelling, industrial buildings, and the Northern Lights; and a portrait of Leonid Brezhnev (Figure 3.5). This *choroon*, decorated with five diamonds weighing almost 12 carats and two almandine garnets, was estimated to be worth 1.5 million US dollars in 2017 (Rossii 2022; Uranov 2017), and as noted in Part 2.3, was returned to Yakutsk, where it is now stored in the Yakut State Museum of History and Culture of the Peoples of the North.



Figure 3.5 Ivory *choroov* carved by T. V. Ammosov with Soviet realist and Sakha designs. Yakut State Museum of History and Culture.

Yet again, the aspect of temporality becomes tangible in these objects. [Ssorin-Chaikov \(2006: 356\)](#) examines an exhibition of public gifts to Joseph Stalin, as a crossover and overlap between several temporalities. Time, which is about relations between people and objects, can be disrupted and re-constituted again as the example of these *choroovs* demonstrate. The choice of a traditional drinking cup, *choroov*, intensifies the temporal frame. While traditional in form and execution, the old-style *choroovs* are claims to modernity, demonstrated in the minute depiction of socialist life. Time becomes condensed in the vignettes carved on the sides of the *choroovs*, combining past and modern, old-fashioned and progressive, where such juxtaposition creates a new time frame – future perspective.

Apart from the highly politicised commissioned works, the artists produced artwork close to their traditional values, focusing on folklore characters, depictions of hunting, fishing, and haymaking, as well as scenes showing the summer festival, *yhyakh*. Such works, rooted in the folk traditions, were intended to tell

the viewers about traditional pastoral life and had a seemingly simple plot (Ivanov 1979: 86). However, the details in these illustrations were important, and were a means through which the artists demonstrated their own skill of hunting, knowledge of life in the taiga, and their experience of rural life. This additional layer of complexity through the personal reflection of the carver made the plot of the carvings deeper, and such a ‘presence’ of the carver contributed to the overall narrative of the object. The rich knowledge of traditional rural life and references to this knowledge in works produced by the carvers take us to a central debate art historians and carvers continued to engage in at the time of our fieldwork, which concerns the Sakha style of carving and what it encompasses. The arguments within this debate may, on the surface, reflect a somewhat essentialist approach to the problem, but this is explained by the desire to ensure the future of the carving art and concern that ivory carving might disappear or become absorbed into other artistic styles. Some art critics and historians in Yakutsk argue that essential elements of the Sakha style that have been lost should be brought back in the works of contemporary artists to reclaim the characteristic signature style, which will be discussed at the end of [Part 3.3](#).

### **Souvenirs and tourist art**

In 1969, a souvenir factory, *Sardaana*, opened in Yakutsk, which brought together decorative applied art and crafts under one roof and established a new form of government-sponsored support for Sakha folk art (Pokatilova 2012: 474). Economically, this move was aimed to provide organised state employment for people engaged in traditional forms of activity. Traditional crafts in the factory were represented by several workshops producing a range of items such as fur garments, beaded embroidery, and carved mammoth ivory souvenirs. One of our main collaborators, Fedor Markov, straight after graduation from the Arts College, got employed by the *Sardaana* factory in 1975. In an interview with us, he recalled his early experiences at the factory during the Soviet times, “We had a monthly plan to make a certain number of figurines, like reindeer calves, bear cubs and such like. They provided us with the pre-cut pieces of carving *bolvanka* (blanks) and an example that we were meant to reproduce. All *izdeliia* (objects) were made according to certain standards, and no deviation was allowed”.<sup>2</sup> The mechanised equipment used at the factory made the process faster, creating a production line of ivory souvenirs, and inevitably turned craftsmen into manufacturers who were paid by the number of souvenirs they produced. Souvenir making has remained a part of the creative and economic aspect of carving artists’ work, as we demonstrate further below. While this element of work has been frowned upon as standardised art and ethno-kitsch (Graburn 1976: 6), more recent scholarship on tourist art proposes that it is an important, authentic, and legitimate form of cultural expression (Steiner 1999: 89).

The concept of reproduction discussed in 1935 by Walter Benjamin (2008) is more relevant than ever and can be applied to the discussion of mass-produced tourist art incentivised by the market economy (Steiner 1999). Extensive manufacturing



Figure 3.6 Mammoth souvenirs for sale in Yakutsk. Photograph by N. Ivantsova.

of ethnic souvenirs is commonplace in many destinations worldwide where mass-produced tourist knick-knacks are an important part of the local economy (Silverman 1999; Inglis 1999). In Yakutsk, where the souvenir kiosks continue to multiply, the tourists wandering into shops for an ethnic gift are overwhelmed by the hordes of mammoth figurines neatly arranged on the glass shelves (Figure 3.6).

A skilled carver can cut a small mammoth figurine using machines in a matter of minutes. On a visit to Konstantin Mamontov's workshop, he offered to carve an object in front of us, and indeed invited us to suggest the object he should carve (Figure 3.7). The workshop – equipped with machinery and an extractor fan to draw out shavings and dust from ivory cutting and rasping – was well-lit and airy. A small block of yellowish ivory in his hands was of good quality, and under the drill, it quickly started taking shape. No pencil drawings on the carving blank, quick and polished movements, and the precise touch of the cutter in the right places demonstrated Mamontov's skill and the habitualness of the movements. While machinery was whirling, making loud noises, Mamontov continued to engage with us, asking questions and making funny comments with a smile, as he moved between different machines to carry out each stage of the process, from cutting, chiselling and polishing, and using hand tools to do the fine carving work to create the tusks and hair. In about 20 minutes, he finished the carving and ceremoniously pressed the warm carved mammoth figurine into Alison's hand. "My gift to you. Take him to Britain" he said.<sup>3</sup>



*Figure 3.7* Konstantin Mamontov carving a mammoth figurine in his studio, April 2013. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

Some scholars have argued that tourist art is a “mechanical reproduction” (Benjamin 2008 [1935]) and a simplified form of artistic expression. Yet others claim that tourist art is an authentic art, “a communicative system in its own right” (Ben-Amos in Steiner 1999: 100), with its own canons (Graburn 1976; Steiner 1999: 95). After all, souvenirs, as a token of memory, have a very specific purpose to remind a holder of complex associated meanings (Kasfir 1999). Binkley makes an argument supporting the kitsch aesthetic that is faithful to conventions and roots. There is security and comfort in repetition that is reassuring, knowing that “what is to come will resemble what has gone before, that the hazards of innovation and uncertainty are far away, and that one is safe and secure in the routines of an unadventurous genre” (Binkley 2000: 136). Tourist objects are easy to understand; they do not require any complex or intricate knowledge, and there is no deep, hidden meaning that needs to be discovered. Indeed, when tourists are looking for certain items, they are looking for confirmation of the knowledge they already have. Conversely, Davy (2018; 2019) points to the complexity of souvenir art in the northwest of the United States. The Makah people who make miniature canoes, although they sell these objects to tourists, have long created them as a way to communicate Indigenous knowledge, thus reinforcing cultural traditions and resilience. Similarly, Phillips and Steiner (1999) point to complex connections between art and a souvenir trade brought by industrial-age consumerism.

Despite numerous mammoth figurines in the souvenir shops and kiosks of Yakutsk, we also argue that the silent stampede of carved mammoths of various sizes has a claim for authenticity and should be considered, as strange as it might seem, to be original. Effigies of mammoths are a relatively recent phenomenon that replaced carved figurines of baby reindeer and bear cubs produced in their hundreds by the souvenir factory. Fedor Markov explains: “We never carved mammoths before as we did not know what they really looked like and how to portray them in tusk. Only when we found images of mammoths from magazines and journals, were we able to start carving mammoth figurines among other souvenirs”.<sup>4</sup> That is not surprising, as for a long time, the only monument to mammoths was a bas-relief erected in Ukraine in 1841. In 1971, the first three-dimensional effigy of a mammoth was made in preparation for the Second International Conference on Permafrost held in Yakutsk, which soon became a symbol of the city of Yakutsk (Klimovskii 2010). Since then, figures of mammoths have proliferated and filled the shelves of souvenir kiosks in Yakutsk. Indeed, their ubiquity in the city is one of the very first things we noticed when we undertook our very first fieldwork together in 2013. Mammoths’ statues, murals, ice-carved effigies, preserved remains of the animals in a museum – even little bags of mammoth hair for sale – big and small depictions of mammoths, and their very remains, seem to be everywhere in Yakutsk.

While one might consider mammoth souvenirs produced by eminent carvers as kitsch and a deterioration of the carving art in Yakutia, instead we argue that the introduction of mammoth figures to replace mass-produced animal figurines is indeed a “curious form of authenticity born in the shadow of mass-produced images and texts” (Steiner 1999: 95). Jules-Rosette argues that tourist art does not just mass-produce things but “exhibits signs of genuine aesthetic creativity and often artistic genius” (in Philips and Steiner 1999: 89). Steiner supports this opinion by adding that we need to accept that mechanical reproduction requires scholarly attention and is one of the “legitimate forms of cultural expression” (1999: 89). Tourist art has its cultural validity (Graburn 1976; Davy 2018). Making tourist souvenirs is a strategic economic decision. Larger works are only commissioned for special occasions or sold to foreign tourists who can afford the expense.<sup>5</sup> Souvenirs like small mammoth figurines and keyrings are in demand and are lightweight and easily transportable. Many professional carvers engage in the production of tourist items, as it is more lucrative and provides stable earnings. Tourist art, as carvers often say, *bihigini aghatar* (feeds us). In this sense, we agree that tourist art is not only a unique form of art but also a form of material culture with its universal characteristics of mass production, reproduction, and dissemination of culture through producer-consumer relations (Steiner 1999: 90). Our fieldwork experiences align with the argument that tourist art should not be seen as a system and an engine of cultural production and reproduction but as a system of representation within discourses about authenticity and cultural truths, which emerge in the continuous friction between notions of heritage, continuation of culture versus economic sustainability, markets and consumption (Steiner 1999).

### Authorship and signatures

During our fieldwork and in conversations with older generations of carvers, we tried to understand why so many works from the past were anonymous and why it used to be a common practice among the Sakha carving craftsmen to release their works without a personal stamp or signature. This was a question that arose out of conversations with the general public during the *Narrative Objects* project, many of whom were interested to know whether it was possible to establish the identity of the ‘unknown’ master artist. Even now, looking at the smaller carved mammoth ivory works in the souvenir shops in Yakutsk, one generally does not see any indication of the carvers’ names on the carved objects. The lack of marks, signatures or initials, normally displayed as carved initials situated in an invisible place such as the base, to indicate the authorship was striking to us. While the lack of a signature on items made fairly quickly as souvenirs for an external market didn’t seem unusual, it puzzled us that some of the older generation of artists would not claim their authorship and attach a signature to works to which they had devoted more time, care, expense, and creative energy. On one occasion, a veteran carving artist revealed that one such carving, sent as a gift abroad, did not have his personal stamp, and to our astonishment, he did not have a photograph of his own work. This practice raises the question of authorship, which, in the current conditions of market economy and individual entrepreneurship, seems fundamental. For those who work creatively, in writing or poetry, for instance, each piece of writing is sealed by their authorship. It would be unthinkable for many people in creative industries to release their work if it does not carry their own name. Authorship is “the perceived ongoing attachment between an object and its producer(s)” (Cant 2016: 23). Drawing on the concept of inalienability in relation to objects proposed by Weiner (1992) and the ways it is produced, Anna Cant argues that it is similarly important to analyse the processes of alienability. She suggests that, together with artistic attachment to the creative processes and the objects produced, artists can be involved in the processes “of detachment that take place between objects and people” (Cant 2016: 22). This perspective is important, for it can better inform us about the social relations of creative processes. The older generation of carvers never had their own stamp, and some of them designed their own signatures only very recently. Of course, an individual stamp is not that informative for the artists themselves, who know each other’s works and know the techniques of carving and styles, hence, stamps are not always required. Also, as an artist explained to us, they normally attach their signature to the works that are of exceptional quality and in those situations where the artist is entirely satisfied with his creation.

Traditionally, carvers who work on larger, labour-intensive pieces, like the model of *hyakh*, which has multiple individual components, would rely on apprentices, as explained later in this part, as well as the support of other skilled craftsmen. Carving has always been a spontaneous collective project. In the 1920s several *artel*’ (carving cooperatives) were established for those purposes to institutionalise the collective endeavour of carving work. While the cooperatives were not very successful, the traditional pattern of working as a team continued for some

time, making the authorship collective rather than belonging to an individual. Another reason to our mind, which explains the lack of individualistic attachment, even in cases where an artist had constructed a piece with no reliance on collaborators, is that a carving artist was often perceived as a broadcaster on behalf of his people, where carved pieces symbolised the communal perspective of the whole nation rather than one individual artist. There is a noticeable, if gradual, change however, in that many artists who display their works at exhibitions and take part in contests now claim their works by signing their works. For the younger generation of ivory carvers, like Maksim, a recent college graduate to whom we return shortly, this is a new reality. During our meeting with Maksim at the large venue at the Verkhoiansk *yhyakh* where he was exhibiting and selling his works, he proudly showed his artistic stamp while sporting a T-shirt with his signature visible on the front, and indeed, on an artwork one of us purchased from him, the signature is quite clearly marked on the underside of the wooden base (Figure 3.8).



*Figure 3.8* Maksim in a T-shirt displaying his artistic signature. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

***In search of the Sakha style of carving***

The example above of the gradual adoption of the use of signatures by professional carving artists exemplifies the shift in carving practices as carvers aim to make a living. Like any form of art, carving is responsive to social and political transformations. From the 1990s, the art of carving experienced a genuine revival when the borders opened and the craftsmen were able to engage in artistic exchanges, attending international workshops and exhibitions. New creative synergies produced contemporary artistic trends but also highlighted the question about the purity of the Sakha style of carving. In the opinion of some art historians, the essence of genuine Sakha style attenuated over time from the imposition of classical forms, forced ideological pressure, and, more recently, due to the influences from other schools of carving. It becomes much easier to borrow artistic styles through creative exchanges at international exhibitions and with thriving social media exposure. Many artists, art historians and critics argue that the Sakha style of carving is a distinct phenomenon (Libakova and Sertakova 2015; Vorotnikova 2022; Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021).

It is useful to consider what the perceived distinctive elements of such a style of carving present in the works of the old craftsmen were. Some say it was the plump and full-bodied figurines, stout animal figures, roundness and slowness of lines; others argue it was specific characters that resonated with fairy tales and myths. An opinion dating from 1913 on what constituted the Sakha (Yakut) style of carving was expressed in a critical review following an exhibition in Yakutsk that displayed the works of the first cohort of ivory carvers to graduate from a training course in Moscow:

Relatively large by the number of objects exhibition – about 150 items – is poor in its content: there is no feeling of the Yakut style. An unsuccessful attempt to copy the Muscovite style: bottles, boxes, Easter eggs, rings – these meaningless trinkets overwhelm ... It is sad to see how the young carvers ignore their native Yakut nature only to replicate the ubiquitous cherubs and roses. Weak are these things in execution – one can see an unsteady *rezets* (blade) and poor knowledge of forms. But where the motif is Yakut in nature, wobbly knife becomes determined. “A cow with a bell” made by Neustroev is where the carver feels at home ... One hopes that time will rub off ‘the Muscovite style’ from the works of the Yakut craftsmen and make them face the rich Yakut nature where they should find inspiration for their future works (Vilenskii 1913 in Ivanov 1979: 52).

The reviewer encourages the carvers to work with native themes where they can demonstrate familiarity with the environment and knowledge of flora and fauna with confidence. If there is an essence of the Sakha style, maybe it is about the ability to demonstrate knowledge, skill, and the capacity to negotiate with the material and improvise. An ability to be flexible, to include natural aspects of ivory, to give consideration to its flaws and highlight its advantages, and, all in all, to improvise and create as one goes, is what constitutes an important part of carving.

When the model of *yhyakh* arrived at Yakutsk, the artists were able to study it carefully and had the opportunity to discuss the style, specifics and peculiarities of work. We held a few sessions with the carving artists, during which several topics arose again and again. From discussions at round tables hosted by the NAM and in many other meetings held as group sessions or with individuals, the carving artists, art historians and museum staff continued their discussions about the Sakha style, learning from each other. As many participants of the *Narrative Objects* project rightly pointed out, the question of the Sakha carving style is not about its past, but about the prospects for ivory carving as a creative pursuit and a profession. It is about its artistic future.

## Notes

- 1 Some ivory carvers we interviewed are also renowned for their mastery of ice carving and often compete at the international ice carving festivals held in winter. During our fieldwork in winter and spring we saw remarkable ice carved sculptures made by carvers exhibited outside in the city and in the tourist site *Tsarstvo Vechnoi Merzloty* (The Kingdom of Permafrost) which was filled with frozen sculptures created by our interviewees. We also were able to follow their successes in international ice carving festivals through social media reports.
- 2 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 11 April 2019.
- 3 During our visit Konstantin Mamontov donated two of his artworks to the University of Aberdeen, and these are now cared for by the University's Museums and Special Collections (ABDUA:31888 a figure titled "The Master of the North" and ABDUA:31889.1-5 which depicts a reindeer running across the land, above a mammoth which is below the permafrost).
- 4 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 4 October 2019.
- 5 Since February 2022, due to the changed political situation, the number of foreign visitors to the Republic have dramatically decreased. This is another example of precarity of the economic circumstances of carvers' work. People, however, are hopeful that the situation will improve.

## References

- Becker, H. 1978. Arts and crafts. *American Journal of Sociology* 83(4): 862–889.
- Benjamin, W. 2008 [1935]. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Binkley, S. 2000. Kitsch as a repetitive system. A problem for the theory of taste hierarchy. *Journal of Material Culture* 5(2): 131–152.
- Cant, A. 2016. Who authors crafts? Producing woodcarvings and authorship in Qaxaca, Mexico. In *Critical Craft. Technology, Globalization and Capitalism*, eds. C. Wilkinson-Weber, and A. De Nicola. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 19–34.
- Davy, J. 2018. Miniature dissonance and the museum space: Reconsidering communication through miniaturisation. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 24(9): 969–983.
- Davy, J. 2019. Contemplating miniaturisation in global material culture. In *Worlds in Miniature: Contemplating Miniaturisation in Global Material Culture*, eds. C. Dixon and J. Davy. London: UCL Press, pp. 61–81.
- Graburn, N. 1976. Introduction: The arts of the fourth world. In *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, ed. N. Graburn. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1–32.
- Gurvich, I. S. 1951. Sovremennoe tvorchestvo iakutskikh kostorezov [Contemporary creativity of the Yakut ivory carvers]. *Sovetskaia Etnografia* 3: 158–161.

- Hastrup, K. 2007. Performing the world: Agency, anticipation and creativity. In *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, eds. E. Hallam and T. Ingold. Oxford: Berg Publications, pp. 193–206.
- Hirsch, E. and S. Macdonald. 2007. Introduction. In *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, eds. E. Hallam and T. Ingold. Oxford: Berg Publications, pp. 185–192.
- Inglis, S. 1999. Master, machine, and meaning: Printed images in the twentieth-century India. In *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. R. Phillips and C. Steiner. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 122–142.
- Ingold, T. and E. Hallam. 2014. Making and growing. In *Making and Growing: Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts*, eds. E. Hallam and T. Ingold. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 1–24.
- Ivanov, V. 1979. *Iakutskaiia Rez'ba po Kosti* [Yakut Ivory Carving]. Moscow: Nauka.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2005. O sootnoshenii iakutskogo narodnogo i dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva [On correspondence between Yakut folk and decorative-applied art]. In *Dialog: Muzei i Obshchestvo. Materialy Vtoroi Mezhdunarodnoi Nauchno-Prakticheskoi Konferentsii* [Dialogue: Museum and Society. Proceedings of the Second Conference]. Yakutsk: National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), pp. 150–152.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2019. Kostoreznoe iskusstvo Iakutii: tendentsii razvitiia [Ivory carving of Yakutia: Tendencies of development]. In *Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo Urala, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* [The Decorative Art of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East], December: 121–131.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. and L. Alekseeva. 2021. Ivory carving in Yakutia: National identity and processes of acculturation. *Sibirica* 20(2): 76–101.
- James, C. V. 1973. *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Kasfir, S.L. 1999. Samburu Souvenirs: Representations of a Land in Amber. In: *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. R. Phillips and C. Steiner. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 67–86.
- Klimovskii, I.V. 2010. O sozdanii skul'ptury mamonta – simvola vechnoi merzloty [On creation of sculpture of mammoth – the symbol of permafrost]. In *Ne Naukoi Edinoi* [Not By the Science Alone], ed. V. Shepelev. Novosibirsk: Akademicheskoe izdatel'stvo "Geo", pp. 213–216.
- Libakova, N. and E. Sertakova. 2015. Formation of ethnic identity of the indigenous peoples of the North in arts and crafts on the example of bone carving. *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities and Social Sciences* 4(8): 750–768.
- Rossii, M. 2022. Kubok. Choron (iakut) [Cup. Choron (Yakut)] <http://www.museum.ru/C6410>. Accessed 26 July 2023.
- Nogovitsyna, E. S. 2019. Po sledam odnoi stat'i I. S. Gurvicha [Tracing an article by I. S. Gurvich]. In: *Echo Arkticheskoi Odisei. Sbornik Trudov Konferentsii* [The Echo of the Arctic Odyssey. Conference Proceedings], ed. E. Romanova. Yakutsk: National Library RS(Ya), pp. 75–78.
- Pfizenmayer, E. W. 1939. *Siberian Man and Mammoth*. Translated by M. Simpson. London: Blackie and Son Limited.
- Phillips, R. and C. Steiner 1999. Art, authenticity, and the baggage of cultural encounter. In *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds. R. Phillips and C. Steiner. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 3–19.
- Pokatilova, I. 2012. Sovremennoe kostoreznoe iskusstvo [Contemporary ivory carving art]. In *Iakuty Sakha* [The Yakuts Sakha], eds. N. Alekseev, E. Romanova, and Z. Sokolova. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 472–476.
- Salmond, W. R. 1996. *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Savvinov, A.I. 2001. *Traditsionnye Metallicheskie Ukrasheniia Iakutov: XIX – Nachalo XX Veka* [Traditional Metal Decorations of the Yakut: XIX – Early XX century]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- Seroshevskii, V. 1993 [1896]. *Iakuty: Opyt Etnograficheskogo Issledovaniia* [The Yakuts: An Ethnographic Study]. Moscow: ROSSPEN.

- Sidorov, A. 1991. Stalin's art through Soviet eyes. In *Art Under Stalin*, ed. M. Bown. Oxford: Phaidon Press, pp. 9–17.
- Silverman, E. 1999. Tourist art as the crafting of identity in the Sepik River (Papua New Guinea). In *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds R. Phillips and C. Steiner. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 51–66.
- Ssorin-Chaikov, N. 2006. On heterochrony: Birthday gifts to Stalin, 1949. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12(2): 355–375.
- Starostina, O. 2019. V Iakutii razrabotaiut novuiu kontseptsiiu razvitiia narodnykh khudozestvennykh promyslov [A new concept of folk arts and crafts development will be offered in Yakutia]. In: IaSIA/Sakha Media <https://ysia.ru/v-yakutii-razrabotayut-novuyu-kontseptsiiu-razvitiya-narodnyh-hudozhestvennyh-promyslov/> Accessed 26 July 2023.
- Steiner, C.B. 1999. Authenticity, repetition, and the aesthetics of seriality. The work of tourist art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, eds R. Phillips and C. Steiner. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 87–103.
- Uranov, S. 2017. Podarok dlia Brezhneva [A gift for Brezhnev] <https://zagadki-istorii.ru/podarok-dlya-brezhneva>. Accessed 26 July 2023.
- Vorotnikova, E. 2022. Kostoreznye shkoly Russkogo severa vo vtoroi polovine 20 veka [Ivory-carving schools of the Russian North of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century]. *Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo Urala, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* [The Decorative Art of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East] 1(10): 72–79.

## 3.4 Artistic futures

### The model and the aspiring artists

The future as an object of study has always been a problematic area of research in anthropology due to its intrinsic link to the past, its research methods, and ways of presenting findings. Recently, however, the study of futures has gained traction and opened up new ways of addressing future-focussed research (Bryant and Knight 2019; Pink and Salazar 2020). Futures feature prominently in Part 3.4. The notion of timespace proposed by Schatzki (2009: 35) is useful here as it implies not only length of time in a certain spatial location but also how such time and space are filled with human activity and therefore create an “infrastructure through which human activities coordinate and aggregate”. This concept helps to present activities, events, and locations and to look into the future of connections that were established during the project, as the future is about stretching temporality to new horizons and prospects. As Bryant and Knight (2019: 192) observe, “Focusing on orientations to the future in everyday adds invaluable detail to our ethnographic quest to better understand the quotidian”. The ethnography we present here is connected to the idea of future, not abstract and intangible, but as ‘cultural facts’ (Appadurai 2013: 285) with its concrete everyday interactions, which are tightly linked to the past and present. This vision of the future is shaped by aspiration, anticipation, and imagination and those actors who are perceived as ‘future-makers’ (Appadurai 2013). In our case, these makers of the future are the younger generation of carvers in *Sakha Sire*. What follows highlights the connections between the past and the future and how the past creates a temporal trajectory into the future and provides “a map for negotiating and shaping new futures” (Appadurai 2013: 288).

\*\*\*

On a sunny day in April 2013, we were sitting in the canteen in the National Arts Museum, tables joined together to accommodate 20 or so students from the P. P. Romanov College of Arts who came to meet us and listen to a presentation we were making about the proposed *Narrative Objects* project.<sup>1</sup> Most students attending the meeting that day were taking a four-year programme of *kostoreznoe iskusstvo* (ivory carving) at the college. Tea, sweets, and biscuits arranged on the tables were one of the attractions of the meeting for these young people, predominantly male, many of whom were away from their homes in the remote northern areas of Sakha.

DOI: [10.4324/9780429456398-16](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456398-16)

This chapter has been made available under a CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

We started the meeting by introducing the ivory model from the British Museum carved by a Sakha craftsman and explaining how it had travelled from Yakutsk to the 1867 Paris exhibition and then to London. We were glad we took colour print-outs of the model for the trip; these came in handy at this meeting. Large images of the whole model and some close-up photographs focusing on small details of the figurines and the carving strokes clearly visible on the trees and the *uraha* helped to illustrate our presentation. We handed out the printed images to the students, and for a while, they looked at them with attention, inspecting details of the model and quietly exchanging comments with each other. When we asked questions to get their feedback, we expected their initial reaction to be modest and taciturn, somewhat typical of Sakha rural youth. But when we asked them to reflect and describe the event depicted on the model, there were enthusiastic and quick responses from students and their teachers, who eagerly engaged in the conversation. No one in the room doubted that the model depicted the summer festival *yhyakh*, all small details evocatively confirming this. We were interested in the students' opinions on what was missing from this model, and again, their response was immediate and unanimous: "Attar!" (Horses!), they exclaimed. The audience knew very well that horses are a core element of the summer festival that celebrates *Döhögöi Toion*, the deity-patron of horses and cattle. Why were the horses missing? Again, the students were ready to provide some scenarios and suggestions, and they eventually agreed with a suggestion made to us by many other Sakha people we had spoken with during our visit that there might have been a second part to the model that got lost. We took some time to discuss what could have featured in the second half of the model. At that point the students started thinking as artists reflecting on the original composition by the old craftsman and projected their professional knowledge and experience of the *yhyakh* celebration. There should be a few *serges*, they said, and a few horses tied to them, people dancing *ohuokhai*, and, of course, *at sürdüüte* (horse races). No *yhyakh* is possible without that, they told us.

Two years later, in April 2015, we were reminded of our presentation to the students and the conversation with them when the *yhyakh* model made its way to Yakutsk. After the elaborate and festive exhibition opening ceremony, two young men—Maksim Struchkov and Aiaal Makarov, graduating students from the College of Arts—approached us and Jill Maggs, British Museum Registrar, and somewhat shyly asked if they would be allowed to carve a second part of the model as part of their diploma final project later that year to be examined in a public defence. The proposal was met with excitement on our part and enthusiasm from the British Museum staff, who were delighted to see how much of an impact the loan was having on local artists. The students' supervisor, Oleg Solov'ev, who accompanied the young men and is himself an established carver, explained that the students were inspired by the idea of 'a missing part' of the model after our presentation two years previously and were thinking about producing this project as part of their diploma project. "We need to make it in time for the graduation in June, so there is a lot of work", he said.

Initially, it was understood that the young men would be making their model using an alternative, cheaper material, like moose antlers, as is the norm for college

projects, and the students had not considered the possibility that they might work with mammoth ivory themselves. As the *Narrative Objects* project gained more attention from the media, the students' project similarly was picked up by local news outlets and became one of the 'feel good' stories of that summer. Responding to the media interest, Kirill Gavril'ev, the Director of the college, and Oleg Solov'ev agreed to supply mammoth ivory for this project as an exception, a decision that indicated the importance of the students' carving project and their choice to create a piece in correspondence with the heritage object. Justifying this decision to us later, Kirill Gavril'ev explained that using the same material for the second half of the model would connect it better with the older part and present a new addition as an integral part and a logical continuation of the missing piece.<sup>2</sup>

Mammoth ivory is expensive, and it is difficult to obtain good-quality material. Some ivory pieces the college procured were not large enough and meant that some of the components the students worked on, the horse figurines, for instance, had to be made by joining two pieces together. We subsequently learned that college staff had scoured the building, looking for any small chunks of ivory that the students could work with. With encouragement from our team and the British Museum to proceed with their project in place and the raw material provided, the students started by researching the old model and comparing it with other carved objects. They studied museum catalogues and art historical literature on ivory carving and concluded that there are very few surviving objects of the same period. They used ivory artefacts that were available in the museums in Yakutsk to research and think about their composition. One ivory work was instrumental in their research: a side panel that was originally part of an ivory box carved early in the nineteenth century and displayed at the Yakut State Museum of History and Culture of the Peoples of the North with a depiction of a scene from *yhyakh*. The panel, with its intricate details, inspired the young carvers to visualise and create their own piece.

### **How to learn from an old master**

In the weeks following the exhibition opening, Maksim and Aiaal spent long hours in the National Arts Museum studying the model while surrounded by more recent ivory carvings, 2D artworks, and the clothing and other exhibits related to *yhyakh* that were part of *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey*. The old model thus became a core object within the young carvers' learning environment as they examined the nineteenth-century craftsman's techniques. They made many visits to the museum to inspect the tiniest details of the model, including the folds on the figurines' dresses, the height and thickness of the little carved figures and other miniature objects placed on the board. It was a condition of the loan agreement that the case should remain sealed within its case for the duration of the exhibition, so all measurements had to be taken through the glass, as accurately as possible.

Oleg Solov'ev, who guided Maksim and Aiaal through their project, explained that he, too, was impressed by the technique of the old craftsman. One afternoon as we sat in Tanya's kitchen, Oleg recalled the processes the students had followed, and how they had focussed on details of the model together to try and work out

the techniques the carver had used. With great attention, he told us, they inspected the thin, curved ivory plates assembled to create the *uraha* positioned in a corner of the composition, trying to understand how the craftsman had managed to make the eggshell-thin plates with access to only simple tools: “*Tak ia i ne ponial kak on umudrilsa eto sdelat*” (I never managed to grasp how the old master managed to make these). Oleg mentioned that by studying the model so carefully and in such detail, the young artists were learning from the old *master* (craftsman) directly and from the traditional style of carving. This experience could be described as an inter-generational, multi-layered exchange, an opinion we heard from other experienced artists who had the opportunity to study the model and felt they were learning from the old craftsman by observing his carving style, processing techniques, flow of lines and the level of polishing. Although the creator of the model was not there to teach the students, some nevertheless described this experience as a dialogue between apprentices and their teachers. The experience of engaging with heritage items as being akin to learning from ancestors is often voiced by Indigenous artists both from *Sakha Sire* and from other parts of the world who are interested in learning about traditional techniques, as we note in [Part 2.3](#). As a form of restorative research, connecting with historic collections is a way of extending teaching across generations through materials (e.g., [Thompson and Kritsch 2005](#)). As this case demonstrates, such engagements are also a means to close historic gaps inflicted by political regimes and thus provide opportunities for reconciliation, learning and inspiration for creative practices.

Traditional carving in *Sakha Sire* is often discussed among art historians who comment on current artistic trends and provide insight into the future of the art form. The presence of the *yhyakh* model in Yakutsk became a stimulus to extend these discussions by triggering reflections from the larger artistic community in the Republic about the model in general and the Sakha style of carving in particular. At the same time, lively discussions to determine what they considered the Sakha school of carving to be were taking place among many art and museum specialists and educators. The exhibition of the model in Yakutsk gathered many practising carvers together at the series of events organised as part of the *Narrative Objects* project. Discussions about carving are normally led by the authoritative voices of art historians and museum practitioners, but in our project, we tried to bring the voices of the craftsmen to the fore and invited them to get engaged in the discussion about the Sakha carving school and its past, present, and future. Importantly, the model also inspired many professional artists to reflect on their individual carving styles and to engage in the polemics about the Sakha tradition of carving. One such event was a discussion organised by Andrei Borisov, former Minister of Culture, and a government advisor on culture. This event, on 17 April 2015, at the National Museum of Arts, brought together artists, art historians, museum workers, and scholars to discuss the model and the impact of its temporary return on the artistic community in the Republic. This discussion became part of the series of television programmes entitled *Kul'turnaia Evolutsiia* (*Cultural Evolution*).

The future of craftsmanship and skills might be about the preservation of style, yet we concur with those authors ([Coy 1989](#); [Marchand 2001](#); [Venkatesan 2010](#);

Ingold 2018) who argue that the process of teaching the knowledge to younger generations and the ways in which such education is offered are crucial. The ever-important learning environment, in which discoveries and professional growth take place, is defined by the relationships between the learners and the area of their enquiry. It is also defined by people, the teachers, the skilled and the experienced who guide the learners in this journey, which relies on social relationships (Coy 1989). Marchand argues that the expertise of craftsmen is a non-objectified form of knowledge and can only be passed on in the form of apprenticeship (2001: 138). Venkatesan (2010) states that skill, an integral part of larger social knowledge, is about identity and belonging. In what follows, we discuss the pedagogy of carving skills.

Ingold (2018) in his discussion of the notion of ‘environment’ and its relation to education, refers to Dewey, who writes, “the things with which a man varies are his genuine environment” (Dewey 1966: 11 in Ingold 2018: 5). The environment in this interpretation is the sum of many things, conditions, and opportunities that a person can learn and grow from. An important aspect of such an education involves not only responding to this environment but also corresponding with it. Ingold (2018) explains correspondence as a relationship between the learner and the object of study, where the object continuously presents questions to the learners, which ignites curiosity. Carving and handling of ivory precisely constitutes the environment in which young carvers develop and grow. This is an environment that endlessly challenges abilities, presents puzzles, and instigates makers to start searching for a potential answer to the conundrum. All in all, it requires the young carvers to correspond to the material. To explore this idea with reference to ivory carving in *Sakha Sire* it is helpful to consider the ways in which the teaching of this art form has shifted over the years. We draw here upon the published works of eminent Sakha art historians, but also upon discussions during fieldwork with artists, including those who studied at the College of Arts and art schools elsewhere in Russia and who subsequently returned home to become teachers themselves.

We visited the P. P. Romanov College of Arts on numerous occasions during our fieldwork. Located centrally, a few minutes’ walk from the National Arts Museum, the building offers three floors of classrooms, studios, and a museum for more than 180 students. One spring afternoon Kirill Petrovich Gavril’ev, Director of the College of Arts, met us in his office, filled with books and artworks created by the college students laid out on the long table. He told us about the programme of study that lasts four years in three disciplinary departments: painting, design, and folk arts and crafts. Competition among applicants is high, as the college offers no more than ten places for each of the specialities to ensure appropriate supervision for their students. There are about 50 students specialising in arts and crafts, which include jewellery design, ivory carving, pottery, birchbark work, and wood carving.

Carving as a discipline was included in the College of Arts curriculum in 1960, initially within the Department of Sculpture (Ivanova-Unarova 2005). Students who studied ivory carving were supervised by the teachers conducting sculpture who followed the rules of plastic anatomy and drawing techniques based on anatomical proportions, often at the expense of the decorative qualities of the material.

Eventually, ivory carving training became a separate discipline and a department in the college, but the rigid criteria applied to carving artworks continued to be influential for some time (Ivanova-Unarova 2005, Ivanova-Unarova 2019). The current college training is based on a curriculum that includes subjects aimed at providing students with foundational knowledge. Students, like Aiaal and Maksim, studied a number of disciplines for four years, including composition and sculpting, that are conducted formally, with the teaching emphasis on the ability of students to perceive structured, theoretical information orally. The curriculum also includes courses aimed at gaining practical skills, and these classes are based on traditional ways of teaching. Carving is a practical skill, learned entirely by observing and from action by continuous trial and error. Students work closely with their instructor, who teaches them by showing and supervising carving tasks, often correcting and explaining the strokes and hand movements for carving, cutting and polishing by demonstration. In some forms of learning, lack of verbal communication is prevalent, as some scholars point out (Marchand 2001, Gowlland 2012). In this mode of teaching, apprentices rely on their vision and tactile perception rather than oral instructions (Marchand 2001: 138). Often, the teacher can take over from the student and slowly show the strokes or lead the student's hand to help them understand the movement.

Teaching by demonstrating and engaging young people in the process as apprentices are core elements of traditional pedagogy and a form of generating craft-related knowledge. This form of learning and obtaining knowledge by doing and participation in the process implies “long immersion, perceptual and kinaesthetic awareness, careful reflection, persistent questioning, and a constant probing of the complex and multiple factors that constitute any field of practice” (Marchand 2010: S10-S11). Knowledge and, therefore, skill become relational, as Cruikshank has also observed. It is “more like a verb than a noun, more a process than a product, and it cannot be easily construed as a written, formally encoded, reified product” (1998: 70). Thus, knowledge of carving and carving well is obtained through the process of making and students need to actively engage to learn the skill in order to achieve expertise.

The Sakha school of carving, one can argue, was established when the College invited traditional ivory carvers and craftsmen, who did not have formal education but who had rich carving expertise, to train a new young generation of carvers (Ivanova-Unarova and Alekseeva 2021: 89). These carvers learned to carve themselves, often by watching their fathers or other relatives. Generations of artists recall Semen Pesterev, a talented and prolific carver, as well as a remarkable teacher. In his long teaching career at the College of Arts, which started in 1960, he taught many famous carving artists. Pesterev taught his students the traditional way, by making them observe and participate in the process, which might have been crucial for the continuation of the carving tradition. As one of his pupils and a well-known carving artist himself said: “Pesterev did not have any theory; he taught what he knew”.<sup>3</sup>

Craftsmen we interviewed agreed that learning the skill of carving is more than just lessons about composition and proportions. When carving is taking place, craftsmen use their perception, intuition, or instinct even. The feeling of the

material is not something that can be explained in words, articulated, or described easily. As we noted in [Part 3.2](#), one can develop an understanding of ivory, its properties, and the way this material behaves when carved only through tactile connection. The tactility of the carving process and the knowledge of skilled craftsmen have been described by Vasilii Amydaev, who referred to his father's ways of guiding his pupils and demonstrating his techniques without much utterance, almost silently, concluding with terse "*mannyk buoluokhtaakh*" (that's how it should be). Formal classes focusing on theory are, of course, important; they provide important, basic knowledge, yet, according to Vasilii, one should treat such knowledge *delikatno* (with caution). By this, Vasilii does not negate the importance of classical training, but highlights that learning to carve cannot be reduced to transmission of knowledge, reproduction of skills, techniques, and tips because the skills of Indigenous artists are obtained through practice and engaged training. Formal education, therefore, should not be a substitute for the traditional ways of growth and learning of skills by a younger generation of artists from older craftsmen and the old works. As Vasilii said: "Those craftsmen in the past used to know so much more than we do now. We need to learn from them".<sup>4</sup>

Teaching offered by traditional craftsmen to their younger apprentices is not only about the technical precision of their carving skills and excellent handling of tools. This training comes with an introduction to Sakha ontology and mythology, which is deeply rooted in traditional knowledge. With learning and acquiring knowledge of carving comes an understanding of the system of belief and moral principles. Carving has always been an effective way to express ethnic identity due to the flexibility of media. It is similar to storytelling and that is why Indigenous and ethnic themes are popular and attract the viewer's attention, as poetically noted in this historic ethnographic depiction: "Eternally long winter evenings of hard-working Yakut family are organised around making ... different objects. The Yakut does not hurry. Humming a tune or listening to a narrated story, as long as the night itself, he will be measuring, cutting, trimming and fitting until the object he is making will take the shape which corresponds to his liking" ([Seroshevskii 1993](#) [1896]: 394). When an experienced craftsman is teaching his pupils to carve ivory, he is also teaching them to tell a story. This type of learning helps to shape and strengthen social and cultural identity. Apprenticeship, therefore, is an important channel for the effective transmission of "the entire cultural repertoire down the generations" and integrates young people into a professional fraternity ([Lancy 2012](#): 121). Carving, then, concerns the process of relating to the material but also to the emerging figure of an animal or anything else.

### **Apprenticeship and dynasties**

Teaching how to carve cannot be presented as a package that students can learn from a textbook. As Trevor Marchand argues, some other non-objectified forms of knowledge, such as building skills for instance, can only be passed to novices through apprenticeship ([Marchand 2001](#): 138). Apprenticeship is a complex concept and has been an institution in many societies ([Lave and Wenger 1991](#);

Marchand 2008; Lancy 2012; Henyei Neto 2019). Apprenticeship is a form of formal or informal training provided by an established craftsman to a younger person, usually male, who is exposed to the work of the master by assistance in their work. While an apprentice is expected to carry out some chores and menial work, in exchange they would normally receive an opportunity to learn a few tips and acquire an important skill from the craftsman. Apprenticeship is based on the idea that it trains novices in craft skills “while socializing them to join the social and cultural elite represented by master craftsmen” (Lancy 2012: 113). The system of apprenticeship has always been, and continues to be, an important way of transmitting practical knowledge in families where the skills would be passed from older to younger members of the family (cf. Gowlland 2012), from a father to a son. For Sakha artistic families, apprenticeship as a form of passing on skills is a common phenomenon and is what holds many dynasties of artists together (Ivanova-Unarova 2021). Historically, before the first missionary schools appeared in the region, apprenticeship was the main mode of passing knowledge and has been rooted in traditional patterns of pedagogy and learning craft skills in Sakha culture.

In this project, we were fortunate to work closely with Vasilii Amydaev, a talented carving artist and the former Chairman of the Union of Artists in the Republic. Sadly, Vasilii passed away in the summer of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. His assistance with the *Narrative Objects* project was immense, from our earliest approaches to seek the guidance of Sakha artists in shaping the aims of the project, to participating in and leading events associated with the exhibition and connecting us with other artists, and later, when writing this book, checking interview material to ensure we were appropriately communicating his views. The Amydaev family is a very good example of an artistic dynasty. Vasilii’s father, Nikolai Danilovich (1933–2010), learned the skill of carving wood and then ivory from an elder in a small village in Verkhneviliuisk *uluus* where he grew up. He later received formal training from the College of Arts in Yakutsk. For the remainder of his career, he was an artist and a teacher. Among his students are many well-known and talented Sakha carving artists: Fedor Markov, Konstantin Mamontov, Georgii Rodionov, Roman Pinigin, Mikhail Sleptsov, and Robert Petrov (Ivanova-Unarova 2021: 8). Vasilii, also became an artist, and Nikolai Danilovich was his first teacher. Vasilii recalled the training he received from his father and the first figurine of an animal he carved using moose antlers under his father’s supervision, when still in primary school, aged 12.<sup>5</sup> After school, Vasilii trained at the Arts College, where his father continued to teach him, before completing his training at the Krasnoiarsk Institute of Arts.

In the summer of 2016, Tanya visited Vasilii’s studio and met his nephew, a 22-year-old young man named Nikolai after his grandfather. While Vasilii was eager to answer most questions on behalf of his nephew, the pride and respect he had for his nephew were immediately apparent. As Vasilii did not have children of his own, it was important that he had an apprentice to continue the Amydaev name and the dynastical skill further. Like his grandfather and his uncle, Nikolai started carving at school, making small, practical objects under the supervision of his uncle. It was difficult not to in a family where the desire to carve is inherited. Following

the family tradition, he then studied at the College of Arts in Yakutsk and was accepted to the Krasnoiarisk Institute of Arts. Today Nikolai Amydaev is already making a name for himself as a young artist, sculptor and ivory carver who takes part in competitions in *Sakha Sire* and beyond. Vasilii's niece, Aiina Amydaeva, born in 1999, is also a trained carver. Aiina is almost an exception to the rule; female ivory carving artists are not yet common in the Republic. "Why did she choose to carve, nobody knows, nobody forced her into this profession. She explains it by her genetic makeup", Vasilii laughed (Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 10 August 2016). Aiina is now a freelance artist and owns a small shop where she sells her works. Vasilii's brother-in-law, Aleksandr Vinokourov (Taman), is also a talented carving artist. It was clear from all our discussions with him that Vasilii was very proud that the tradition of carving continues in his family.

### **Two parts of the model**

Summers in Yakutsk are always busy with public events, festivals, and gatherings. The reverberating buzz from the long-awaited heat, sunshine, and the *yhyakh* celebrations was in the air in the summer of 2015 when we were busy interviewing artists, meanwhile carefully observing the progress of Maksim and Aiaal's diploma project. We visited them a few times in the college workshop, where they demonstrated their work in progress: the initial designs of their model on the computer, plasticine-moulded figures, and the first rough shapes of the ivory composition. We even watched them talking about their work on a morning television show.

On 24 June 2015, we were invited to attend the formal defence of Maksim's and Aiaal's diploma work at the College of Arts. Diploma defence events in higher education institutions in Russia are open to public, and while they do not always command large external audiences, friends and family will often attend to support students. We arrived early, and Oleg Solov'ev took us up to the room where the young men were getting ready. Unlike the other students who were defending their work that day, Maksim and Aiaal were dressed in traditional Sakha outfits and looked smart, albeit slightly nervous. A television crew and newspaper photographers who were planning to cover their project added to the excitement and exceptionality of the event. Their model, already assembled, was ready to be shown to the college staff and students. Not wanting to add to their nerves, we wished them well and entered the large assembly hall where the defence was taking place. Rows of seats were arranged to face the presenters, and a long table was prepared for examining panel members, who were all senior members of the college's teaching and administrative team or external artists. One by one, the presenting students would enter the hall and stand near the front alongside their artworks to give an oral presentation, normally in Russian, lasting about 15 minutes. This was followed by comments and questions from the panel. We saw several students presenting their work, noting that much of the work produced by aspiring architects and artists incorporated traditional Sakha designs.

Finally, Maksim and Aiaal started their presentation. They presented in Sakha, the language of their choice, which made them much more articulate as they talked

about the different stages of their project as images of their carvings appeared on a sleek Prezi show. In the two months of continuous work on their model, they carved 16 human figures, three horses, and three *serges*. They adhered to the artistic style called primitivism exemplified by the original piece and characterised by simpler shapes and uncomplicated design decisions, significantly different from European styles of representation. Young artists described their composition and explained their choices of objects and sporting contests of *yhyakh* celebration they portrayed in their version of the model of *yhyakh*. To create cohesion with the original old carving, they lent age to their model by using a traditional method of boiled bark and a manganese solution for the right tone of the brownish colour. They also had to age the wood by scratching and chipping the corners of the board. The examiners praised the project, and there were many positive comments on the style and special efforts made to create cohesion with the old model, its primitive style, folk authenticity, the facial expressions, and the laconism of carving. The boys were commended for their craftsmanship, and the execution of the work that presented the students' own reading of the original piece. Their supervisor, Oleg Solov'ev, spoke with pride and commented on their hard work, creativity, and their ability to learn. Finally, the examination panel announced the marks, and we all applauded when it was announced that Maksim and Aiaal had received the grade of Excellent with Distinction, the highest mark that can be awarded. The panel further recommended that their diploma work be put forward for future carving contests (Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 26 June 2015).

Two days later, on 26 June 2015, the new model was brought together with the one made by the old master. After a round-table discussion on the future of Sakha ivory carving held in the cool, marble-lined upper atrium of the National Museum of Arts—attended by many well-known artists, art historians and museum workers—those present were invited into the gallery, where Maxim and Aiaal's own model was displayed on a table next to the glass display case with the *yhyakh* model loaned from the British Museum inside. The newly made composition created great excitement; people were inspecting the model, exchanging comments, and praising the young men. Cameras and phones started flashing non-stop to preserve this historic moment. When the students' new model was lifted and held up against the glass case with the original model so that people could see the two parts together, a round of applause echoed in the spacious museum exhibition hall. The two models were finally connected (Figure 3.9).

Many of those present at the event made public speeches about young men's project and their skill, and also commented on the dialogue between the old craftsman who had inspired and taught the young students 150 years later through his own model. This moment was understood by many as a meeting point of past and present. Some expressed their satisfaction that the arrival of the model was timely, as the connection it enabled contributed to the preservation and maintenance of the traditions of the Sakha masters, which has been an objective of the College of Arts for its 70 years of existence. Some pointed out that the dialogue with the past was possible due to the British Museum's own preservation efforts and that the care of artefacts is not just historically important but allows people to reconnect with their



*Figure 3.9* The old and the new models brought together, June 2015. Photograph by T. Argounova-Low.

roots and ancestry. Indeed, often, museum workers, carvers, and scholars, who appreciate the availability of these objects for academic and public engagement, acknowledged the efforts of museums in the USA, Germany, and Britain, among many others, that have cared for old Sakha artefacts. These artefacts taken out from the country before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution were most definitely preserved from destruction during the Soviet period (Balzer 2017; Ivanova-Unarova 2017; Kendall 2017; Krupnik 2017).

In both the public celebration of these students' work, and in reflections on their project shared with us subsequently from their teachers and those in the arts establishment, there was agreement that the two models, from the past and the present, were also addressing the future of the ivory carving in Sakha (Yakutia). The student project highlighted the important role young artists will play later, as they develop artistically, create new works, and take on the responsibility for the continuation of the Sakha style of carving. This is especially so, given that due to the openness of the creative space, artists are exposed to many trends and it is easy to be influenced by other schools of carving. The discussion also raised issues of the perceived purity of the Sakha style of carving. The category of purity is often brought up in relation to language, styles and designs. Ferguson (2022) notes how this notion of purity, often expressed as *d'inyneekh sakhalyy* (authentic Sakha style) or *chisto po-iakutski* (purely Sakha way), widely circulated among speakers of Sakha, is linked

to linguistic ideologies in the Republic and perceptions of the state and the future of the Sakha language. Ideas of purity are often linked to discourses about the disappearance or dilution of culture, its survival and ability to withstand contemporary pressure and form part of the essentialist discourse, where the notion of purity is viewed as an aspect of the political strategies of Indigenous communities (Spivak 1988). Whereas influences from other carving artists around the world are unavoidable, the professional artists who engaged with the *Narrative Objects* project are very conscious about such trends. Many at the event focussed on the students' model and discussed the benefits of such exposure from outside, but also expressed their concerns about the diluting effects of globalisation, which is characteristic of the internet age without borders and the free flow of information. They warned of downsides and harm that can be done to the carving art, so one must treat such influences with caution. Both teachers and artists expressed their worry that these global developments affect art and that for a small nation, like Sakha, where people are trying to preserve their unique culture, it can be detrimental to the authenticity of artistic expression.

The discussion was also an opportunity to offer some comments for improvements and suggestions. For instance, some participants pointed to the wrong orientation of the students' model. Zinaida Ivanova-Unarova, an art historian, explained the importance of the sequence of events during *yhyakh* and how the flow of activities on the model can be marked by the placement of objects in a logical order on the model and why the exit should not be near the horses, but on the opposite side. Teaching continued in this formal event and involved not only the master carver but also other experienced teachers. The original model was an instigator of this process of knowledge sharing and acted as a mediator between past, present, and future, which is, of course, an important characteristic of a narrative object.

\*\*\*

For Maksim and Aiaal the *Century Long Journey* exhibition provided an unprecedented opportunity to engage with a historic Sakha artefact, participate in continuing the tradition of carving, and tell a contemporary story about their rich culture. The *yhyakh* model in the British Museum is not the only artefact of early Sakha carving available, but its loan to the NAM generated an unexpected and evocative outcome. Their own echoing model, which is now exhibited at the College Museum for future generations of students in the P. P. Romanov College of Arts, will serve as a good example of how carving is a process of making creative pieces but also of engaging with ethnographic knowledge of an artist's own culture. The young generation of carving artists will continue to receive a comprehensive education that will equip them with classical knowledge, but at the same time, they will be able to combine such knowledge with the skills of working with ivory in the traditional style, characteristic of old craftsmanship. When they graduate and become individual artists and teachers themselves, they will be able to pass this knowledge to their trainees, emulating their teachers and old craftsmen from whom they learned a great deal.

This is not a story with a comfortable ending. Soon after we returned to the United Kingdom in 2015, we learnt that Aiaal tragically died very soon after his graduation and left many unfinished projects. Maksim, meanwhile, returned to his home in Verkhneviliusk, where he continues to work as an ivory carving artist and teaches carving at a local school. He participates in artistic exhibitions, and we had a chance to catch up with him a year later at the *Olojkho Yhyakh* in Verkhneviliusk, where he proudly demonstrated his recent works. Life as an artist in Sakha (Yakutia) is financially precarious, it takes a serious commitment from a young person to dedicate career to art and ivory carving. Like many of his classmates, Maksim hopes to continue his creative career and sees his profession as an opportunity to tell stories that are so evocatively expressed in ivory.

Throughout the *Narrative Objects* project, many artists commented that the presence of the model in Yakutsk was an opportunity to reflect on the future of the art of Sakha carving. It raised the profile of carving as a valued art form and attracted the attention of many people responsible for the development of this branch of expressive art in the Republic, such as the Ministry of Culture and other agencies. Educators highlighted the importance of exposing young aspiring artists to old-style carving, which will help them think about their ethnic traditions and carving skills. For the branch of art that was affected and dominated by socialist realism during the Soviet era, works like the model of *yhyakh* preserved by the British Museum serve as a reminder of the original, creative forms and decorative carving styles, which take attention away from the rigid, academic approach to folk authenticity and flair. The young artists connected the distant past, exemplified by the old model, with the echoing, contemporary reading of the same event on their own model. By bringing two parts together, the students created a case of *ynevremen-naia istoriia* “non-temporal history”, as one of their examiners described it, which illustrated not only the continuity of the festival, but also evocatively demonstrated the future of the ivory carving tradition.

## Notes

- 1 Alison Brown and Tanya Argounova-Low visited Yakutsk in April 2013 specifically for consultation and preliminary discussion for developing our AHRC grant proposal.
- 2 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 24 July 2015.
- 3 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.
- 4 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.
- 5 Argounova-Low, fieldnotes, 27 July 2016.

## References

- Appadurai, A. 2013. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. London, New York: Verso.
- Balzer, M.M. 2017. Vozrozhdenie dukhovnosti v Respublike Sakha [Spiritual revitalization in Sakha Republic]. In *Material'naia i Dukhovnaia Kul'tura Narodov Iakutii v Muzeiakh Mira (XVII – nachalo XX vekov)* [The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in the World Museums (17<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)], eds. A. Zhirkov and Z. Ivanova-Unarova. Yakutsk: Bichik, pp. 48–66.

- Bryant, R. and D. Knight 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coy, M.W. 1989. Part 1. From Theory. In *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again*, ed. M. W. Coy. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, pp. 1–11.
- Cruikshank, J. 1998. *The Social Life of Stories*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ferguson, J. 2022. The persistence of antiquity: language ideologies and perception of language vitality among Sakha speakers. In *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 43(3): 214–227.
- Gowlland, G. 2012. Learning craft skills in China: apprenticeship and social capital in an artisan community of practice. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 43(4): 358–371.
- Henyei Neto, G. 2019. Art, craft, and the Sámi reflections on Sámi Duodji in Kautokeino through an apprenticeship experience [electronic resource]. Unpublished PhD thesis. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.
- Ingold, T. 2018. *Anthropology and/as Education*. London: Routledge.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2005. O sootnoshenii iakutskogo narodnogo i dekorativno-prikladnogo iskusstva [On correspondence between Yakut folk and decorative-applied art]. In *Dialog: Muzei i Obshchestvo. Materialy Vtoroi Mezhdunarodnoi Nauchno-Prakticheskoi Konferentsii* [Dialogue: Museum and Society. Proceedings of the Second Conference], Yakutsk: National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), pp. 150–152.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2017. Ot sostavitelia. [Editor's note]. In *Material'naia i Dukhovnaia Kul'tura Narodov Iakutii v Muzeiakh Mira (XVII – nachalo XX vekov)*. [The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in the World Museums (17<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)], eds. A. Zhirkov and Z. Ivanova-Unarova. Yakutsk: Bichik, pp. 10.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2019. Kostoreznoe iskusstvo Yakutii. Tendentsii razvitiia [Ivory carving art in Yakutia. Tendencies of development]. *Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo Urala, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* [The Decorative Art of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East]. December: 123–133.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 2021. Ud'yor sitim. Khudozhestvennaia dinastiia Amydaevykh. Pamiatii Vasilii Nikolaevicha Amydaeva [The artistic dynasty of the Amydaevs. In memory of Vasilii Nikolaevich Amydaev]. *Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo Urala, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* [The Decorative Art of the Urals, Siberia and the Far East]. September: 7–13.
- Ivanova-Unarova, Z. and L. Alekseeva 2021. Ivory carving in Yakutia. National identity and processes of acculturation. *Sibirica* 20(2): 76–101.
- Kendall, L. 2017. Amerikanskii muzei estestvennoi istorii i ego kollektsiia [American Museum of Natural History and its collections]. In *Material'naia i Dukhovnaia Kul'tura Narodov Iakutii v Muzeiakh Mira (XVII – nachalo XX vekov)* [The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in the World Museums (17<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)], eds. A. Zhirkov and Z. Ivanova-Unarova. Yakutsk: Bichik, pp. 14–31.
- Krupnik, I. 2017. Arkticheskie, sibirskie i iakutskie (sakha) etnograficheskie kollektsii v Smisonovskom institute [Arctic, Siberian and Yakut (Sakha) ethnographic collections at the Smithsonian Museum]. In *Material'naia i Dukhovnaia Kul'tura Narodov Iakutii v Muzeiakh Mira (XVII – nachalo XX vekov)* [The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Peoples of Yakutia in the World Museums (17<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)], eds. A. Zhirkov and Z. Ivanova-Unarova. Yakutsk: Bichik, pp. 32–47.
- Lancy, D. 2012. “First you must master pain”: the nature and purpose of apprenticeship. *Anthropology of Work Review* 23(2): 113–126.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marchand, T. 2001. *Minaret Building and Apprenticeship in Yemen*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.
- Marchand, T. 2008. Muscles, morals and mind: craft apprenticeship and the formation of person. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 56 (3): 245–271.
- Marchand, T. 2010. Making knowledge: explorations of the indissoluble relation between minds, bodies, and environment. *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) Special Issue*, pp. S1–S21.

- Pink, S. and J. Salazar. 2020. Anthropologies and futures: Setting the agenda. In *Anthropologies and Futures. Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds*, eds. J. Salazar, S. Pink, A. Irvin, and J. Sjöberg. Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, pp. 2–21.
- Seroshevskii, V. 1993 [1896]. *Iakuty: Opyt Etnograficheskogo Isseldovaniia* [The Yakuts: An Ethnographic Study]. Moscow: ROSSPEN.
- Schatzki, T. 2009. Timespace and the organization of social life. In: *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, eds. E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk. Milton Park, Abington: Taylor and Francis, pp. 35–48.
- Spivak, G. 1988. “Can the subaltern speak?”. In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. L. Grossberg and C. Nelson. Houndmills: Macmillan, pp. 66–111.
- Thompson, J. and I. Kritsch, 2005. *Long Ago Sewing We Will Remember: The Story of the Gwich'in Traditional Caribou Skin Clothing Project*. Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Venkatesan, S. 2010. Learning to weave: weaving to learn...what? *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) Special Issue*, pp. S158–S175.

# Conclusion

## Model of *yhyakh* as a narrative object

This book was inspired by our efforts to understand what a narrative object might be and what it might do if brought into conversation with people. In order to address these questions, we chose to focus on an especially compelling artefact in the collection of the British Museum, *Model of a Summer Encampment of the Yakuts*, one of the earliest known depictions of *yhyakh* – the Sakha summer festival which has been celebrated for centuries in *Sakha Sire* but was threatened during the Soviet era when Sakha cultural expressions and beliefs were challenged by state ideology. This model has been in London for over 150 years, having left Yakutia in 1866 for the Paris Universal Exhibition of the following year, though its display history since has been sporadic, and, like most objects in museum collections, it is normally in storage rather than on display.

The *Narrative Objects* project, which underpins the book, has its roots in Tanya's experience of being raised in Yakutsk during the later Soviet era, her observations over many years of the transformations taking place in *Sakha Sire* following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and lengthy discussions with friends and family prompted by the Sakha cultural resurgence which has occurred at pace since the early 1990s. The project was further inspired by Alison's museum work, and particularly her experiences of supporting the visits of Indigenous cultural specialists, artists and researchers from around the world to museums in the UK, in which the capacity of historic objects to generate stories, often in extremely powerful ways, has been reinforced time and time again. As such, we were both fully aware that people routinely turn to museum and archival collections to tell their own stories, both to provide counter-narratives that challenge established stereotypes and one-sided perspectives on the past and to fill in gaps, but most importantly to support knowledge regeneration and education for those who matter to them. We were curious to know whether similar narrative processes might take place in *Sakha Sire*, where the complexities of ethnicity and identity given political divergences from Russia play a key role in debates about culture, and what the impact of bringing the model to the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) might be, knowing that doing so would ensure the model would reach the widest possible interested audience. In short, the book is our attempt to examine some of the processes through which a historic object becomes a narrative object.

The book is, crucially, also concerned with both the repression and the revitalisation of Sakha culture. As we noted in the Introduction, anthropological literature

in the areas of absence and silence, presence and counter-narratives or voice, and creativity has inspired our thinking and our approach as we developed the project, undertook the fieldwork, and wrote the book. We explored these themes in all three parts. [Part 1](#) provided context for the reader to recognise the continued power of narrative and story-telling practices within *Sakha Sire*, while appreciating just how pervasive the effects of silencing during the Soviet era have been. By drawing attention to themes of cultural, historical and contemporary importance to Sakha in their stories, such as environmental knowledge and climate concerns, the prevalence of mammoths as mystical and potentially dangerous beings, and the evidentiary capacity of *olonkho* and its links with Sakha cosmology, we laid a foundation for the reader to understand how these themes coalesce in material form in the *yhyakh* model while making explicit the centrality of the verbal articulation of legends in Sakha cultural practices. *Yhyakh* is one route through which stories were publicly shared. As we note, there was no sharp break between how *yhyakh* was celebrated prior to and following the creation of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922; nevertheless, as the twentieth century progressed, the silencing which formed part of the Soviet strategy of restricting the expression of ethnic identity began to take hold, and the impact of this strategy continues to reverberate (see Gavrilova 2019; Balzer 2021).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Sakha people have worked extremely hard to revive *yhyakh* and to support a multitude of linguistic and cultural initiatives. For these individuals – and we spoke with many of them across the *Narrative Objects* project – any work that contributes to deepening Sakha familiarity with Sakha history and culture is to be welcomed, even if there is a more general resignation that the deeper meanings of *yhyakh* are being submerged by the ever-growing spectacle of the celebration in its current form. Having laid out the cultural and historical contexts, we turned in [Part 2](#) to the model itself to examine the ways in which, following its relocation from the Khamagatta *nasleg* in Namskii *uluus* to Paris and then to London, it has been mobilised in different exhibitions to participate in very specific representational narratives. While most of these narratives were not generated by Sakha themselves, the exhibition *Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long Journey*, curated by the staff of the National Arts Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), which took place over the spring and summer of 2015, was the first time that the model was interpreted through a Sakha lens. Here it took its place alongside other masterpieces of Sakha mammoth ivory carving and contemporary art as the centrepiece of a display which celebrated *yhyakh* and those who have represented it artistically. Alongside mammoth ivory sculptures, the curators constructed an open display of items that would have been used at the festival created by the hands of craftspeople from the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These included wooden *choroons* carved with intricate designs, woven horsehair rugs, delicately cut birchbark *khappakhchy* (screens) that would have been used inside an *uraha* to offer privacy to young women or couples, and a woman's heavily appliqued and fur-trimmed coat, hat and silver *ilin-kelin kebiber*. All of these exemplify a vivid artistic environment in which things intended for domestic spaces were made to be beautiful. While the model of *yhyakh* was

the focus of the exhibition, the curators were making a strong statement about the vitality and creativity of Sakha men and women across time, a message that was in stark contrast to the narratives promoted by the exhibition of the model and related Sakha items in Paris and London, at least until its 2011 display as part of Grayson Perry's *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* show, which drew out and respected the creative skills of so many individuals whose names are absent from museum records. Much of [Part 2](#) is concerned with Sakha responses to the model following its return to *Sakha Sire* in 2015. Following the discussion of curatorial creativity, we turned to how the themes of absence and silence, presence and voice, and creativity, converge, first in relation to our discussion of the use of historic collections in cultural revitalisation work and the contested issue of ownership, and then in an examination of how people engaged with the model in creative ways that brought to the fore its narrative capacity. From using a dental camera to reveal a hidden figure, to staging an *yhyakh* performance based on the model's links to a wealthy Sakha benefactor, to creating curriculum materials and supporting student learning – all of these were direct incorporative responses to the model that used it as the basis for new stories. In many respects, these fieldwork encounters are very good examples of how some objects can act as carriers of knowledge from the past as well as being suffused with temporal meanings that link them to possible futures and, as such, exhibit what [Bryant \(2014\)](#) refers to as “temporal dynamism”.

We see temporal dynamism further at play in [Part 3](#), where we return to the material – mammoth tusk – to consider the creative practices of artists and to relate these to ideas of futurity in a context in which Sakha art forms are reemerging after a period in which these, too, were silenced. Rather than focus purely on the idea of temporal dynamism in relation to the idea of tactile memory or “touching the past” ([Harries 2017](#)), however, we extend this notion to propose the idea of “material dynamism” in which the fluctuations of a material over time are practically engaged with by artists. Drawing primarily from conversations in artists' workshops in which raw materials and works in progress mediated our discussions, we examine first how the engagement of artists with mammoth ivory is shaped by the material itself, inconsistencies and all. This is a material which is highly responsive to its environment, be this while embedded below the permafrost over thousands of years, where it absorbs minerals from its surroundings that enrich its colour, or subsequently, once it has emerged into the daylight and fluctuates according to temperature and humidity. Through sensory encounters, artists learn how to anticipate the ways in which a piece of tusk might crack or otherwise shift and to adjust to this material dynamism by thinking about how it might influence their carving. When working with ivory, there are no “finished” or “completed” objects. “Material dynamism” is thus a useful way of thinking about the responsiveness of materials that fits well alongside the less tangible idea of temporal dynamism. In [Part 3](#), we also examined the ways in which different generations of artists work together to establish a distinctly Sakha style of carving. This is both a creative and a political act, in which their art serves to mobilise and reinforce Sakha identity. We see this most clearly in [Part 3.4](#) with the discussion of the creative response of two young carving students to the *yhyakh* model following the suggestion that the original piece may be incomplete. This

unexpected offshoot of the *Narrative Objects* project afforded an opportunity for us to better understand how carving knowledge is shared and supported across generations, itself a form of temporal dynamism, and was encapsulated in the Russian term *vnevremennaia istoriia* “non-temporal history” used by one of the examiners of the two students at their public Diploma defence who spoke eloquently of how the students had learned from the old master with the boundaries between them being fluid.<sup>1</sup> Temporality had become timeless (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006). Whether the original model was indeed intended to be larger is not, in fact, important; what matters is how these artists chose to extend it creatively by drawing different parts from different times together. Our exploration of the ideas of temporality and material dynamism, as exemplified in [Part 3](#), is one of the key contributions of this book.

### **Beyond narrative capacities**

We fully recognise that the *yhyakh* model is a unique item made for a particular purpose, and that this raises the question of the extent to which the conclusions we draw from our analysis about what a narrative object is might usefully be applied to other items. The specific characteristics of this model, be these physical, such as its captivating small-scale format, or representational, for example, its status as one of the earliest artistic depictions of a celebration which is close to the hearts of many Sakha individuals, meant that it was both intriguing and recognisable for many of those who engaged with it. We suspect that this contributed quite markedly to the richness of the responses it elicited. Less iconic or familiar items, or those that were not created with the purpose of narrative in mind, are unlikely to spark quite so many discussions or responses of the variety and depth that arose during the *Narrative Objects* project. Nonetheless, the model’s very capacity to trigger memories, stories, and reflections about *yhyakh* celebrations of earlier times, and to contribute to a wider set of debates about history, time, and culture, can also be seen with other historic artefacts that may be less overtly narrational. We might then ask what implications this project has for museum anthropology more broadly, given that museums are filled with thousands of other items that exhibit varying degrees of narrative capacity. What questions arise regarding access, for example, given the evident benefits of engaging with narrative objects? What steps might museum staff take beyond those they are already making to work on projects like this one? Who takes the lead in this work, given stretched finances and limited curatorial capacity? In our case, we knew the British Museum, a comparatively wealthy institution,<sup>2</sup> had no ability to take forward work with the model despite senior staff recognising the potential for a valuable cultural project. Without specialist curatorial staff and resources, they were reliant on a partnership with university-based researchers.

We might also ask what the implications of this project are for debates about cultural property. We have been writing this book at a time of great change within museums in Europe, when institutions are reflecting on their links with the many forms of colonialism and its fragmenting power, as well as the ways in which museum activities can both reinforce and challenge entrenched views about cultural differences. Museum staff across Europe are developing engagement projects

which reflect on concepts of care, access, and ownership and which are intended to critique their own institutions' status by exposing biases in their collecting histories, their interpretative functions, and their structures. Mostly this work is glossed as part of wider decolonial processes, and there is a wealth of scholarship and practice-based work that indicates how museums are responding to the challenge. This work is set against a backdrop of government promises to build better relations with museums in former colonial territories, most often through the creation of restitution legislation but also through training schemes, exchanges, and other cultural initiatives. Since the publication in 2018 of the *Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Sarr and Savoy 2018), which offered strategies for returning cultural items and artworks to African nations that were acquired by France during the colonial era, governments in several European countries have passed legislation aimed at tackling the issue of returning cultural items wrongfully removed. While progress on delivering the promises of this legislation has been uneven, those of us working in this area are well aware of the increase in repatriation and rematriation-related stories from many parts of the world in our daily news feeds over the last few years. And while in Europe, in particular, there has been a noticeable rise in restitution and decolonising activity on the part of museums, museums and Indigenous people in settler colonial states such as Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United States, have been taking forward work in this area in a sustained manner for a longer period of time.

The shifts in museum work noted above, while considered controversial by some, point to the desire to correct what are regarded as historical wrongs, and many cases cite cultural and/or religious need as underpinning reasons prompting requests for return. The model of *yhyakh* falls into a somewhat different space.<sup>3</sup> We noted in [Part 2](#) that when the topic of where the model should belong came up in fieldwork discussions, invariably, people were quite clear that it should remain in the British Museum. Unlike those instances where cultural items were removed illicitly and often violently, this was a commissioned piece which people fully recognised was not taken without consent or in circumstances of explicitly unequal power relations. Indeed, Gavriil Pavlov, the Sakha merchant who negotiated the commission, is remembered very positively for his generosity, and though less is known about the carver Belousov, no one with whom we spoke speculated that he produced this piece under duress. By contrast, there was a preference to point to the model having been intended to portray Sakha cultural expression in the wider world, and the observation that this is a role it can continue to have as a narrative object. While the legitimacy of the British Museum's ownership of the model is not in doubt – Franks paid the asking price for it – in our conversations with Sakha colleagues on this topic they repeatedly emphasised a political point which we gloss here: despite acknowledging the value to Sakha people of seeing the model in Yakutsk, it should remain in the British Museum at the present time because to have something of such importance to Sakha people in that particular institution is external validation of who the Sakha people are. Given wider efforts to assert Sakha identity, this perspective is perhaps not so surprising. Indeed, the ways in which people responded creatively to the model which we described in [Parts 2 and 3](#)

were a means of reclaiming ownership of the model and of using and interpreting it for purposes which made sense locally. That the model is rarely on display may not have been fully appreciated by the majority of those with whom we spoke, yet by reflecting on their responses it seems that this matters little. Tanya's perspective on this interpretation, as a Sakha person, is that having such a culturally important item in the British Museum – an internationally recognised museum with long-standing claims to universalism – represents an acknowledgement of the place of *Sakha Sire* in the world, and that Sakha cultural heritage is part of global heritage.<sup>3</sup> This is a point that several interviewees made in relation to Sakha items taking their place on the world stage of the 1867 Paris Exhibition; knowing this was the case was a challenge to perceptions of *Sakha Sire* as remote and unconnected from centres of global power. Given on-going debates in Europe and the Americas about museums and universalism, this may seem to be a perspective at odds with more dominant current narratives about ownership and cultural property and decolonial work in museums, however, it is a perspective that needs to be taken seriously. The overt expression of ethnic difference is still relatively recent in the former Soviet Republics; silencing and “common unsaids” remain and continue to be reproduced (Gavrilova 2022). As such, to make statements that support the British Museum as the right place (right now) for the model to be is an acknowledgement that its presence there serves a larger purpose than if it were to remain in Yakutsk, albeit one that is not fully appreciated outside *Sakha Sire*. Our findings thus provide an ethnographically grounded alternative to predominant cultural political narratives with regard to museums and ownership that does not invalidate the range of perspectives and the necessity to challenge injustice where it exists but highlights the subtleties of restitution discourse that are perhaps themselves silenced.

Having indicated how the *Narrative Objects* project and this book might influence museum anthropology, we offer some closing thoughts on its contributions to anthropological scholarship more broadly. First, regionally this work adds to the literature in English on Siberia and Sakha (Yakutia), and specifically that which addresses memory, material culture and cultural revitalisation. Given that our approach to these themes is centred on a post-socialist location for which there is relatively little published research, it brings a much-needed comparative dimension to the literature on this topic from other parts of the world. Second, the book continues a tradition within anthropological scholarship in Siberia of foregrounding Indigenous voices that dates to the later nineteenth century. That Indigenous ethnographers, linguists, and other culture specialists played a crucial role in documenting cultural forms and traditions is well-established, and their influence on early studies in Yakutia is widely acknowledged (Balzer 1995; Diakonova and Romanova 2003; Takakura 2006; Kasten 2018; Argounova-Low 2018). In our case, Tanya's positionality as a Sakha anthropologist allowed her to draw on personal experiences as well as an extended network of familial relations, which together shaped how – and why – the project was conceived and developed in the way it was. This positionality comes with its own challenges, of course, but generated a richness of fieldwork experiences for the whole team during the project and has brought unusual depth to the analysis. Finally, voice in the context of this book is not only addressed in terms of representation but in relation to how the vocal

articulation of narrative and of memory can challenge silences which have become normalised. In the context of scholarship on Soviet and post-Soviet ideology and experience, this is especially important given the limited anthropological work to date on the processes and impacts of silencing as they concern those living in the Russian Northeast. The scholarship which does exist, for example, [Laptander's \(2020\)](#) work on silence and silencing in relation to the history of the Yamal Nenets, highlights how silences can be extraordinarily telling in themselves. [Laptander's \(2020: 6\)](#) observation that “Although silencing makes words unspoken, at the same time, it endows these unspoken words with a more powerful message, so that silencing can both help to keep and forget memories about the past” resonates with our own study. By drawing attention to absences and presences, and particularly through the discussion of mammoth ivory carving during the Soviet era and the transformations of the *yhyakh* celebration, we have highlighted both the mechanisms through which silencing occurred in relation to cultural production and the persistence of Sakha cultural forms in spite of these processes.

For this study, the vocal articulation of narrative required a trigger – the model – that exposed narrative strands that might otherwise have seemed disconnected. As we learned from artists how to respond to mammoth ivory as a material enmeshed within and reactive to its environment, we began to consider the model of *yhyakh* as a refraction surface directing us to broader themes that took us away from the minutiae of the small-scale figures and their celebratory activities towards issues of pressing concern to many Sakha people: we heard about climate change and the melting permafrost and its impact on livelihoods; we were told highly personal stories about relocating from the security of the *uluus* to the city and the effect that had on the extent to which a person felt able to express their Sakha ethnicity; and we heard about cultural durability as expressed through the contemporary manifestation of *yhyakh* and the joy that brings to many today. Whether these stories would have been articulated without the model is not a question we can answer, but we do know that its presence provided a space for these topics to be discussed relatively freely and for what might seem to be disparate stories to become connected. Perhaps, then, it is the very power to connect that makes an object that might otherwise rest silently in a museum cabinet a narrative object. The challenge becomes one of harnessing that power.

## Notes

- 1 Argounova-Low and Brown, fieldnotes, 24 June 2015.
- 2 We fully recognise that UK national museums, though well-off by comparison with museums in many other parts of the world, and indeed within the UK itself, nonetheless are struggling in a challenging economic climate in which energy costs have increased, staff are over-stretched and often demoralised, and central funding for the arts and culture has been severely cut over the last decade or so.
- 3 On the contentious topic of contemporary museums and universalism, see [Curtis \(2005\)](#) and the response from former British Museum director Neil MacGregor and assistant director Jonathan Williams (2005), and [Cuno \(2011\)](#). At the time of writing, the idea of universalism remains very present in the British Museum's activities, although in line with museum practice elsewhere, there is a shift towards reimagining the museum's role and purpose, and ambitious plans to redisplay its entire collection.

## References

- Argounova-Low, T. 2018. Waldemar Jochelson's monograph *The Yakut* and continuing traditions of *ysyakh*. In E. Kasten, ed. *Jochelson, Bogoras and Shternberg. A Scientific Exploration of Northeastern Siberia and the Shaping of Soviet Ethnography*. Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien.
- Balzer, M. M. 1995. *Culture Incarnate: Native anthropology from Russia*. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe.
- Balzer, M. M. 2021. *Galvanising Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bienkowski, P. 2013. A critique of museum restitution and repatriation practices. In *Museum Practice: The International Handbooks of Museum Studies* vol. 2, ed. C. McCarthy, 431–453. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Bryant, R. 2014. History's remainders: On time and objects after conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist* 41(4): 681–697.
- Cuno, J. 2011. *Museums Matter: In Praise of Encyclopedic Museums*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Curtis, N. G.W. 2005. 'A continuous process of re-interpretation': The challenge of the universal and rational museum'. *Public Archaeology* 4(1): 50–56.
- Diakonova, N. and E. Romanova 2003. The role of the Yakut intelligentsia in the national movement. In *Indigenous Ecological Practices and Cultural Traditions in Yakutia*, ed. H. Takakura, 13–22. Sendai: Center for Northeast Asian Studies, Tohoku University.
- Gavrilova, S. 2022. *Russia's Regional Museums: Representing and Misrepresenting Knowledge about Nature, History and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Gray, R.R. 2022. Rematriation: Ts'msyen law, rights of relationality, and protocols of return. *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 9(1): 1–27.
- Harries, J. 2017. A stone that feels right in the hand: Tactile memory, the abduction of agency and presence of the past. *Journal of Material Culture* 22(1): 110–130.
- Hicks, D. 2020. *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kasten, E. ed. 2018. *Jochelson, Bogoras and Shternberg. A Scientific Exploration of Northeastern Siberia and the Shaping of Soviet Ethnography*. Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien.
- Laptander, R. 2020. 'When we got reindeer, we moved to live to the tundra': The spoken and silenced history of the Yamal Nenets. Unpublished Doctor of Social Sciences thesis, Faculty of Social Sciences, Rovaniemi, University of Lapland. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-200-9>. Accessed 22 September 2023.
- MacGregor, N. and J. Williams 2005. The encyclopaedic museum: Enlightenment ideals, contemporary realities. *Public Archaeology* 4(1): 57–59.
- Sarr, F., and B. Savoy 2018. *Rapport sur la Restitution du Patrimoine Africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. Ministère de la Culture.
- Ssorin-Chaikov, N. 2006. On heterochrony: Birthday gifts to Stalin, 1949. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12(2): 355–375.
- Takakura, H. 2006. Indigenous intellectuals and suppressed Russian anthropology: Sakha ethnography from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s. *Current Anthropology* 47(6): 885–1062.

# Index

**Note:** – *Italicized* page references refer to figures and page references with “n” refer to endnotes.

- Aal Luuk Mas* (The Tree of Life) 42, 75–77, 76, 135  
absence 8–10, 84, 126, 138n3, 194–195  
*alaas* 30  
*algyschyt* 41, 54, 59, 70  
*algyschyt* 50, 56, 70, 133, 137  
American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) 109  
Ammosov, T. V. 118, 166, 167  
Amydaev, N. 186  
Amydaev, V. 113, 113, 154, 184–185  
Andreev, N. 135, 137  
anthropology 85, 107–109; concept of culture in 63; development of 95  
aphasia 49  
Appadurai, A. 145  
apprenticeship 182, 184–186  
*Arctic: Culture and Climate* (Lincoln, Cooper, and Loovers) 15, 101–102, 145n1  
artists 3, 11, 174, 178–190; apprenticeship 182, 184–186; carving 150–151, 154, 156, 158, 163–166, 168, 173–175; dynasties 184–186; ethnic origins of 138n5; expressions 31, 170; identity of 130; learn from craftsman 180–184; and materials 85, 154; skilled master 4; two parts of model 186–189  
Arzyutov, D. V. 118  
authorship and signatures 172–173  
  
Balzer, M. M. 7, 9, 120, 121n13  
Basu, P. 85  
belonging 15–16, 182; cultural 15–16, 28, 47, 56; ethnic 31, 47, 49, 58, 66; and narrative 34  
Belousov, N. 17n9, 135, 138n5, 197  
Benjamin, W. 168  
Bloch, A. 12, 108, 121n17  
Blumenbach, J. 38  
Bolshevik Revolution 188  
Borisov, A. 64–65, 113  
Brezhnev, L. 118, 166  
British Museum 1, 4, 13, 14, 17n9, 94, 107, 110, 121n21, 131–132, 134, 137, 145n1, 152, 179; *Arctic: Culture and Climate* at 15; inter-generational artists at 120n8; Model of a Summer Camp 27–28; model within 95–102; WCEC 16n1  
Bryant, R. 10, 11, 85, 114, 125, 143–145, 158, 178, 195  
  
Cant, A. 172  
Carpenter, E. 157  
carved items 161, 165  
carving: as art and craft 161–175; artists 150–151, 154, 156, 158, 163–166, 168, 173–175; authorship and signatures 172–173; development of 164–168; of mammoth 149; mammoth imagery for 27; mammoth ivory 39; Northern Russian fashion of 148; project 144; in Sakha (Yakutia) 43n1; Sakha style of 144–145, 174–175; *setka* (mesh) structure 152; souvenirs and tourist art 168–171; technical knowledge about 115; *see also* ivory carving  
Castellane, Compte de 90–91  
*Catalogue of the Russian Section of the Paris Exhibition* 17n9, 93, 98  
Chandler, A. 89, 102n1  
*chechir* 71, 137  
*choroons* (carved wooden goblets) 3, 9, 42, 59, 111, 132, 166–167, 194

- Christy, H. 95  
*Circumpolar Civilization in Museums of the World* 121n20  
 Clifford, J. 126–127  
 Cole, H. 95  
 common unsaids 9, 49, 137, 198  
 Communist ideology 51, 67  
 Communist political regime 28  
 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) 39  
 COVID-19 pandemic 77, 185  
 craft, definition of 161–163  
 craftsmanship 147–148, 163–164  
 craftswomen 68, 162  
 creativity 8, 10–12, 163, 194; of Arctic peoples 101; ivory carving 162; of Sakha men and women 195  
 Cruikshank, J. 34, 83, 108, 183  
 cultural belonging 15–16, 28, 47, 56  
 cultural facts 145, 178  
 cultural identity 9, 47, 67, 184  
 cultural knowledge 6, 10, 27, 108, 115, 125  
 cultural politics 125  
 cultural revitalisation 4, 10, 64, 69, 116, 125, 195, 198; and museums 66, 116–117, 195; *see also* revitalisation work  
 cultures: Indigenous 33–35; material 10, 14, 84, 94, 99, 114, 119, 148, 165, 171; Sakha 7, 27–28, 32, 34, 50, 55, 63–64, 73, 75, 107–108, 119–120, 127, 134–135, 148, 185, 193; Soviet festival 47, 50–54; speechless 49; and strategic essentialism 63–65  
*dacha* (summer house) 58  
*Dal'nevostochnyi federal'nyi okrug* (The Russian Far Eastern region) 25  
 Digby, B. 38  
*Döhögöi Toion* (God of the Horses) 137, 179  
 Ducuing, F. 92–93  
 dynasties 184–186  
 Ellei (ancestor of the Sakha people) 41, 121n13  
 ethnic belonging 31, 47, 49, 58, 66  
 ethnic consciousness/confidence 26, 47  
 ethnic dress 66–69, 68  
 ethnography 49, 98–100, 178; collections 1; conventional 13; of language practices 8; Soviet 9  
 Ferguson, J. 8, 188  
 First World War 100  
 Franks, A. W. 94–100, 96, 97, 111, 137, 197  
 Gabysheva, A. 104n19, 107, 120n2, 127, 129  
 Gavril'ev, K. P. 180, 182  
 Gavrilova, S. 9, 137  
 Gorbachev, M. 9, 62  
 Gorokhov, S. 100–101, 107  
*Guide to the Christy Collection of Prehistoric Antiquities and Ethnography* 99–100  
 Guinness World Records 77, 78n7  
 Hallam, E. 11, 163  
 Harries, J. 147  
 Iakovlev-Tühülgen, V. 72, 73–75  
*Iakutskaia oblast'* (Yakut oblast') 17n10  
*Iakuty: Opyt Etnograficheskogo Issledovaniia* (Seroshevskii) 37  
 Ignat'eva, V. 54, 56  
*ilge* (blessing and divine milky liquid) 72  
*imet' kul'turu* (to own culture) 64  
 Ingold, T. 11, 84, 85, 149, 154, 163, 182  
 Institute of Permafrost 31, 36  
 International Council of Museums (ICOM) 100, 116  
 Ivanov, Vasilii N. 17n9  
 Ivanov, Vladimir 68  
 Ivanova-Unarova, Z. 75, 109, 189  
 Ivanov-Unarov, V. 109  
 ivory carving 1, 5, 94, 163; exhibition about 86; Sakha scholarship on 10; in *Sakha Sire* 15, 144; in Yakutia 148; *see also* carving and craftsmanship  
 Jesup North Pacific Expedition 109  
 Jochelson, V. 42, 111, 117  
 Kendall, L. 12, 121n17  
*khomus* 64–65, 78n7  
*Khudozhestvennoe Uchilishche* (Art College) 165  
*kladbishche mamontov* (mammoth's cemetery) 35  
*kolkhoz* 55  
*korennye malochislennye narody* (Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples) 7, 9, 18n16  
*kostoreznoe iskusstvo* (ivory carving) 178; *see also* ivory carving  
*kravevedcheskiy* museums 9, 17n14  
*kravevedeniye* 9, 17n14  
*kul'tura* 63  
*Kul'turnaia Evolutsiia* (Cultural Evolution) 113, 181  
*kumiss/kymys* festival 42  
*kustar'* (a craftsman) 161

- kustarnichestvo* (handicraftsmanship) 161  
*kymys* (fermented mare's milk) 8–9, 43n3, 56, 72, 117  
*kytalyk* (white cranes) 41
- Labelling Matters project 18n18  
 Laufer, B. 39  
 LePlay, F. 89  
*L'Exhibition Universelle de 1867 Illustrée* 90, 92  
 Lindenau, Y. 41  
*Living With the Gods* 101
- MacGregor, N. 101  
 Maggs, J. 110, 179  
 Makarov, Aiaal 179–180, 183, 186–187, 189, 190  
 mammoth ivory 1, 4–5, 10–11, 15, 17n15, 37, 39–40, 102, 107, 147–158; ivory craftsmanship 147–148; as material 37–39, 153–158; sensing life of material 148–152  
 mammoth tusks 25, 27, 31, 35, 38–40, 143, 147, 158n1  
 Mamontov, K. 169, 170, 175n3, 185  
 Marchand, T. 184  
 Markov, F. 33, 33, 102, 145n1, 149–150, 155, 157, 168, 171, 185  
 Marsden, K. 121n21  
 Martynova, E. 134–137  
*massovik* (ritual specialists) 52  
 material culture 10, 14, 84, 94, 99, 114, 119, 148, 165, 171; culture studies 84, 86n1  
 material dynamism 11, 144, 149, 158, 195–196  
 material(s), raw 144, 147, 150, 153–155, 158, 163, 164, 180, 195  
 materiality 148–152  
 mechanical reproduction 170–171  
 Middendorf, A. F. 41  
 Model of a Summer Encampment of the Yakuts 1, 2  
*Model of a Summer Festival* 13–15, 16n3, 17n9, 50, 88, 95, 98, 101–102, 107, 110, 111  
 museum anthropology 6, 12, 15, 83–84, 86n1, 107, 114; *see also* anthropology  
 Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge 14
- narratives 30–43; about climate and permafrost 35–37; about mammoths 37–40; of identity and *yhyakh* 40–43; oral 27, 33, 35; and oral traditions 32–35; performing 134–138; and storytelling 33; and teaching with model 127–131  
 National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (NAM) 5, 11, 15, 17n9, 26, 86, 110–111, 113, 126–134, 136–137, 189; *Model of a Summer Festival* in 111; website 120n4  
 National Library of France 13  
 National Museums of Scotland 14, 122n23  
*ne bylo kul'tury* (void of culture) 64  
 Nikanorova, L. 121n13, 138n1  
 Nikolaev, M. 65  
 Nogovitsyna, E. 13, 17n9, 134, 136  
 Nosov, M. 75  
 Novruz (Navruz) 53
- object itinerary 84–85  
 object-person engagement 85  
*ohuokhai* dance and singing 54, 56–57, 62, 64  
*olokh* (life) 63  
*olokh maigyta* (lifestyle) 63  
*olonkho* 8, 31–34, 42, 43n2, 64–65, 70, 75–76, 127, 131, 135, 137, 157, 190, 194  
*Olonkho Yhyakh* 70, 76, 127, 190  
 oral narratives 27, 33, 35; *see also* narratives
- Paris Universal Exhibition 13, 15, 111, 88–90, 88, 92, 95, 97, 193  
 Paterson, M. 156–157  
 Pavlov, G. 93, 98, 103n4, 103n11, 134–137, 197  
 perestroika 6, 50, 59  
 performing narratives 134–138  
 permafrost xiv, xx, 11, 26, 30, 31, 35–38, 134, 171, 175n1, 175n3, 195, 199; *see also* *vechnaia merzlota*  
 Peers, E. 13, 17n9, 107, 151  
 Perry, G. 5, 101, 195  
 Petrone, K. 55  
 Petrov, R. 185  
 Pfizenmayer, E. 161  
 Pinigin, R. 185  
 Pitt Rivers Museum 14  
*pochuvstvovat' material* (to feel or sense the material) 154  
 Pokatilova, I. 68  
 Portelli, A. 8, 48  
 Portland Art Museum 126  
*poslushnyi* (obedient) material 31  
*poteriali kul'turu* (lost culture) 64  
*poteriali navyki* (lost skills) 68  
 presence 8, 9–10, 84, 114, 126, 138n3, 168, 181, 190, 194–195

*Puteshestvie Dlinoiu v Vek/Century Long*

*Journey* (Gabyshveva, Baskhadyrova, and Nogovitsyna) 5, 15, 86, 107–120, 130, 137, 180, 194; emergence of object narratives 114–115; engaging with model 112–114; exhibition 110–112; model, access, and restitution 115–120; temporality 114–115

repatriation 117–119, 197; virtual 10

*Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Sarr-Savoy Report) 197

Republic of Buryatia 13

Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) 6, 16n7, 17n10, 25–26, 125, 130, 137

revitalisation work 6–16; and museums 66, 116–117, 195; *see also* cultural revitalisation

Rimmel, E. 94

Rodionov, G. 185

Romanova, E. 54, 56

Runia, E. 8, 126

Russian Federation 25, 25, 62, 116, 119

Russian Museum of Ethnography (REM) 17n9

Sakha (Yakutia) 4–5, 13; academic elite 7; activists 63, 64; art/creativity/making 10–12; calendar 5; climate and weather 30; cultural revival in 7; culture 7, 27–28, 32, 34, 50, 55, 63–64, 73, 75, 107–108, 119–120, 127, 134–135, 148, 185, 193; education 128; ethnic dress 66–69, 68; ethnic identity 7, 9, 86; ethnicity and culture 5, 7, 32, 55; ivory carvers 6, 13, 153, 187; ivory carving 13; post-Soviet transformations in 63; presence/voice 9–10; and revitalisation work 6–16

Sakha clothing 66, 78n7, 116–117, 128; *see also* ethnic dress

Sakha language 9, 51, 63, 65–66, 138n6

*Sakha Sire* 9, 12–14, 15, 17n10, 27, 70; Arctic cultures 35; commemorative practices in 108; cultural landscape in 62; history of carving in 144; mammoth ivory carving in 13; narrating model in 125–138; sociological studies 8; *Ūs Khatyn* 73; in Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture 116

Sakha style of carving 174–175; *see also* carving

Salmond, Wendy 161

*Sardaana* (souvenir factory) 168

Schatzki, T. 178

Science Museum 1

Scott, J. 57

Seroshevskii, V. 36, 41

Serres, M. 26

shamanism 8, 13, 101

Siberia 6, 16n7, 38–39, 41, 42, 53,

91–94, 96, 100, 103n3, 103n11, 121n18, 198

silence 8–9, 47–59; of anger 49; traditions 47–50; *yhyakh* in Soviet time 54–59

Sivtsev Museum of History and Ethnography 151

Sleptsov, M. 185

socialist realism 166, 190

social relations 83, 148, 172, 182

Solov'ev, O. 156, 179–180, 186

Solovyeva, V. 109

souvenirs 168–171, 169

Soviet communism 52; festival culture 47, 50–54; ideological elements 57; ideological environment 49; socialism 8

Soviet Union 5, 8–10, 26, 28, 48–51, 53, 166, 193; “common unsaids” 49; cultural identity 67; ethnic identity in 48; ideological totalitarian space of 48; political landscape of 62; role of art in 166; traditional dress 67

*Soyuz Khudozhnikov* (Artists Union) 68

*spartakiada* (sport competitions) 56

speechless culture 49

Spivak, G. 63

Stalin, J. 166, 167

Strahlenberg, P. 41

Struchkov, M. 145, 173, 179–180, 183, 186–187, 189, 190

*sakha byhakh* (Sakha knife) 151

temporal dynamism 10–11, 26, 71, 85, 114, 125–126, 143–144, 158, 195–196

temporality 14, 163, 167, 178, 196

Thal, R. de 90

*The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (Perry) 5, 101, 195

totalitarianism 8, 49, 57

tourist art 168–171

*Tsarstvo Vechnoi Merzloty* (The Kingdom of Permafrost Museum) 31

*tühülge* 31, 70, 71, 72, 75–76

*Tuimaada Yhyakh* 70, 72–73, 77, 78n7,  
117, 125  
*tvorchestvo* 163

UK Arts and Humanities Research Council  
(AHRC) 4, 107, 190  
*uluus* 6–7, 14, 55, 70, 93, 131  
*uraha* 110, 132, 133, 181  
*Ūs Khatyyh* (Three Birches) 72, 73, 73, 74,  
75, 77, 117, 131  
*uu oghuha* (water bull) 37  
*uus kishi* (craftsman) 144, 163–164

V&A East Storehouse 16n1  
V&A South Kensington 1, 95  
*vechnaia merzlota* (eternally frozen) 36;  
*see also* [permafrost](#)  
Venkatesan, S. 182  
*vernut'navyki* (skills of making designs  
back) 68  
Vinokourov, A. 186  
Vinokurova, L. 65  
Vinokurova, U. 151  
*vnevremennaia istoriia* “non-temporal  
history” 190, 196  
*vozrozhdenie* (revitalisation) 64

Witsen, N. 38  
women: *ilin-kelin kebiher* 128,  
129; at *yhyakhs* 138n4; *see also*  
[craftswomen](#)  
World War II 55, 119, 165

*The Yakut* (Seroshevskii) 41  
Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist  
Republic 6, 55, 166, 194  
Yakutsk xviii, 7–9, 26, 40, 50, 55–56,  
62, 65–66, 69–70, 77, 107, 112–113,  
125, 131–133, 135, 161, 169, 171  
Yakutsk Museum of History and Culture  
111, 116–118, 121n21, 153  
Yeltsin, B. 62  
*yhyakh* celebrations 2, 4–5, 7, 9,  
14, 16n3, 27–28, 31–32, 43;  
diversity of 77–78; ethnographic  
scholarship 7; non-ideological  
content of 55; returns 62–78; and  
silence 47–59; in Soviet times 54–59,  
59; spatial transformations 69–77;  
women at 138n4  
Yurchak, A. 9, 52  
Zverev, S. 55