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## Symbiosis with Nature : A Message for the Reconstructing of Sakha Ethnicity and Identity

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## **Symbiosis with Nature: A Message for the Reconstructing of Sakha Ethnicity and Identity**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the former Soviet Union, with its dissolution, over a dozen ethnically based states have been founded. In eastern Siberia, too, the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, declaring its state sovereignty in September 1990, made a choice to become the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) with economical and political independence. The Yakut changed their ethnonym (recognized name for the group) (Bromley 1975: 11; cited by Banks 1996: 19) to Sakha at the time of the declaration of independence, and the republic was named after this.

During the Soviet era, although every individual was registered by his nationality, which might surely function to make one assure one's ethnic ascription, the internationalism, or the Russification, was the basic policy of the Soviet Union. Everyone was required to be a Soviet first, and ethnicity could never be the focus of any political matters in the former Soviet Union. Then what does the upsurge of these political movements towards independence of ethnically oriented nations after perestroika indicate? Are ethnicity or ethnic identities to be revived or reconstructed? If so, how and why are they constructed?

Ethnic identity can be the stronghold of any group solidarity. However, ethnicity or ethnic identity itself is a newly invented term for group expression. In practice, the word "ethnic", derived from the Greek *ethnikos* (adj.), originally meant heathen or pagan. It gradually began to refer to "racial" characteristics from the mid-nineteenth century and in 1940s ethnicity might be evaluated almost entirely upon a biological basis or upon purely social characteristics (Warner and Lunt 1942: 73; cited by Banks 1996: 4). However, along with an increase in the 1960s of the tendencies by peoples in many circumstances to insist on their group distinctiveness and identity, and on new rights that derives from this group identity, ethnicity had become a new social and anthropological category.

Thus, the study of ethnic groups and ethnicity has become one of the major academic concerns in sociology and anthropology, and been approached from different theoretical viewpoints (Roosens 1989: 11–20; Banks 1996: 4–6). For example, ethnic groups are discussed in terms of social boundaries (Barth 1969). Alternatively, ethnicity has also been discussed in terms of its relationship with the struggle for interest—material goods and status (Glazer and Moynihan 1975), with nationalism (Eriksen 1993), and with socio-psychological dimensions (De Vos 1975; Epstein 1978; cited by Roosens 1989: 15). The relationships between ethnic and social identification have also argued (Bell 1975).

Moreover, in the last decade, the revival of religion, ethnic renaissance, and nationalism

has been resurgent, as exemplified by the movements in the former Soviet Union and among indigenous peoples in nation-states. Friedman suggests a strategy of Fourth World—the formation of politically autonomous communities, which aim at re-establishing a formerly repressed identity and lifestyle—as one of the life-strategies for satisfying the structures of this desire (Friedman 1991: 360; cited by Eriksen 1993: 151). These phenomena show that ethnicity or ethnic groups can be freshly reconstructed. However, little has been argued about how a group reconstructs its ethnicity or ethnic identity in the midst of the global system. Most of the studies on ethnicity or ethnic groups have rather presupposed an ethnic group to be *a fait accompli*.

This paper aims to explore the process in which the Sakha are reconstructing their ethnicity and identity after independence. The Sakha, whose traditional subsistence economy had been the breeding of cattle and horses, were deeply connected with nature in their lives, and constructed their ethnicity and identity in relation to the benefits obtained from nature. The reconstructing of Sakha ethnicity and identity today might reflect their intimate relationships with nature. In consideration of this, the analyses focus not only on the cultural revitalization movements and the shamans' and peoples' involvement in them, but also on environmental and ecological problems and government policies against them. Here, I roughly define ethnicity as an emic category of ascription (Moerman 1965; cited by Eriksen 1993: 11) to a group bearing the consciousness of its unity or solidarity, and identity as an individual's feeling of being involved in this group. The analysis is based on field data mainly collected during researches in Yakutia in 1994, 1996 and 1999.

## NATURE AND ECOLOGICAL/ ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS TODAY

In the middle of Yakutia flows the River Lena which goes down to the Arctic Sea. As is shown by the fact that the River Lena, with its width of one kilometer, is totally frozen every winter, Yakutia is one of the areas in Siberia famous for its severe winters. In reality, although the yearly average temperature in Yakutsk, which is the capital of the Republic of Sakha, being situated in lat, 63°N, is -10° Centigrade, the monthly average temperature there varies between -41.2° and 18.7° Centigrade.

Annual precipitation amounts to around 240 mm and the climate is cold and semiarid, though it often rains in summer. However, the whole country belongs to the permafrost zone and the permafrost near the surface thaws in summer, providing plants with ground water. It is considered that this mechanism of the permafrost makes the taiga able to develop in the semiarid climate of middle Yakutia (Takahashi 1997: 137-138). Thus, in northern Yakutia north of lat, 70° N., facing the Arctic Sea, extends arctic tundra, while in the central and southern Yakutia there is sub-arctic lowland taiga of *Larix dahuricus* and *Pinus silvestris* with thin undergrowth (Takahashi 1994: 23; Takahashi 1997: 131-133; Fukuda 1996: 28-29).

The natural conditions specific to the circumpolar area cause environmental problems that the Sakha have to face and cope with every year. In spring, the thawing of the River Lena often causes a big flood if the temperature fluctuates greatly during this season. Roads are become very muddy and thawing rivers cut transportation routes for other vehicles as well. Therefore, only air transport is possible in the Republic during this season.

Moreover, the arid climate with less rainfall especially from spring to early summer makes the taiga dry, causing spontaneous forest fires. Spontaneous forest fires are, of course, considered to have positively contributed to the forest ecology. Firstly, it has been the trigger for generating a sunken area with ponds, lakes and grassland, named *alaas* in the Yakut language (Fukuda 1996: 53). *Alaas* that are spotted in the forest have been utilized by the Sakha to collect grass for their cattle. There is a saying that without *alaas* the Sakha cannot maintain their subsistence lifestyle of breeding cattle and horses. Secondly, forest fires contribute greatly to the rejuvenation of the forest. The thin lowland taiga in eastern Siberia is known as vegetation rejuvenated and maintained by forest fires (Takahashi 1997: 139).

Forest fires have thus had positive effects on the local environment. However, it surely causes a loss of wood resources. It has also been suggested that forest fires influence global warming. Recently, the government has felt serious misgivings about the destruction of forest, since incidents of forest fires are increasing rapidly in the Republic of Sakha. In reality, the Environmental White Paper states in 1996 that forest fires occurred 2,023 times between 1993 and 1995 (cited by Saito 1998: 133). It also states that in 1995 161 cases of forest fires, out of 635 cases, were caused by inhabitants' carelessness (cited by Saito 1998: 134). The conservation of the taiga is now a problem acute not only for the Sakha efficient utilization of wood resources but also for the global conservation of the environment.

The northern taiga with its boundless expansion had been regarded as a symbol of primeval nature left in Siberia. However, Siberia today is not free from exploitation and industrialization, and is faced with the effects of global warming and the destruction of nature. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened up the region so that the contamination of nature in Siberia has developed unimaginably. The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) today is not exceptional, but is seriously confronted with environmental disruption. The 1995 research report by the National Center for Monitoring Hygiene and Diseases suggests that various pollutants are released into the rivers especially in the Aldan and Vilui basins where gold and diamonds are mined (cited by Saito 1998: 131). It has been publicly announced that the pollution and radioactive contamination of the environment had continued during the Soviet period. In particular, the exploitation of natural resources caused serious pollution of the environment.

The most serious pollution was the radioactive contamination caused by underground nuclear testing. During the Northern Forum held in Yakutsk in 1996, a precise report on the radioactive contamination was publicized. Between 1974 and 1987, nuclear testing was carried out twelve times in the Vilui basin, most of which was concerned with diamond mining. Once, an underground nuclear test was even carried out near the junction of the Vilui and the Lena in order to search for seams of natural resources (Fukuda 1996: 181–183).

It was considered highly possible that contaminated underground water might reach the River Lena (Fukuda 1996: 183). However, contrary to popular anxiety, the Environmental White Paper in 1996 reports that the pollution of the environment, including the radioactive contamination in the air, was revealed to be no more serious than that of the global, usual radioactive fallout (cited by Saito 1998: 124–129). In actual fact, it is officially announced today that the radioactive contamination is insignificant.

## GOVERNMENT POLICIES FOR ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

It has also been politically important that such environmental problems are solved, and forced the government of the Republic to actively forward ecological policies from the very start of the Republic. The then President of the Republic announced the reality of the state's ecological policies and made the Ministry of the Conservation of Nature the competent authority. The slogans of the policies say, for example (cited by Saito 1998: 120–121):

- (1) Wild creatures should not be damaged since they are our mothers;
- (2) We should respect and be responsible for nature since the damage that nature suffers now may cause future damage that our descendants will suffer; and
- (3) We should help nature to recover from the damage caused by us humans.

These slogans explicitly show that the ecological policies of the Republic are based on the idea that nature is not considered simply as a materialistic being, but as an organic whole that has spiritual or systematic relationships with human beings.

The then President of the Republic also says that the national schooling should be provided on the basis of cultural-ethical traditions and languages of the peoples in the Republic, and that the education of their cultures, customs and ways of life should be laid out as a component part of the curriculum. It is considered necessary that children are brought in the spirit of unity with nature since this has been the tradition of the Sakha. Moreover, the then President considers it vital not to damage nature and to instill this "ecologic" culture in children in order to survive in extreme conditions (Nikolaev 1994: 89–90).

The ideas of the Republic to guide the ecological construction of the state involve not only the introduction of conservation technologies into the field of economic activities and juridical arrangements for the conservation of the environment, but also the reconstructing of Sakha culture so that it is ecologically sustainable. In other words, the government intends to reconstruct peoples' consciousness, through education, from the spirit of conquering nature into that of harmony with nature. The then President fully appreciates that Sakha traditional culture can be a core ideology to promote the conservation of the environment. Thus, the former Marxist ideology is now being replaced with an idea of "unity with nature," which was re-appreciated to be the basis of traditional worldview of the Sakha. In this respect, the conservation of the environment is considered by the government to be inseparable from the revival of traditional culture and religion.

## THE REVIVAL OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

The 1989 census shows that the Republic of Sakha is a multi-ethnic state, consisting of Russians (50.3%), Sakha (33.4%), and other northern ethnic minorities such as the Evenki, Even and Yukagir (Nikolaev 1994: 67–68). These circumstances have forced the government of the Republic to cope with internal ethnic problems from the very beginning. Furthermore, during the period of the former Soviet Union, the ways of life for Northern peoples had been forcibly changed under communist policy, and peoples were doomed to be

Russianized. In reality, a well-known discourse in the late 1970s to early 80s, that only one ethnographer is required to study the entire Yakut Autonomous Republic (Romanova and Vasiliev 1994: 10) aptly shows that indigenous cultures had been greatly neglected during the Soviet period.

Struggling with these problems, the government has made it the national policy to value the ethnic identities of indigenous peoples in the Republic. It is a policy to revitalize ethnic cultures and to construct an ecologically balanced nation, which is clearly shown in the election platform of President Nikolaev (Nikolaev 1994: 93). Backed by the President's election platform that "the main aim is economic, social, and *spiritual* revival of the Yakutia" (Nikolaev 1994: 93; italicized by the author), a new system of education has started since independence. A ban on shamanism and the practice of traditional healing has also been lifted, and ethnological and ethnographical interests in ethnic cultures have increased rapidly. In order to financially support activities for the revival of indigenous cultures, a national foundation named "Rebirth" (*Vozrojdenie*) was established in 1991 (Nikolaev 1994: 91). Its aims include the restoration of ethnic ritual ceremonies, healing and worldview, and the maintenance of epics and narrators, songs, dances, costume and cuisine. The foundation has financially supported the Sakha, Evenk, Evenki, Yukagir, and other peoples in the territory of the Republic of the Sakha and helped them to revive their cultures and traditions.

In fact, as I describe elsewhere, the cultural revitalization movements of the Sakha after independence (Yamada 2000), with academic and educational activities for the restoration and revitalization of their culture have developed remarkably. One of the characteristics of the cultural revitalization movements among the Sakha is the revival of shamanism under the title of traditional medicine or healing. Traditional healing is thus authorized, and the Sakha Traditional Medical Association has started to give public lectures on traditional medicine to popularize it. Healers who are known as *oyuun* (shaman), *udagan* (female shaman), *otofuto* (herbalist), "extrasenses" have begun their healing in public (Yamada 1998).

Healers whom I met during my field trip in 1994 had kept traditional belief systems. They claimed the importance of respecting nature and conserving the traditional life, and showed almost the same worldview as Sakha tradition. They had the same conceptions of soul and spirits/supernatural beings, of the universe with three divisions consisting of their own spiritual inhabitants, and of "soul-flight" (Yamada 1997). At the same time, a new animistic idea was also emerging. *Ichchi* (literally, owner spirit) is considered to be some kind of immortal essence of nature like a human soul, and is essential for human life and nature to be able to move in cycles together eternally. Especially, one shaman, whom I will describe in the following sections, showed her idea of the spiritual equality of humans and nature, such that the relation between humans and spiritual beings is idealized in the symbiosis between humans and nature (Yamada 1996: 12–13).

Corresponding to the government's policy for the revival of culture, it has become more common for the Sakha that they offer small presents to the spirit of the pass, who resides there and watches over people when passing the boundaries of the districts. People have gradually started to believe in the spiritual and supernatural power of shamans. Even highly educated Sakha are in awe of a shaman's power, and say that they will never get in touch with a shaman carelessly and thoughtlessly. The revival of traditional medicine has thus

helped to popularize traditional shamanistic and animistic beliefs among the Sakha.

The most significant government policy for the revival of culture is the revival of *ysyakh* (mid-summer festival or *khumus* festival), which had been considered to be the most important and biggest ritual festival among seasonal rituals. The then President of the Republic of Sakha positions the *ysyakh* festival as the most important national holiday (Nikolaev 1994: 92). Although the *ysyakh* was held in the spring during the Soviet period, the festival was a simple working and political event without any ritual ceremonies, being denied its religious meanings (Romanova 1994). In addition, the decorations of *sergé* (sacred tethering post) were also replaced by new symbols of the time such as a red star, a sickle or a hammer. Moreover, in the 1970s, corresponding to a policy for the internationalization of every aspect of social life, the *ysyakh* had also become a festive event for neighboring peoples, in which internationality was stressed more than Sakha ethnicity even though the festival itself was of Sakha origin (Romanova 1994: 149).

After experiencing a long relinquishment of its religious and cultural significance, the *ysyakh* with its original ethnic form was restored in 1991. Since then, the festival has been held annually as a national festival in Yakutsk on June 21, on the day of the summer solstice. The festival is opened by an *algys-chit* who presides over a ritual ceremony by offering horse wine to spirits and deities and blessing people. Moreover, the *ysyakh* has been held not only by the state but also by the district, village or small group as a symbol of the revival of Sakha culture. The revival of *ysyakh* has occasionally coincided with the political intention of a local government to solidify the identity of the Sakha, by restoring and keeping traditional Sakha culture (Yamada 2000).

Although the performance of the *ysyakh* was borne of a political significance from the very start, the Sakha have gradually become involved in its religious meanings. I recognized in 1996 that early in the morning on the second day of the *ysyakh* festival at Yakutsk, many young men and women gathered to participate in the sunrise ceremony and waited piously for the coming of the sun. Moreover, the ritual ceremony includes various phases: establishing the holy space for the ceremony, offering *algys* (prayers, or good wishes) and *khumus* (wine made from horse milk) to the gods by shamans, performing spiritual dances and songs, and playing a variety of games and round dance (*osuokhai*). The restoration of the *ysyakh*, too, not only revitalizes performance aspects of Sakha traditional culture but also emphasizes the importance of worshipping nature. The revival of traditional culture is thus interlinked with that of religion.

## CULTURE UNDER VILLAGE-LEVEL RESTORATION

A field trip in 1999 made me realize once again that the policy for the revival of traditional culture, and efforts to restore shamanistic worldviews and traditional culture have permeated the entire country. I want to try and describe here the current situation of village-level cultural restoration, taking villages in Kobyaiskii District and Amginskii District as examples.

First of all, with regard to Kobyai Village in the Kobyaiskii District, villagers' subsistence is primarily through stock farming of cattle and horses. During summer, people

throughout the village are busy with preparations of hay harvesting for wintertime. Ice fishing flourishes at lakes in the winter, with fish sold in neighboring towns. Although this is a typical village in the middle of Yakutia, not only an *udagan* (female shamans), who practices shamanistic rituals and treats diseases, but also a male *algys-chit* (devotional priests), who plays a role in offering prayers to souls and gods in various rituals, and a female *otofut*, who treats diseases with traditional herbs, were restoring their respective activities in the village during my surveys.

On the other hand, in Amga, Amginskii District, the traditional *ysyakh* festival has been thriving every year since it was restored in 1996 (Yamada 2000). In 1999, *ysyakh* was held in commemoration of the 90th year since the birth of Kirenskii, a cosmologist who is a descendant of a Polish exile. In Myandigi, a village with a short history, which was created by settlers in 1982, a cultural center patterned after a traditional winter dwelling “*balagan*” was constructed in 1997. A traditional Sakha kiln was installed inside the cultural center, which is fired every day during winter and when they have gatherings or visitors during the summer to offer the spirit of fire tobacco, butter, etc.,

In the Sakha traditional beliefs, fire was very important as a place where *Uot Ichchite* (Owner of Fire) stayed and kilns had a special meaning in this context. The owner-spirit of fire was the most venerable soul and believed to normally stay in a kiln at home. People offered *khumus* (a fermented mare’s milk beverage), alcohol, tobacco, tea, butter, etc. to the spirit of fire. Expressed as the “offering of food to the owner-spirit of fire,” burning tributes in an oven with invocations was tantamount to prayers to the owner-spirit of fire (Yamada 1997).

With the primary role being the observation, purification and sanctification of people, the owner-spirit of fire was the object to which tribute had to be paid on a daily basis by the Sakha. People believed that thanks to the owner of fire, they could survive winter and that they could escape disease and live by respecting the owner of fire. They never failed to offer tributes to the owner-spirit of fire whenever they went on a trip, asking “Although we cannot offer tributes because we will be away for a long time, please ensure that we will be safe during our trip.” When they returned home from a trip, they offered tributes again to thank the owner-spirit of fire for their safe arrival. Moreover, shamans first make a fire during their rituals to evoke the owner-spirit of fire. The spirit of fire has been believed to help shamans travel to other worlds (Yamada 1997). People in Sakha have believed that the owner-spirit of fire is of primary importance in that it serves as the guardian to keep a close eye on human beings.

The installation of a traditional kiln at the cultural center in Myandigi Village can be understood, therefore, to signify that the aforementioned beliefs in the owner-spirit of fire are about to be restored. Actually, villagers explained to me that kilns were used not only for warmth, but also for purification of everything. Reasoning that children could learn the quintessence of traditional culture through these attitudes toward fire, villagers boasted that they could hold various traditional events and teach children traditional culture at the said center. They also said that the most important aspect of the Sakha culture is faith, i.e., worship of nature.

In the case of Betjuntse Village, the traditional *ysyakh* has been held since 1997 with

the cooperation of the Kulakovskij Cultural Center in Yakutsk. Researchers from the said center prepared for the exhibition of traditional culture at a museum in the village and taught villagers how to carry out the *ysyakh* and the “ceremony for greeting the sunrise.” The 1999 *ysyakh* was dedicated to the “God of Horses,” and the entire village cooperated in holding the *ysyakh*. While *khumus* and other refreshments were prepared, competitions of ethnic costumes, songs and dances of various peoples, sports, etc. were held. These days, *ysyakh* for people who cut pasture grass, those who raise cattle and those who raise horses are also held, in addition to the one involving the entire village.

Thus, the traditional *ysyakh* and the education of traditional Sakha culture, which replaced that of communism by using the framework of cultural centers constructed during the former Soviet era, are unfolding throughout the nation. While ethnic entertainment and craftwork, such as ethnic costumes, cooking, songs, dances and traditional sports are restored in the name of the restoration of traditional culture; shamanistic worldviews are also being restored as the emotional prop of the Sakha people.

### SHAMAN’S PROMOTING THE RECONSTRUCTION OF TRADITIONAL RITUALS AND REACTIONS OF VILLAGERS

The venue for the 1999 *ysyakh* in Kobyai Village was changed to a lakeside location, which is slightly far from the village, upon the advice of Ms. D, an *udagan*. This is because Ms. D judged that the location in the center of the village where the festival had been held every year was inappropriate for *ysyakh*. The village office accepted her claim that *ysyakh* should be held not near graveyards or in the village center, but in or near nature.

I heard that due to the change of venue, a sacrificial ceremony for the owner-spirit of land at the new venue was carried out three days prior to the *ysyakh* as follows:

The *udagan* selected a three-year-old white steer with black eye markings for offering. The fees for this steer were borne by the village office.

*Salamas* (sacred strings with colorful cloths tied to them) were hung from trees surrounding the venue. Ms. D offered a prayer to the owner-spirits of lakes and the ground and arranged sacrifices (fried bread, tea, alcohol, or tobaccos) in the shape of a raven’s foot. She then offered the steer’s head by directing it to a lake. She cut off the head, skinned it, cut up its meat and innards into pieces and left them as they were. A tall white birch was selected from a nearby forest, and the steer’s four hooves and tail were placed at the roots while its skin, the lower jaw and horns were hung from the top so that the steer looked as if it were running up to the “upper world.”

Ms. D then offered sacrifices to all owner-spirits of lakes in Kobyai Village and *ysyakh* was performed on the fourth day.

Some villagers complained of this *ysyakh*, which was conducted at a new location, by saying, “The venue was far away from the village,” “Ms. D was not wearing the ethnic costume of the Sakha” and “No facilities were provided at the venue.” Nevertheless, Ms. D made a strong impression on villagers that nature not only had material meanings for the

Sakha people, but also that it should be respected, by performing the steer offering, which the majority of villagers had never experienced before.

Moreover, a woman made the following comment regarding Ms. D's activities at the village:

Thanks to Ms. D, children in this village have learned what the *aiyy* (god) is. I never thought that Ms. D would become so powerful because she used to be skinny when she was an elementary school student although she was cheerful in class. She started to have strong power after she gave birth to her younger daughter. After the delivery, she changed significantly.

As I was not feeling well, while I was expecting my youngest daughter, I wanted Ms. D to examine my body. One day, I met her on the street and talked with her. I felt better afterwards. At that time, I keenly felt that she had very strong powers.

Ms. D says that the human soul continues to live and I feel the same. During the era of the Soviet Union, we were prohibited from believing in the existence of the human soul and taught another way of thinking. Therefore, I never wondered whether the soul existed or not. Since Sakha became independent, however, the education of its traditional culture began, enabling such religious beliefs to be accepted.

Ms. D has delivered lectures on the Sakha traditional frame of mind to adult villagers, and also talked to children at school. As a result, children in the village came to know what the *aiyy* is, which I believe is very good.

We are very grateful to her for teaching us the Sakha mentality, which we did not know before.

Ms. D's activities to reproduce traditional rituals signify that the traditional shamanism of the Sakha is not an impractical religion of the past, but a live, practical religion. The aforementioned comment by a villager suggests that Ms. D's activities have been accepted by villagers as those which make them appreciate their traditional culture, with their confidence in her special power as the basis for this. The consciousness or identity of the Sakha is being restored through learning traditional culture.

## **NATION-WIDE ACTIVITIES OF MS. D AND HER IDEA**

I have realized that the activities of Ms. D have greatly changed during 1994 and 1999. In 1994 Ms. D, an *udagan*, had just started her activities as a traditional physician in a former clinic. Afterwards, she developed traditional worldviews into the philosophy of "symbiosis with nature" on her own and actively promoted the restoration of traditional healing (shamanism). Although this idea had already burgeoned when I first met her in 1994 (Yamada 1997), I found in 1999 that it had developed into her strong belief.

Her activities transcended the village boundaries to cover the entire Republic of Sakha. People say that even the then President of the Republic is her client and addresses her for her help. Holding lectures to enlighten people on the importance of the restoration of traditional culture throughout the nation, she disseminated the philosophy of "symbiosis with nature."

In fact, a person from Altan said that she once delivered a 6-hour lecture about the worship of nature and the importance of traditional culture from 8:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. at Altan village in the Amginski District, which is far from her village.

She is currently commanding much respect throughout the nation and addressed as the "Sister of Sakha Comrades." Her idea has also been propagated by newspaper, in which she tried to call people's attention to spiritual beings. She explains, for example, that one should not leave clothes hung outside during the night because an evil aura may penetrate into the clothes and will make one sick, and that it is good that a dog barks in the night because the dog is keeping the evils out. With utterances like this she tries to convince the Sakha of the existence of spiritual beings. I also noticed in 1999 that, being greatly assisted by the government of the Republic of Sakha, she was constructing large-scale medical examination facilities and a training institute in traditional style of *balagan* (winter dwelling).

Thus, Ms. D, an *udagan*, who had gained great fame as a religious functionary, was involved in nation-wide activities of reviving shamanism (in the name of traditional medicine) and animistic beliefs. Then, what idea is she really propagating? In an interview with me in 1999, she explained her idea on nature and her roles as shaman:

I have never lost any energy of mine, because it is natural energy. Whenever I treat my patients, I can use up to 103 kinds of solar energy. Some kinds of solar energy are only used for preventing flood, war, and epidemic. These are not so frequently used, but only used rarely. Generally I only use three, six, or nine kinds of solar energy. I usually decide which one is to be used after examining the patient.

Since your last visit to Yakutia, I have adjusted the energetic balance of the earth. I felt before everything else that it was necessary to reform nature in order to cure people. I have worked hard to adjust the energetic balance of the ground. I felt everything in the forest or on the mountain was upside down and faced with difficulties.

In such emergencies, diseases and misfortune may easily occur. Mountains, rivers, forests, and any land are facing with difficulties. People may suffer from diseases. I have special tools to adjust the energetic balance. Animals and birds also help me.

There are many "holes" in areas where mineral resources, gold, or diamonds are found. Fog is coming out from these holes. We need to clear up such fog. Lakes and rivers whose energy have become low are damaged or in danger. I have adjusted the energetic balance of these places with the help of thirteen kinds of solar energy.

We have freely exploited our land. High technology is damaging nature. Nature has big holes everywhere. The land has no time to rest. Now, in return, we have to start action in order to revive nature. We should not make holes in the land. We should not clear the forest when constructing houses. We have to construct our houses according to the places and location and not damage the land. We should not damage nature. Instead, we have to respect nature. Then, our nature will become more rich and healthy. We have to live in harmony with nature.

My major aim is the preservation of nature, and healing is not my main purpose. Therefore, I have often delivered lectures on the conservation of nature to children and

villagers. People listened to my lectures with great interest, although they are not ready to put this idea into action.

Now nature is reviving. With the revival of nature, minority peoples can also revive. Minority peoples are sisters of the earth.

As shown in her narrative, Ms. D came to clearly believe that her mission was not simply to treat diseases, but to treat the ground, i.e., nature. She believes that the ground is alive as human beings, and that the environment of Yakutia is being damaged by man-caused environmental pollution due to mine development and other causes, and by the thawing of the permafrost due to high-rise building construction and deforestation.

Ms. D also said that she had delivered lectures throughout the country to the effect that man should cherish nature more because the nature of Yakutia is being damaged and that to this end, it is important to restore the Sakha traditional beliefs and worldviews. She did deliver 7–8 hours of lectures in villages throughout the Republic, during which she healed both local nature and the audience. She stressed that the primary objective of her lectures was the preservation of nature, not treatment (healing).

For Ms. D, whose identity of being a shaman stems from her ties with nature (Yamada 1998), the destruction of nature or the environment is a matter of serious concern. Thus, she actively performs shamanistic rituals in order to spread her idea that nature should be respected and that we humans should live in collaboration with nature. Moreover, positioning herself as the person who heals and preserves nature in the face of environmental problems confronting the Republic of Sakha, she continues to give the Sakha a message of “symbiosis with nature.”

## **CONCLUSION: ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTED**

Being independent in the Russian Federation with economical and political sovereignty, the Republic of Sakha has been struggling with the construction of new national systems. Faced with serious environmental problems, it seems essential for the government to establish an ecologically balanced construction of the nation in order to fostering the growth of industry and economy. Moreover, as a multi-ethnic nation, the government has to strategically reconstruct its national identity as Sakha.

The government’s policies, as described so far, show that its strategies for reconstructing both an ecologically balanced nation and national identity are to revive traditional cultures. In fact, the process of the cultural revitalization movements in the Republic of Sakha shows that the Sakha traditional worldview and religion has become re-appreciated as one that deals nature with great respect and that has originally had a symbiotic relationship with nature. In this respect, Ms. D’s shamanism based on the idea of “symbiosis with nature” has conformed to the ecological policy that the then President of the Republic is promoting, and has vigorously been backed by the government. The state government, in cooperation with shamans, has taken a strategy to proceed with the reforming of people’s environmental awareness based on this idea.

Backed by such political and religious movements in the Republic, people themselves

have started to re-appreciate Sakha tradition, to respect nature and spiritual beings, and to participate actively in the *ysyakh* festival. In effect, some claimed that being Sakha is to keep traditional culture, to treat nature with respect, to breed horses and cattle, and to hunt. Another says that the most important for the Sakha moral is to respect elders, invalids, and nature; not to scold children, not to damage nature and to keep traditions. The other says that in particular, to treat nature with respect is the most important for the future development of the Sakha. Since the Sakha, having an identity as cattle and horse breeders, have been keen to tackle environmental problems, they thus accept an idea of symbiosis with nature as an essence of their culture.

The Sakha traditional idea of animism is thus being restored and handed down as the spirit of ecology, based on “symbiosis with nature,” which pays respect to nature in a contemporary manner. This idea of “symbiosis with nature,” being propagated as the essence of Sakha traditional culture, makes traditional shamanism suitable for modern thinking. Thus, the restoration of shamanism among the Sakha has taken on the contemporary purpose of serving as the core for promotion of the education of ecology and restoring identity. In this respect, the idea of symbiosis with nature, being backed also by government’s political strategies, has functioned to be a core message for reconstructing Sakha ethnicity and identity.

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