e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 2 – Num. 1 – June 2022

What's in a Model? Shifting Multispecies Relationships in Sakha (Yakutia)

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Abstract This paper explores continuities in multispecies relationships, expressed through art. It delineates these continuities through the study of a nineteenth-century model of a Sakha *Yhyakh* celebration. The indigenous Siberian Sakha people have experienced considerable transformation since the advent of Russian settlers. The story of the *Yhyakh* model illustrates the alterations and continuities in Sakha experiences of multispecies community. It also shows how an interconnected community of human and non-human beings generates aesthetic expectations and affordances that contrast with those of a human-centric worldview.

Keywords Multispecies relationship. Siberia. Indigenous art. Sakha (Yakutia). Yhyakh.

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Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2022-03-21
Accepted 2022-07-12
Published 2022-07-27

Open access

Citation Peers, E. (2022). "What's in a Model? Shifting Multispecies Relationships in Sakha (Yakutia)". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 2(1), 75-92.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2022/01/004

1 Introduction

This article explores the links between contrasting experiences of multispecies relationship, and creativity. I suggest that life within a profoundly interconnected community of human and non-human beings generates aesthetic expectations and affordances that contrast with those of a human-centric worldview. The example presented here – an ivory model carved by a member of the indigenous Siberian Sakha people – incorporates two conventions of aesthetic practice, one related to the Sakha people's older cosmology, and the other to the human-centric perspective introduced through the Russian colonisation of Sakha territory.[1] This model shows how artistic expression can be both an active intervention within a nexus of multispecies relationship that encompasses humans, organisms and landscape, and a passive representation of a human-centric setting (cf. Ingold 2000; Hallam, Ingold 2014). An attention to creative expression therefore must be incorporated into the explication of holistic relational ecologies, and their inhabitants. I will be paying particular attention to a key player in the pre-Soviet Sakha setting – Djöhögöi, the creative being, or *ajyy*, in charge of horses. Djöhögöi *ajyy* made himself visible both in the flourishing of the Sakha people's horse herds, and in the forms of creative expression Sakha people used to communicate with him, as I will explain.

1 I use the word 'indigenous' to indicate the fact that Sakha people lived in this region when the first Russian colonisers arrived. The English word 'indigenous' cannot be easily translated into Russian; not all Sakha people would agree that they are 'Indigenous' in the Canadian or American sense. I have therefore refrained from using the capital letter (cf. Nikanorova 2019).

Figure 1 The model of the Yhyakh (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The model in **fig. 1** depicts an *Yhyakh* festival. These celebrations have been held for centuries by the Sakha people, as I will describe. The figures were carved from mammoth ivory and pegged into the wooden board in 1866, in Nam *ulus* or region; Nam *ulus* is now in central Sakha (Yakutia), northeast Siberia. The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) takes its name from the Sakha people, who now make up just over

e-ISSN 2785-2709

half of its population.[2] Its territory rests on a large expanse of permafrost, which continues to preserve the remains of mammoths, including their ivory. The kneeling figure at the front of the model is holding out a wooden vessel – a *choroon* – full of fermented mare's milk, or *kymys*, to the *ajyy*. The *ajyy* were and still are the non-human persons who sustain Sakha communities through their generous bestowal of the organisms, features and qualities of Sakha (Yakutia)'s ecology. Behind him three helpers are holding similar *choroon*s, likely to be filled with *kymys*. In front of him are two large containers, also holding *kymys*, held between poles decorated with what might be silver birch trees – and at the very front are three horse-tethering poles. Around the kneeling figure and his helpers sit the respected guests, and behind this group you can see a pair of men wrestling, a group of women, and a conical summer dwelling called an *uraha* in the top right-hand corner. The figure on the right-hand side is participating in a hopping competition – perhaps the Sakha sport now known as *kylyy*.

The model currently belongs to the British Museum.[3] It was sent to the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1867, where it was bought by the British Museum's collector, Augustus Franks. It was probably ordered specifically for the Paris Exhibition, as part of a display of the wonders of the Russian Empire and its peoples: Sakha people did not have models like this at home (Knight 2001; Nogovitsyna 2017). As such, it both constitutes and represents a nineteenth-century colonialist geography. It was sent back to Sakha (Yakutia) for the first time in 2015, as part of a project called *Narrative Objects* based at the University of Aberdeen.[4] This project's team consisted of Alison Brown, Tatiana Argounova-Low, and myself. The model was exhibited for six months in 2015 at the National Art Museum in Yakutsk, Sakha (Yakutia)'s capital. I was in Yakutsk for three months, exploring the conversations that emerged as a result of this exhibition – and I returned to Yakutsk for another two and a half months in 2016, on a follow-up trip. During my visit in 2015 I conducted informal interviews with visitors to the exhibition, a survey, and two focus groups, with ritual specialists and university students; I also interviewed artists, ivory carvers, politicians, journalists, historians and art historians. In 2016 I spoke to the various people who had had a particular interest in the exhibition, as I monitored the exhibition's impact.

2 According to the 2010 census, 478,100 Sakha people live in Russia, while 466,500 live in Sakha (Yakutia) (https://gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm) (accessed October 2019). 'Yakut' is the Russian word for Sakha.

3 Cf. the British Museum's page on the model: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_As-5068-a.

4 Cf. the website of the project: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/ysyakh/.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

People in Yakutsk were very interested to see the model, though in some respects it surprised them. Many Sakha people found it to be both intimately familiar, and very strange – "ours, and yet not ours", as one viewer put it.[5] They were surprised to see that the people had such large, wide eyes, for example, if they were supposed to be Sakha. When Brown and Argounova-Low first showed pictures of the model at a meeting of intellectuals and ivory carvers in 2013, members of the group asked why the model contains no horses: a large contemporary *Yhyakh* will always include horses tethered to ornamental tethering poles, often wearing elaborate horse-cloths and saddles, and accompanied by their foals. This question animated a strong current in the discussion about the model. It was supposed that horses are missing because a part of the original model was lost: as the photograph shows, the fence does not encircle the entire model space, while some of the ivory figures are missing. The horses must have been in the missing section, therefore. This hypothesis generated a diploma project at Yakutsk's Art School by Maksim Struchkov and Aiall Makarov, who carved their version of the model's missing section in 2016, supervised by their tutor Oleg Solovyov. And yet some felt that the existing model was communicating something very important. For example, one viewer said that this model's carver had wanted the model to come back to Sakha (Yakutia), to make Sakha people reflect, ask questions, and increase their consciousness. This remembering, he said, is the way that the "spirit" (*dukh*, in Russian) of Sakha culture will survive.[6] What, then, might the model's carver have been conveying – if he was not simply constructing a model to order, for an unknown and distant audience in Paris?

This paper is another contribution to the discussion about the model in Sakha (Yakutia). One day I hope I will be able to go back to Yakutsk, and put it forward as a suggestion to the people concerned. This suggestion incorporates various remarks made by individual Sakha viewers – along with information from the historical ethnographic literature, juxtaposed against the model's features.

Thus I explore the co-existence of differing aesthetic conventions within the model, taking the widespread preoccupation with the presence or absence of horses as my starting point. The absence of horses that struck some but not all of the model's viewers demonstrates the contrast between the aesthetic conventions introduced by Tsarist and later Soviet administrations, and those that emerge from the older Sakha tradition (cf. Peers 2019). Tsarist and Soviet aesthetic expressions are part of the European artistic tradition, which by the late nineteenth century incorporated the understanding that art was

5 Author's fieldnotes (April 26, 2022).

6 Author's fieldnotes (April 14, 2022).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

a representation of and therefore separate from real life – just as nature was separate from culture, and human persons from the landscape (e.g. Ingold 2000). As I will explain, pre-colonial Sakha aesthetic practice consisted of interventions into a relational ecology, rather than abstracted representation. Sakha artistic forms invoke human and non-human persons through allusions – as for example the patterns on *choroon*s visible in **fig. 2** reveal the multi-layered cosmos of pre-Soviet Sakha life (Neustroev 2010; Khabarova 1981). I demonstrate the commitment the model's carver, Nikolai Belousov, had towards evoking the *Yhyakh* in his model, and I suggest that this commitment extended to invoking horses through allusion, rather than direct representation.

A quotation from Tim Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment* helps to articulate the ambivalence of this model:

> [Inhabiting the land] should not be taken to imply mere occupancy, as though inhabitants, already endowed by descent with the attributes of substance and memory that make them what they are, were slotted into place like pegs on a peg-board […]. Rather, to inhabit the land is to draw it to a particular focus, and in so doing to constitute a place. As a locus of personal growth and development […] every such place forms the centre of a sphere of nurture. Thus the generation of persons within spheres of nurture, and of places in the land, are not separate processes but one and the same. In the relational model, as Leach has put it, 'kinship is geography'. (Ingold 2000, 149)

This model, literally consisting of figures slotted into a peg-board, is both a product of high colonialism, and the expression of shared experience of a multispecies community that pre-dates the Russian arrival. It manifests simultaneously the wide, flat Russian Empire, spread out like a tablecloth and peopled with natives of various types, and the intimate geography of human and non-human kin that generated the *Yhyakh* festival. It is a product both of colonialist forms of art and representation, and of a creativity rooted in a multispecies cosmology, as I will explain. As a colonialist artefact it represents the Sakha community as self-contained human persons in an inert landscape; in this representation human beings are indeed "endowed by descent with the attributes of substance and memory that make them what they are". However the model's careful depiction of the *Yhyakh* also demonstrates the intimate multispecies extended family that conditioned pre-Soviet Sakha life, and within which art – whether visual, sonic or verbal – was a form of action, rather than passive representation.

This extended family could not exist without horses, who were so intimately woven into the fabric of experience that their milk, as

kumys, was central to the *Yhyakh* – while their protector Djöhögöi was frequently invoked. I suggest that the model's capacity to nudge Sakha people into recalling their 'spirit' comes from its evocation of the Sakha people and their land as a 'sphere of nurture' – a place emerging from the shared trajectories of many human and non-human lives, including that of Djöhögöi. Both human and non-human persons were so intimately connected within this sphere of nurture that they were present in every part of the *Yhyakh*: no separate representation is needed to show that they were there. For example, the *ajyy* were present in the words of the poem-prayers (*algys*) chanted during the offering of *kymys*, as I will explain below. Thus Belousov may not have felt the need to place horses at an *Yhyakh* or depict them in a representation of an *Yhyakh*, because the horses, inevitably, were there already. This discussion is relevant to the exploration of multispecies relationship and place more generally. It is an example of the way changing experiences of the relationships between species are linked to changing aesthetic regimes; this link creates the possibility of exploring multispecies relationships through creative expression.

The following section introduces nineteenth-century Sakha (Yakutia), as the setting within which the model was carved. The second section describes the *Yhyakh* festival, as it was changing under the Russian influence. The third section focuses on the detail of the model, and its expression of the *Yhyakh*'s multispecies cosmology, before the Conclusion returns to the debate about the model in Yakutsk.

2 Sakha (Yakutia) in the Nineteenth Century

Nikolai Belousov, the craftsman who carved the *Model of a Summer Camp*, lived and worked in a community that was adapting to a rapidly changing Imperial order. Even though he and his neighbours inhabited a territory that was regarded throughout Russia as the back of beyond, the cares and convulsions of European Russia reverberated through their world, shaping their possibilities and constraints (e.g. Schukin 1844). The nineteenth-century Tsarist Empire was a representative example of the European colonialism of its time, in that a transformation of non-Russian communities underpinned policy and public culture, even if its influence varied across time and territory (Ferro 1997; Brower, Lazzerini 1997; cf. Dirks 1992). Like the other colonialist states, the Tsarist state imagined Eurasia as a flat expanse, to be mapped into administrative units that would govern the people this expanse contained; the territory along with its wilder and more dangerous characteristics – the weather, the flies, the wolves – were understood to be conquered by people from without, rather than shaped within an emergent interrelation between different actors, or species (cf. Black 1991). But the transformation the Russian Empire wrought

was partial, fragile, and inconsistent. As a Sakha man told a Russian Orthodox Priest at the beginning of the twentieth century, his community still "lived by the breath of livestock" (Popov 1910, 99).

The little we know about Nikolai Belousov comes mainly from the work of Efrosiniia Nogovitsyna, formerly Senior Researcher at the National Art Museum in Yakutsk, in addition to some lucky encounters of my own in London and Saint Petersburg (Nogovitsyna 2017). He was described in official documentation as *rodovich*, or as 'native' (Nogovitsyna 2017). Given the region of Sakha (Yakutia) in which he lived – Nam *ulus*, in the Sakha heartlands around Yakutsk – and the intimate knowledge of Sakha life he displays in his work, he is likely to have been at least partly Sakha (cf. Gorokhov 1993).

Nam *ulus* is in the area inhabited by the bulk of the Sakha population when the Sakha people first encountered Russians, in 1631. The archaeological and ethnographic evidence shows that these Sakha communities incorporated a stocky, hardy breed of horse, with whom they had migrated into the region before the arrival of the Russians; contemporary Sakha villages are still home to these horses, bred for their meat (Sieroszewski 1993; Crubezy, Alekseev 2012; Forsyth 1992; Middendorf 1878). Squads of Russian Cossacks, travelling quickly across north Asia's rivers from the start of the seventeenth century, tried by various means to force the Siberian communities they encountered to swear allegiance to the Tsar in perpetuity, paying tribute to the Tsar in fur (Wood 1991; Forsyth 1992; Slezkine 1994). These Cossacks were funded by a mixture of private and state enterprise: both the Tsarist state and individual entrepreneurs were keen to profit from the apparently limitless supplies of fur-bearing animals the vast, unexplored territories of Siberia contained (Dmytryshyn 1991; Collins 1991; Slovtsov 2006, 84). These Russian entrepreneurs needed the indigenous Siberians to hunt these fur-bearing animals, hence the tribute-gathering.

By the eighteenth century the fort of Yakutsk had become an important town, concentrating people, supplies and trade in preparation for long journeys of exploration across north-east Siberia and the wider Arctic (Wood 1991; Black 1991). J.L. Black contends that these expeditions, and the literature they produced, were instrumental in creating Russia as an Empire in the minds of both Russians and Europeans (Black 1991). Various richly illustrated books of the peoples of Russia disseminated visions of 'wild Siberian tribes' and their shamans, which could sit beside stories of other Imperial peoples – as the Russian Section with its models, drawings and yurts sat alongside equivalent displays at the Paris Exhibition (Knight 2000). Even if the Russian colonisation of Siberia had important distinguishing characteristics, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Tsarist establishment both presented and saw itself as a European Empire, on a par with the others (Ferro 1997; von Hagen 1997; Brower, Lazzerini 1997).

Accordingly, from the seventeenth century the Tsarist state attempted increasingly to draw Sakha populations into its institutions and their geography, through censuses, taxation, and Christianisation (Wood 1991; Forsyth 1992). Sakha populations had to negotiate shifting constrictions and their concomitant opportunities, as Tsarist policy developed. As part of this, movement and location changed; this shift consisted largely of a transition from nomadic horse-herding to settlements (Sieroszewski 1993; Middendorf 1878). Over the nineteenth century, in particular, large numbers of Sakha people began to grow wheat and vegetables, like the Russians; their increasingly settled lifestyle favoured dairy farming over horse-herding; Sakha people joined gold prospectors or became merchants on a par with Russians (Basharin 2010; Sieroszewski 1993; Middendorf 1878; Popov 1910). Ivory carving was another trade picked up from incoming Russians (Sieroszewski 1993; Ivanova-Unarova, Alekseeva 2021). The ethnographers Alexander von Middendorf and Wacław Sieroszewski claim that Sakha communities continued to keep herds of horses throughout the nineteenth century nonetheless, because horses were important, beloved animals – beautiful, independent and intelligent, in contrast to stupid, stubborn and sickly cattle (Sieroszewski 1993, 251; Middendorf 1878). Like colonised populations all over the world, successive generations of Sakha people had to pursue their lives within systems of authority that rejected key aspects of their worldview and experience – and, most obviously, the members of Sakha communities that were known and engaged through the *Yhyakh* festival.

3 Changing Multispecies Relationships at the *Yhyakh*

It seems that the Tsarist government never banned *Yhyakh*s specifically, although the pre-contact forms of healing that were recognised as 'shamanic' were repressed (Khudyakov 2016; Popov 1910). These forms of healing, in common with the *Yhyakh*, were grounded in the Sakha people's relationships with complex and hierarchical 'clans' of beings, which were treated as extended kin networks (Lindenau 1983; Sieroszewski 1993). European ethnographers recognised these beings as gods, guardian spirits and demons – as typical features of an animist worldview. In fact, these beings in their nature and activity cross-cut any distinctions between material and spiritual: they are recognisable both as organisms, meteorological events, or geological forms, and as named persons with life histories and relatives (cf Ingold 2000). These beings were emotional and strong-willed; they were equally capable of kindness and anger. They could be benevolent and creative, like the *ajyy*, with Ürüng Aar Toion, the god of the sun, at their head – or they could be malevolent and destructive *abaahy*. The more powerful beings were encountered in a

variety of complex ways, and sometimes through the specific aspects of life with which they were associated; one of them was Djöhögöi *ajyy*, the creator and protector of horses. Both human and non-human persons could quickly shift their loyalties and position. For example, great care was taken after someone had died, to prevent them from returning as an *üör* – a hungry ghost that preyed on the living, causing sickness and death (Sieroszewski 1993; Khudyakov 2016).

There were particular people who had an unusual capacity to mediate or intervene within these relationships, called in Sakha *oyuun* if they were men, or *udaghan* if they were women. These people were identified by European explorers as shamans. Their activities were strongly discouraged or actively repressed as either devil worship, primitive superstition, or both – however Sakha communities contained practicing *oyuun* and *udaghan* throughout the Tsarist period (e.g. Sieroszewski 1993; Popov 1910; Khudyakov 2016). The early twentieth century ethnographer A.A. Popov describes an occasion in which an *oyuun* flew up to ask Djöhögöi to increase the horse herds, using a combination of song, poetry, food, craft, and the services of young human assistants (Popov 2008, 116-30). Thus, healing action consisted of negotiation and persuasion, often through the medium of song, poetry, or art. It was grounded in the assumption that the events of daily life – and indeed all actors, whether human or non-human – emerge out of a constantly shifting pattern of relationship (cf. Ingold 2000). The pursuit of a community's flourishing consisted of constant interventions, intended to bring the relationships constituting a particular place into a harmonious state: geography was indeed kinship. Words, songs and artefacts altered the flow of events, therefore; Sakha artistic forms were active, and deeply embedded in community life (cf. Harris 2017; Ferguson 2019; Balzer 1997).

The historical sources show that *Yhyakh*s differed greatly from community to community. They also could be held during a variety of important events, such as marriages. Thus, different ethnographic accounts describe three 'shamans' offering prayers and *kumys* to the *ajyy* deities, accompanied by suites of boys and girls; a single elderly man praying and sprinkling *kumys*; one man pouring *kumys* over a white horse, and even a 'dark' *Yhyakh* held to honour the *abaahy*, involving a blood sacrifice (Khudyakov 2016; Sieroszewski 1993; Popov 1910). The entertainments that were incorporated into large *Yhyakh* festivals often included horse-racing. *Yhyakh*s could include individual horses, therefore – but not necessarily. Many ethnographic sources assert that the *Yhyakh*s were becoming smaller and simpler over the nineteenth century, reflecting profound changes in Sakha peoples' ways of life (cf. Middendorf 1878). The horse herds were decreasing, making *kumys* harder to obtain – and people's aspirations and preoccupations were changing. Sieroszewski claims that the guests at an *Yhyakh* in Nam region during the 1890s were

more interested in the tent selling vodka and tea than the Sakha drinking vessels, *kumys*, and the decorations made of silver birch (Sieroszewski 1993, 446).

Within this multiplicity of form and purpose, the activity that remains constant through all the accounts is the address to higher, benevolent persons, intended to reaffirm a kind, loving interrelation through prayer, worship intermingled with rejoicing, and the offering of *kymys*. The relationship between Sakha communities and these beings was felt to be so intimate that the protective higher beings themselves – and among them Djöhögöi – bestowed the *kymys*, rich food and beautiful words that were used in their praise. For example, one poem-prayer or *algys* recorded by Ivan Khudyakov in the middle of the nineteenth century contains the following words:

> Lord God, arising and living behind the third heaven, you determine everything! Their fate is made by you. Because of that you have made us to give prayers. You, […] quickly increasing the horses in pens, Kürüö Djöhögöi, you have done everything, you ordered everything. All of us, we Uraankhai Sakha, thank you. Will we say your prayers successfully? (Khudyakov 2016, 243)

The event as a whole manifested and celebrated the loving generosity of these deities, and in doing so assured the future flourishing of the entire community of human and non-human persons – within which Djöhögöi and his children, the horses, were paramount. The verbal artistry in the prayers was both the expression of a multispecies extended family, and a form of action in its reconstitution of this family. This family and its aesthetic interaction were to survive the transitions brought about by the Tsarist Empire, as both the ethnographic accounts and the model demonstrate.

4 Nikolai Belousov and his Model

Belousov included the recreational activities *Yhyakh* participants would also enjoy – wrestling, and hopping races. The occasion we see in Belousov's model in fact corresponds very closely to the ethnographic evidence – and in particular S.V. Yastremskii's account of two *kumys* rituals in a region close to Belousov's, which took place around the time the model was carved (Yasktremskii 1897, 19, 22). In both these rituals, one man went down on one knee, holding a *choroon* full of *kumys* – while the shaman or 'eulogist' (*algyyr kihi*) stood next to him, sprinkling *kumys* out of the *choroon* with a spoon, and chanting praise and prayers to the *ajyy*. In another the kneeling man held the *choroon* by its 'one leg', and he wore a "cloth woman's cap with a badge" – a "*tuhakhtalakh dshabaka bergehe*" (Yastremskii 1897, 22,

10). This is exactly the cap the man in the model is wearing, as he stands on one knee and holds a 'three-legged' (*üs atakhtaakh*) choroon by one of its 'legs'; this is visible in Figure Two. Next to him is one of the holes in the model's base, indicating that a figure should have stood next to him; this hole is hidden behind the birch-tree decoration in Figure Two, but is just visible in Figure One. This figure has been lost – and, from its positioning, it could well have been the shaman or *algyyr kihi* Yastremskii describes.

Figure 2 The kneeling figure (photographed by the Author)

This combination of shaman or *algyyr kihi* with an assistant holding the *kumys* appears in Jacob Lindenau's account of an *Yhyakh* which occurred near Yakutsk in the 1730s or 40s (Lindenau 1983, 37). Lindenau's journey to the Yakut Oblast' narrowly pre-dates the extensive efforts by the Orthodox Church to Christianise the Sakha people: he is likely to have been describing an event that was closely related to pre-Tsarist Sakha practice. Belousov's model therefore was true to its time and the *Yhyakh* itself both in its form – a depiction of Si-

berian life created specifically for a European audience – and in its representation of the continuities that survived Imperialist change.

There is no direct evidence that the original model was much larger, and contained representations of horses. On the contrary, the evidence in the model itself suggests that only a small section is missing: as viewers pointed out, the model would be completely symmetrical but for one section of fencing, and the angle of the wood supporting the base of the model indicates that a narrow section was cut off. As I have explained, the ethnographic material indicates that Belousov was very committed to the accuracy of his depiction: if an *Yhyakh* required the presence of tethered horses, it seems he would have found a way to include them. Belousov was certainly able and willing to carve horses: another model of his, held by the Russian Ethnographic Museum in Saint Petersburg, contains figures of horses.

If Belousov was a Sakha man of his time, then he must have been as aware of the hosts of beings in his setting as anyone else; he also would have had his place within the ever-moving relationships. The *Yhyakh* was and is an important forum for many Sakha creative genres, encompassing song, poetry, dance and craft. This illustrates the explicit and intrinsic relationship between Sakha creativity and the relational setting. Creative inspiration and skill emerged through interactions between human and specific non-human people: the poem-prayer offered to Djöhögöi is an example of this interaction (cf. Ferguson 2019; Crate 2006). As a talented and successful carver, Belousov is likely to have known he was *ichchileekh* – i.e. his art would have been fostered by the energising beings known as *ichchi*. He did not tease the wood and mammoth bone into the model we now see on his own, therefore: it came into being within a field of relationships that encompassed the *ajyy*, and many more (cf. Hallam, Ingold 2014). Perhaps it can be said that the *ajyy* – and with them Djöhögöi – generously bestowed the model on Belousov, as they bestowed the words of poem-prayers on those who preside at *Yhyakh*s. If Djöhögöi was one of the personalities behind the model, then his children, the horses, are of course embedded within it, and make their appearance felt in various ways. The model invokes horses in, for example, the *kumys* the figures are holding; the kneeling man's 'three-legged' *choroon*, which would normally have its 'feet' carved in the shape of a horse's hooves (cf. Sieroszewski 1993, 394); and in the birch tree decorations shaped like horse tails, as one viewer pointed out.[7] These birch tree decorations also resemble the Sakha horse-hair whips (*deibiir*), which are much in evidence in *Yhyakh* festivals. When the model is seen as the expression of the *Yhyakh*'s multispecies universe, the need for Belousov to include representations of horses disappears.

7 Author's fieldnotes (April 25, 2015).

5 Conclusion: Hybrid Aesthetics in the *Yhyakh* Model

At its carving, the model was simultaneously a direct expression of Sakha life, like the prayers and epic poetry transcribed by pre-Soviet ethnographers, and a curious artefact from an obscure Siberian tribe, ready to be displayed and sold to the European public. As a hybrid object, it continues to slip beyond the aesthetic conventions and expectations of its viewers, as it appears to conform to them. Apparently it is a representation of a common event in the Sakha people's daily lives, corresponding to European and then Soviet conventions of depiction: the carver has taken the position of an external observer, and has created figures that represent each character at the event. People are the central focus, while animals and the environment are almost entirely absent – reflecting the anthropocentric emphasis of the Paris Exhibition. Its apparent conformity to European representative genres of art perhaps leads contemporary viewers in Sakha (Yakutia) to assume that it will follow the representative conventions introduced during the Soviet period – conventions that were highly formalised, and which demonstrated the hard distinction between human beings and the natural world that were inherent to Soviet materialism (cf. Yurchak 2006).

The Soviet state in fact accelerated the homogenising trends that the Tsarist state had started, as it inculcated an extreme, materialist version of the separation between man and his environment that had filtered into prominent discourse during the Tsarist era (cf. Hirsch 2005; Slezkine 1994; Volkov 2000). Sakha (Yakutia) and the lives of its people changed even more over the twentieth century, largely as a result of the Soviet administration's attempt to build a modernised, atheist Soviet state across the Soviet Empire. The bulk of the Sakha population moved from hamlets scattered across the forest first to Soviet collective farms, and eventually to Sakha (Yakutia)'s capital, Yakutsk. Modernised forms of farming were introduced, along with a universal secularist education, and a network of institutions devoted to secularist, russianised cultural production (Donohoe, Habeck 2011; Grant 1995). Offering *kymys* to creative beings was certainly not regarded as an appropriate use of a respectable Soviet person's time. This separation between humans and their environment was intensified within Soviet-era artistic genres, which became increasingly repetitive as the Soviet period continued: art was primarily a passive representation of a human-focused world, rather than an active intervention in a multispecies ecology. The repetition in Soviet art included a set of conventions that determined the portrayal of the Soviet Union's different ethnic groups; for example, indigenous Siberians like the Sakha were generally given narrow, slanting eyes and high cheekbones.

The *Yhyakh* persisted throughout the Soviet period in various forms, and was eventually the focus of the Sakha cultural revival of

the 1990s: it is now one of Sakha (Yakutia)'s most important yearly events. The *Yhyakh* continues to display the influence of the Soviet aesthetic regime, which was incorporated into it as Sakha people continued to adapt it to their changing political circumstances (Peers 2022). Just as an *Yhyakh* held in the aftermath of sovietisation might include tethered horses, as an externalised representation of their importance, so a Soviet or post-Soviet depiction of an *Yhyakh* would contain depictions of horses. The expectation that Belousov would have included figures of horses perhaps comes from the aesthetic conventions that were established in Sakha (Yakutia) during the Soviet era – along with the surprise to see Sakha people portrayed with large eyes. In fact, the questions people asked have enabled participants in the discussion to identify the assumptions inherent to the Soviet aesthetic regime, and its contrasts with older forms of artistic expression.

And so I would like to suggest to my interlocutors in Yakutsk that the horses are not absent, but instead are imbricated into the model's representation. Belousov was working within a set of aesthetic and representative expectations that differed from the conventions that became so powerful during the Soviet period, and which continue to dominate artistic practice today. I would argue that these respective sets of aesthetic and representative expectations emerge from and articulate contrasting experiences of life and setting, shaped by successive political regimes. I would note the profound ambivalence of the model, representing as it does a crucial and ancient Sakha event for a distant audience Belousov would never have known. I would suggest that the model is simultaneously a diorama produced to order for a colonialist international exhibition – and the expression of an experience of life that pre-dated the Russian arrival, within which humans, animals and the natural world were so closely bound up with one another that a distinct representation of a horse is not necessary to demonstrate that they are "the most important guest" at the *Yhyakh*, as one viewer put it.[8] The model in fact emerges from the multispecies interconnection that its subject, the *Yhyakh*, was and is instrumental in reproducing. It demonstrates the flux of relationship that engendered pre-Soviet Sakha creative genres, in a depiction of the yearly event that re-harmonised and hence re-established these relationships.

I suggest that the model continues to evoke the human and non-human clans in Sakha (Yakutia), as it testifies to their resilience. As my consultant said, this model offers Sakha people an opportunity to recover the relationships obscured by their political status quo – including their close connection with horses. As such, it remains an

8 Author's fieldnotes (April 25, 2015).

active intervention in the Sakha multispecies family. I suggest this model also gives all of us a chance to think about how the persons we live with – who may take a myriad of forms, and whom we do not necessarily perceive, understand, or control – communicate and connect with us through music, poetry and art. Aesthetic experience reveals both the assumptions about multispecies interaction that may dominate a specific setting, and the nature itself of this interaction.

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