This book draws on a wide range of theoretical perspectives – from Chaney and Bourdieu to Berger, Sontag and Bakhtin – and from ideas about nostalgia to theories of consumption, nation, and ethnicity. The ethnographic detail in each chapter is impressive, and in my view is the real core of the book. It is a resource which will be widely used by Russian, Soviet and postsocialist specialists, by anthropologists, sociologists and geographers, and by anyone interested in cultural studies, material culture and consumption, and place and ethnicity.

—Dr. Frances Pine, Goldsmiths, University of London

Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North breaks new ground by exploring the concept of lifestyle from a distinctly anthropological perspective. Showcasing the collective work of ten experienced scholars in the field, the book goes beyond concepts of tradition that have often been the focus of previous research, to explain how political, economic and technological changes in Russia have created a wide range of new possibilities and constraints in the pursuit of different ways of life.

Each contribution is drawn from meticulous first-hand field research, and the authors engage with theoretical questions such as whether and how the concept of lifestyle can be extended beyond its conventionally urban, Euro-American context and employed in a markedly different setting. Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North builds on the contributors' clear commitment to diversifying the field and providing a novel and intimate insight into this vast and dynamic region.

This book provides inspiring reading for students and teachers of Anthropology, Sociology and Cultural Studies and for anyone interested in Russia and its regions. By providing ethnographic case studies, it is also a useful basis for teaching anthropological methods and concepts, both at graduate and undergraduate level. Rigorous and innovative, it marks an important contribution to the study of Siberia and the Russian North.

As with all Open Book publications, this comprehensive book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.
This volume uses the concept of lifestyle to investigate social change in a very specific regional setting — the Russian Federation, the largest country in the former Soviet Union. As David Chaney’s work shows particularly clearly, the concept of lifestyle can help us investigate the interrelation between social differentiation, and the varying patterns of aesthetic and ethical values that can be observed in contemporary mass societies (Chaney 1996). However, like other theorisations of lifestyle, Chaney’s discussion is explicitly concerned with Euro-American capitalist societies, which have broadly conformed to consumerist forms of production throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A crucial difference between the development of western European and Soviet social practice was the presence in the Soviet Union of a consistent mobilisation of state resources into promoting expedient forms of cultural production, incorporating a particular notion of the nature and function of aesthetics, in addition to aesthetic and ethical values. How, then, can the trends Chaney describes have emerged in Soviet or socialist societies, where the possibilities for performance and expression were shaped to a much larger extent by a socialist state
ideology and policy, rather than capitalist consumer production? How could Soviet-era configurations of aesthetics, ethics, communication, and social differentiation be affecting those of the present day? To what extent is a body of theory generated in the capitalist west applicable to former Soviet societies, and what can it show us?

This article takes the national revival of the Sakha people in Sakha Republic (Yakutia), in north-eastern Siberia, as a case study, to examine the extent to which the Soviet legacy is influencing post-Soviet patterns of expression, value, and community — thus evaluating the significance the lifestyle concept has for the former Soviet Union. As this chapter will show, perceptions of cultural difference were a key target of a complex Soviet policy, which utilised a range of artistic and aesthetic forms. Contemporary identification and identity politics in the Russian Federation continue to revolve around cultural production. Hence, the Sakha national revival can reveal the impact of Soviet policy on contemporary formations of community and aesthetic values — and, particularly, those existing in the Russian Far North and Siberia.

The first section describes the forms of expression and value that are linked to the Sakha national revival. This description is structured around an account of the Yhyakh, the Sakha people’s most important yearly festival, and it includes a discussion of a pattern of aesthetic value and community formation that differs from the cases Chaney describes. It will re-focus the questions posed above towards a particular community within the former Soviet Union — contemporary Sakha society — and the Sakha patterns of social differentiation that involve notions of cultural difference. In doing so, it will explicate Chaney’s theory, and its implications for understanding contemporary social differentiation in the west. The second section describes the configuration of aesthetics and community that emerged within Soviet-era authoritative discourse, and, in particular, through state-sponsored cultural production. It also explores the unintended effects these policies had on community formation during the late Soviet period. The third section shows how the Soviet policies that concerned non-Russian ethnic groups incorporated the authoritative aesthetic, and the forms of cultural production it encouraged. The chapter’s conclusion will draw links between the specificities of contemporary expressions of
Sakha identification and their aesthetics, and the trajectory of Soviet-era aestheticised social differentiation.

**Lifestyle, Aesthetics, and Identity Politics in Sakha (Yakutia)**

What’s in a coat?: taste and identity politics at the Yhyakh

Sakha society has transformed rapidly over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as have the nature of its hierarchies, and their values. There are many aspects of present-day Sakha that conform to the post-modern, capitalist social realities Chaney’s theory concerns; however, there are features of Sakha values and aesthetics that are distinctive, as this section will describe. The following discussion of lifestyle in Sakha (Yakutia) focuses on the values and aesthetics of the Sakha national revival, and their integration into Sakha’s social differentiation. It is structured around an account of the Sakha people’s contemporary Yhyakh festivals, and the different patterns of community, value, and expression that can be observed on these occasions.

Sakha (Yakutia) is unusual, although not unique, among Russia’s federal subjects, in that its titular ethnic group, the Sakha people, is numerically dominant over the Russian population: according to the 2010 census, 49.9 per cent of the population are Sakha, while 37.8 are Russian (Vserossiiskaia perepis’ 2010). The Sakha, like many other non-Russian peoples of the former Soviet space, experienced a nationalist revival of their religious and artistic traditions during the 1990s, initiated by members of the political and intellectual elites. This revival is occurring against the backdrop of a Russian colonisation of the region beginning in the early seventeenth century, and the Soviet-era social engineering discussed in subsequent sections.

The impact of this revival is evident from the current popularity of one of its flagship events, the summer Yhyakh ritual. This event is rooted in the Sakha people’s shamanic heritage: the pre-Soviet Yhyakh was an opportunity to offer fermented mare’s milk, or *kumys*, to the higher nature spirits and gods in the Sakha shamanic pantheon. These rituals both praised the gods for the coming of summer, and asked
for prosperity in the future. The festival was banned in some parts of Sakha (the then Yakutian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic) during the Soviet period. Soviet Yhyakh organisers would frequently omit the shamanic prayers and libations that were the event’s original pretext, replacing them with the official speeches that occurred at most Soviet public events (cf. Lane 1981) — thus making the Yhyakh indistinguishable from the many other Soviet state holidays. Key members of the Sakha nationalist intelligentsia staged prominent Yhyakh festivals during the early 1990s, and since then the Yhyakh has become one of the republic’s most important holidays. Hundreds of thousands of people now attend the republic’s largest Yhyakh, put on by the municipality of Yakutsk, the republic’s capital; every other Sakha settlement in the republic holds its own Yhyakh, as do many of the republic’s larger institutions, private businesses, and family groups.

The Yhyakh can take innumerable forms, depending on the agenda and means of its organisers — however an Yhyakh generally includes the ritual feeding of the upper spirits and gods, followed by a communal circle dance, the Ohuohai; eating, drinking and relaxing with family, friends, and colleagues; performances of Sakha folk and pop music and dancing; and competitions in traditional Sakha sports. The larger, state-sponsored Yhyakh festivals last for a couple of days, interspersed with a ritual greeting of the sun on one of the mornings. Yakutsk’s Yhyakh incorporates several sound and concert stages, food stalls, a sports area, horse racing, fashion shows, and a market selling Sakha art, crafts, clothes, jewellery, and souvenirs — in addition to areas where individuals can receive their own shamanic ritual cleansing, healing, and advice. A large part of the festival site is taken up with a series of small enclosures, in which individual organisations and regional administrations host their own rituals, exhibitions and parties.

The photograph below, Figure 7.1, was taken at a private banquet in one of these enclosures, at a large Yhyakh organised by the administration of a region close to Yakutsk. An extended version of the ancient wooden Sakha summer accommodation (urahai) had been built to house the banquet; the guests were seated at wooden tables around its edge, eating a selection of traditional Sakha foods as they listened to each other’s toasts and speeches.
Two out of this group of high-level government officials and businessmen are wearing Sakha national costume — this is the dark grey coat, studded with metal that they have on over their European white shirts and ties. Noticeably, the man facing the camera, a high-ranking regional politician, is not Sakha, even though he has invested in an expensive Sakha national costume. He is sitting between a Russian in a conventional European shirt, and a Sakha man, also in European dress. Sakha national costume is clearly not obligatory at this occasion even for ethnic Sakha, despite the emphatic visual and culinary signals that define the event as Sakha — such as the wooden pillars carved to look like traditional Sakha horse-tethering poles, or the bottles of kumys on the tables, rather than wine or vodka.

These signals also highlight indigenous Siberian tradition *per se* as a locus of meaning and value — as does the fact that the banquet’s important guests have taken the trouble to wear Sakha national costume. The politician’s decision to wear Sakha national costume was clearly made with reference to the complex of meaning and value surrounding contemporary Sakha identity, so evident at this festival. In fact, he was carefully displaying his commitment to Sakha cultural particularity, in order to consolidate his relationship with the region’s Sakha population — as a high-level Russian official in a political context.
conditioned by the Putin administration’s emphasis on the supremacy of ethnic Russian interests and traditions, within the Russian Federation as a whole. Sakha government officials also have to manage their expressions of cultural affiliation, depending on their position and context: it is not always appropriate for them to wear national costume, as the smart white shirt on the Russian’s Sakha neighbour shows.

All these men are using their dress as a means of visual expression, which, in this occasion’s specific circumstances, enables them both to display their own position with reference to the subtle play of value, power, and community at this event, and to act within it. They are employing the repertoire of conventional local tastes into both communication and action — and, in particular, the spectrum of common visual and gastronomic tastes and values, as they choose their clothes and their food. (For instance, does the Russian politician tuck in to the boiled reindeer tongue, which is not commonly found in European Russia — or does he avoid it, thus drawing attention to his ethnic origin, and the tense colonial relationship between Russians and Sakha?) Their behaviour shows how social relationships, power differentiation, and community formation are embedded in sensory experience and value. If aesthetic responses are understood to concern “the qualitative effect of stimuli upon the senses”, following Howard Morphy (1996: 258), then they are clearly integrated into the negotiation of power relationships in Sakha (Yakutia), as they are throughout the world.

Lifestyle: aesthetics in action

This section will use Chaney’s discussion of Euro-American lifestyle to expand on the role display has within contemporary mass societies, and on its implications for the interrelation of aesthetic and ethical value, and action. In line with other influential writers on the concept of lifestyle, Chaney (1996) places the development of a “culture of spectacle” in the modern capitalist world at the heart of his discussion. He argues that the anonymity of contemporary urban space, the development of cultures of consumption, along with mass advertising and fashion, and the fracturing of pre-modern hierarchies have led to a new emphasis on visualisation in the formation and negotiation of social structuration and identity. Chaney defines lifestyles as “any distinctive, and therefore
recognizable, mode of living” (1996: 11), following Sobel (1981: 3). He contends that they are “‘expressive’ behaviours” (Chaney 1996: 11; see also Chapter 1 of this volume). Chaney further describes these expressive behaviours as “characteristic modes of social engagement, or narratives of identity, in which the actors concerned can embed the metaphors at hand […] lifestyles are creative projects, they are forms of enactment in which actors make judgements in delineating an environment” (1996: 92).

As this quotation suggests, lifestyles are the way that individuals can assimilate the symbols available to them into habitual expressive practices, which orientate them with respect to the changing communities and hierarchies among which they live — and, in doing so, also reproduce these dynamic and yet structured social groupings. Lifestyles signal “patterns of affiliation” or “sensibilities” — groupings of aesthetic and ethical values, which form the terrain of social differentiation in today’s societies (Chaney 1996: 11). Lifestyles are therefore the means by which social structure both emerges and is negotiated in contemporary societies, characterised as they are by increasing and destabilising flows of people, information, symbols, technologies, and consumer products. Chaney’s elaboration of lifestyle links the notion of the “social imaginary” that Joseph Long presents in Chapter 5 to social structuration. If social imaginaries refer to “collective representations of social identity”, Chaney’s account points out the work these representations do in the negotiation of power.

As Chaney seeks to emphasise, the expression within these lifestyles relies heavily on the visual: “visualisation has become the central resource for communicating and appropriating meaning” (1996: 101). He points to the increasing preponderance of “visual clues” in contemporary urban environments: “The combination of the inherent anonymity of urban crowds, allied with mass retailing, industries of mass leisure and entertainment and the provision of public information for those seeking guidance in alienating spaces all work to create an insistent chatter of visual imagery” (ibid.). Furthermore, he suggests that the prominence of fashion and design in contemporary societies exhibits a material culture that revolves around a popular capacity to reflect on the distinction between the form and function of material objects; this reflection acts to invest these objects with meaning through incorporating them into different performative demarcations of sensibility. Styles of, for
example, clothing, interior decoration, or smartphones express both the values and intentions associated with their particular aesthetic, and the reflexive process of inscribing meaning to physical objects — a process which itself acts to relativise aesthetic judgement. The management of visual cues, or, as Chaney puts it, “surfaces”, is thus integral to the process whereby individuals acquire identity and agency through their capacity to navigate the shifting spectrum of taste and value that constitutes social differentiation.

A widespread recognition of the relativity of both aesthetic and ethical values is of course a central part of the lifestyle phenomenon Chaney describes. This relativity extends to the nature itself of the ethical and aesthetic, and their interrelation, through the reflexive awareness of the activity of investing different material forms and sensual stimuli with meaning and expressive power. The process through which individuals communicate and act within social reality invokes ethical and aesthetic values, as part of a spectrum of alternative ethics, aesthetics, and expressions. Social differentiation in contemporary consumer societies therefore occurs through forms of communication that incorporate habituated patterns of aesthetic and ethical value, while also rendering these patterns provisional.

The contingent and dynamic nature of ethical and aesthetic values, within multiple and overlapping instances of lifestyle expression, makes possible a shift in the relative position and nature of the aesthetic and ethical, such that the aesthetic becomes both a means and an end. The invocation of a specific aesthetic response becomes part of the expression of both ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. For example, the extent to which an individual foregrounds the care with which they have coordinated the shapes, textures, and colours in their new kitchen is part of the lifestyle choice it manifests, along with the ethical and aesthetic values this choice implies. It is therefore possible to imagine “the aesthetic” as providing the means for a variety of expressive interventions into the social environment, rather than as the passive experience of the beautiful. Particular patterns of aesthetic response can incorporate understandings of functional aesthetics, which can be mobilised in the service of a given spectrum of lifestyles, and their underlying intentions and sensibilities; as part of this, perceptions and notions of the aesthetic become intermingled with ethical considerations.
To give an example, technological products made by Apple are geared towards individuals who take pride in the beauty of their material accoutrements. The recognition that aesthetic value can and should be incorporated into everyday technologies is the conduit and signal for further systems of ethical and aesthetic sensibilities: the minimalist shapes and hard, polished textures both echo and emphasise the placing of value on capitalist technological development, efficiency, and empirical science. At the other end of the scale, those wanting to signal their disassociation from free-market capitalism and the spread of communication technology can subvert the assumption that everyday technologies should also carry an intrinsic aesthetic statement, by covering their Apple Mac with stickers, for example. Their Mac becomes a vehicle for their personal self-expression, rather than a beautiful object in itself. These examples occur in juxtaposition with one another, even if there is no direct contact between the people involved. Both will have an awareness that alternative aesthetic expressions exist, along with the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities they manifest: their expressive intervention into the social environment is therefore perpetually relative to these alternatives.

Finally, these two aesthetic decisions will be accompanied by many others, which together enmesh these individuals into a variety of overlapping communities they have recognised through their ability to “read” the aesthetic choices of others. Hence, someone in a dark, well-cut suit sits on an urban underground train, engrossed in their iPad, next to another person with body piercings and strikingly dyed hair, listening to an iPhone in a black and red striped case. The people sitting opposite them can while away the journey in imagining their houses; their political views; their life partners; or their pets, in the awareness that others may be doing the same with them. A reflexive awareness of alternative aesthetic expressions is thus built into the way we apprehend the social environment, and the way we engage with it through “performing” our own aesthetic and ethical sensibilities and alliances. The result, in many Euro-American capitalist societies, is a plethora of overlapping appearances linked to lifestyles, which map on to what are recognised as the more stable differentiating characteristics, such as gender, ethnic background, and age, to constitute shifting systems of social structuration, community, and identity.
Sensibilities of ethnicity at the Yhyakh

Attending an Yhyakh shows clearly that similar combinations of sensibility and expression also serve to demarcate communities and actors within the social reality of Sakha (Yakutia). The Sakha identification is strong enough for most Sakha people to conceive of themselves as belonging to a discrete community within the Russian Federation. And yet the Sakha population is large enough (466,500 people, in 2010) and sufficiently integrated into the Russian Federation’s wider social context for social differentiation to occur within it, according to shifting patterns of sensibility and value. For example, an observer familiar with Sakha (Yakutia) would immediately conclude that the men sitting at the Yhyakh banquet in Figure 7.1 above are members of the elite, and, therefore, are likely to be managing their expressions of national affiliation very carefully, regardless of their real sympathies.

A survey of the Yhyakh at Yakutsk shows some important patterns of sensibility in Sakha (Yakutia), the way they are expressed, and hence the recognisable lifestyle choices that have become both markers and conduits for social differentiation within the Sakha community. Many of the values and preconceptions that inform these sensibilities concern the meaning of Sakha identification, and an emphatic public commitment to the Sakha people and cultural heritage has become a widespread convention among Sakha intellectual, political, and business elites, as Figure 7.1 shows. However, the public celebration of Sakha cultural heritage sits in an uneasy tension with Sakha (Yakutia)’s politically subservient position within the Russian Federation. Visitors to the republic constantly encounter a worry that others may perceive the Sakha people and their culture as primitive, irrelevant, on the verge of dissolution — and, even worse, that this perception could be correct. The massively increased exposure to global technologies and cultural products brought about by the cessation of the Soviet administration has in some respects exacerbated the worry about Sakha culture and its value, while providing opportunities for individuals to adopt or create new forms of Sakha identification (Ventsel 2004a, Ventsel & Peers 2017).

Yakutsk’s Yhyakh is shot through with the ambiguity that surrounds a Sakha identification, whether manifested through the occasion’s political communication, cultural production, shamanic spirituality,
commerce, or individual decisions about how to enjoy the holiday. Its main didactic purpose is the cultural establishment’s effort to encourage Sakha people to respect and value their cultural tradition; this is also a key motivation within the current revival of the Sakha shamanic tradition, which, again, is supported by many members of the cultural and intellectual establishments. Among these communities, a desire to pursue an interest in Sakha shamanism is associated with a commendable love and respect towards one’s native Sakha culture; this in turn is taken to signal an appreciation of higher values, a love of nature and mankind, and an openness towards an engagement with positive, spiritual forces. The contemporary practice of Sakha neoshamanism is therefore a way of expressing a set of sensibilities, and in doing so marking oneself out as an intellectual, idealist, or creative person (творческий человек) — as someone who is drawn to the pursuit of life’s mysterious, complex, and creative dimensions, for its own sake.

This set of values is so deeply integrated into the Sakha social context that individuals can refer to them through signals as small as brief asides in a conversation — or as far-reaching as adopting what in some cases can amount to a lifestyle, in Chaney’s sense. Some people devote a great deal of their time, energy, and money to attending shamanic lectures, for example, or visiting important ritual sites. These people come to Yakutsk’s Yhyakh to receive spiritual cleansing, as part of engaging with their pre-Soviet cultural tradition. They may pay particular attention to the Yhyakh’s main ritual, undergo private shamanic healing ceremonies, or attend the greeting of the sun — or they may themselves be helping to administer the various different forms of Sakha shamanic ritual. These people are likely to see the Yhyakh as an occasion that enables them to engage with and articulate their deepest religious and moral convictions, and thus as one of the year’s most important events. Their values to some extent coincide with those expressed by the republic’s leading intellectual and cultural figures, and hence put them on the side of Sakha society commonly held to be discerning, enlightened, and elite. In fact, the majority of the people I have encountered who espouse this set of values are from the professional classes, with a level of education that would facilitate their seeking meaning and value in learning about cultural tradition.
However, a large proportion of Yhyakh attendees — likely to include many of those who appreciate the Yhyakh’s spiritual aspect — are there as consumers of the various attractions provided by both state and commerce. The willingness to appropriate foreign cultural forms, which Chaney (1996) contends is characteristic of modernised, capitalist social contexts, sits in Sakha (Yakutia) with a characteristically modern, capitalist consciousness of an individual’s right to seek their own happiness, pleasure, and trajectory of development, through their power to consume (Giddens 1990). In the Sakha context, the directions this consumption can take are inflected by the uncertainty about the value of a Sakha identification, mentioned above. On the one hand, the demonstration that one is “up to speed” with the rest of the world, through one’s ownership of prominent foreign brands of clothes, mobile telephones, or computers, is regarded by many as a commendable action. On the other, the healthy market in specifically Sakha crafts, jewellery, art, national costumes, and fashion testifies to a widespread desire to demonstrate that one is not only up-to-date, but proudly Sakha: many decisions, expressive actions, and lifestyle choices are shaped by a felt need to establish the Sakha people’s right to regard itself as bearing one of the world’s valuable cultures. The Yhyakh provides a valuable opportunity both to trade in and celebrate contemporary Sakha fashion, cultural production, and art. Sakha designers and artisans can exhibit their products to potential customers, while individuals have a chance to display their Sakha national costumes and jewellery.

Those who are unable or unwilling to buy expensive Sakha artefacts still have the opportunity to enjoy and display their Sakha affiliation through their consumption of Sakha popular music; the various concert and sound stages at the Yhyakh are packed with listeners, many of whom spend the entire night dancing or socialising. The Sakha popular music industry has mushroomed since the 1990s, and now encompasses a variety of genres and performers, each of which addresses and manifests the ambiguities posed by the nature of contemporary Sakha identity (Ventsel 2004a, 2004b, 2009). Many Sakha pop singers use their performances to showcase Sakha fashion designs, which on occasion can incorporate elements taken from Sakha national costume, and traditional art.
On the other hand, Sakha rap artists emphasise their enthusiasm for foreign music genres by adopting hip-hop fashion and style wholesale, in common with their generally young, urban fan base. However, even the Sakha hip-hop fans who stride through the Yhyakh in skinny jeans and hi-top trainers are demonstrating their adherence to Sakha hip-hop, in particular. They may not be about to have anything to do with Sakha national costumes and traditionalist shamanism, but they are, nonetheless, a new incarnation of the Sakha people — as their eagerness to participate in the Sakha-language pop and rap scene shows. Sakha-language pop and rap lyrics frequently concern the dilemmas that a Sakha identification can entail for young people, even if the singers and rappers themselves dress, move, and dance like American pop artists (Ventsel & Peers 2017).

As the description of contemporary Sakha fashion and pop indicates, visual display and spectacle have become very important in the contemporary Sakha context, in common with the western capitalist cultures Chaney describes. People can signal their affiliation with the Yhyakh’s spiritual meaning by, for example, buying and displaying amulets, or the sacred Sakha horse-tail whips (debir). They can demonstrate their pride in their Sakha identity by simply wearing traditional Sakha earrings, if they are women, or a horsehair headband, if they are men — or, at the other end of the scale, by creating their own elaborate national costume. The different perceptions and values surrounding Sakha identification and culture therefore emerge as juxtaposed patterns of expression, which enable individual Sakha people both to identify and to situate themselves among the changing communities within Sakha society. People use combinations of dress, ornament, and behaviour to mark their own priorities, within Sakha (Yakutia)’s familiar spectrum of aesthetic and ethical value — whether they are committed to reviving the Sakha shamanic tradition, or to showing the world that Sakha people can rap and breakdance.

Traces of the Soviet in Sakha shamanic art

The intersections of ethical and aesthetic value, expression, and social differentiation at the Yhyakh therefore correspond to some extent with Chaney’s description of lifestyle in the west. However, the
visual expression at the Yhyakh also reveals the influence of Sakha (Yakutia)’s Soviet heritage. As is the case all over the former Soviet Union, contemporary cultural production bears a strong resemblance to Soviet-era cultural production — and understandably so, since many of the people who train and direct cultural workers received their own training at the end of the Soviet era (cf. Habeck 2011a). The Yhyakh’s main shamanic ritual is therefore accompanied by complex displays of choreography, which clearly belong to the same aesthetic tradition as the dances staged during Soviet-era public holidays (cf. Lane 1981; Rolf 2009). The majority of Sakha national costumes meanwhile conform to patterns that were recorded and reproduced by Soviet-era ethnographers.

The presence of Soviet-era visual forms reflects a striking repetitiveness within the Yhyakh’s visual expression. It is noticeable that the same visual formulae are reproduced in very different contexts, and, as part of this, have become assimilated into the expression of contrasting spectrums of sensibility and community. For example, depictions of Baiaanai, the spirit guardian of the forests for both past and present generations of Sakha people, crop up in a surprising variety of contexts — while also conforming to a stable set of visual conventions. As Figure 7.2 shows, Baiaanai is shown as an old, good-natured Sakha man, with high cheekbones, long hair and a beard, surrounded by wild animals. The representation combines realism with naïveté, and Baiaanai is often merged with the wild animals and landscapes he is portrayed against.

The picture in Figure 7.2 hangs on the wall of a centre for shamanic healing and education, in Suntar’, the main settlement of Suntar’ region. This establishment, like its equivalents all over Sakha (Yakutia), aims to revive Sakha shamanic practice, and, in doing so, to re-educate Sakha people about their ancient beliefs and values. This picture is part of a series of representations, designed to remind Sakha people about their own sacred traditions; it asserts that area spirits are alive and well, and that they should be respected and revered as sacred beings. As such, it has its own elevated moral value, as does its creator and exhibitors: as I have explained above, a reverence for what is regarded as Sakha tradition signals a praiseworthy commitment to higher ideals. This picture and its presentation therefore are directed towards, and appreciated by, the
Sakha individuals who espouse the value of reviving Sakha shamanism, along with its concurrent attitudes towards the natural environment.

The carving in Figure 7.3 is also regarded as a highly valuable, original art object; it was on sale at a fair of traditional Sakha arts and crafts, in Yakutsk in 2010.

Again, Baiaanai has a long beard, a good-natured expression, and is fused into the rivers and animals that surround him. And yet this representation is being sold as an art object, rather than displayed as a sanctified reference to the Sakha people’s ancient spiritual tradition. The circumstances of its display invite the viewer to admire the artistry of the carving, as much as Baiaanai’s intrinsic meaning and value. It is being presented as a work of art, and perhaps also as a patriotic status symbol, within a nexus of value that does not include the assumption that Baiaanai himself should be an object of worship, along with his living environment. One can imagine its eventual buyer as a well-off
Fig. 7.3. A carving of Baiaanai, on sale at a fair in Yakutsk. Photograph by Eleanor Peers, November 2010, CC-BY.

individual who is proud of their Sakha identity and heritage, but who does not necessarily also invest significant resources into pursuing the Sakha shamanic revival. An image that in one context is used to remind the Sakha people of one of their most prominent spiritual entities is used in another to create an attractive household ornament.

Figure 7.4 shows a depiction of Baiaanai on a large, wooden “tree of life”, put up as part of the Yhyakh celebrations at the town of Mirnyi in 2011. This tree of life refers to the Sakha Aal luk mas, a giant tree that unites the shamanic cosmos.

This depiction of Baiaanai is more naïve than the others, although the central elements are the same: we see a Sakha man with a long beard, merged into the landscape, his generosity symbolised by the stream of fish coming from his lap, as in the carving. And yet this representation of Baiaanai is part of a much more overt political statement than the previous two, addressed to an audience of varied ethnicity, rather than the Sakha community. Mirnyi is one of the industrial mining towns built after World War II, according to the Soviet Union’s centralised
economic planning. These towns grew rapidly, developing primarily non-Sakha populations, made up of industrial workers and specialists who migrated into Sakha (Yakutia) from around the Soviet Union. It remains a predominantly non-Sakha town; as a result, the large Yhyakh at Mirnyi in 2011 had to manage relationships between Sakha and non-Sakha residents, and attitudes towards Sakha communities within the wider Russian Federation. The company that runs Mirnyi’s diamond mine, ALROSA, also used the event to demonstrate its commitment to both the Sakha people and Mirnyi’s multi-ethnic population.

Therefore the “tree of life”, like the rest of this particular Yhyakh, aimed to mix recognisably Sakha and non-Sakha motifs within a nominally Sakha cultural form. The other panels on the “tree of life” included representations of Russian folktales, of Orthodox Christian motifs, and of different ALROSA settlements, with the name ALROSA itself written along the bottom. This picture of Baiaanai therefore is integrated into a statement, firstly, of the importance and value of Sakha culture to ALROSA, and, secondly, of the capacity Sakha culture has to
welcome and incorporate foreign traditions. Baiaanai himself has very little relevance to the message, other than as a reference to ALROSA’s respect for the Sakha people’s traditional love of nature — and as an attractive, exotic Sakha cultural form for the Yhyakh’s many non-Sakha attendees.¹

These three illustrations show how similar visual forms — in this case, a stylised representation of Baiaanai — can be incorporated into very different expressive statements, addressed towards a wide variety of audiences. It is possible for a large diamond corporation to incorporate a sacred Sakha figure into its public representation, and, conversely, for an image used in a company’s public relations to appear as an art object, and a visual evocation of core Sakha values and spiritual beliefs. The same visual forms are of course reproduced in contrasting contexts all over the world. However, what is striking about Sakha (Yakutia)’s patterns of aesthetic expression is their lack of reflexivity. None of the three images above, or their presentation, makes any reference to the alternative meanings and references to Baiaanai, with which they co-exist. ALROSA is happy to present a sacred Sakha figure next to idealised images of its mining settlements, without alluding to the fact that Baiaanai is more than a pretty story, for many Sakha people.

Meanwhile, the shamanic centre does not feel the need to foreground a sense that their treatment of Baiaanai may be more respectful of his value and power than other representations — by, for example, experimenting with different visual styles and techniques. In contrast, visual presentations in Euro-American settings can be constructed under the assumption that viewers will see the repetition of an image as a deliberate part of the representation as a whole, itself acting as a reflection on the original source. A classic example is Andy Warhol’s 1962 painting Marilyn Diptych, which incorporates a still from the Marilyn Monroe film Niagara into a visual comment on celebrity culture.

None of my Sakha interlocutors have ever noted the ease with which the same visual forms are transferred from setting to setting, becoming incorporated into fundamentally different expressive acts. The widespread practice of reproducing a stable set of visual forms is accompanied by a willingness to accept highly conventionalised forms

¹ The environmental impact of ALROSA’s diamond mining is an extremely difficult issue in the areas immediately concerned, as Susan Crate describes (2003, 2009).
of visual cultural production and fashion, to the extent that copying or adapting another person’s artwork is not regarded as problematic, or even worthy of comment. The carved figure of Baiaanai in Figure 7.3 is treated as an original art object, for example, even though it incorporates a well-used motif and style. These factors indicate that patterns of aesthetic response take a distinctive form in Sakha (Yakutia), and, therefore, that the interrelation between the expression of sensibility and social differentiation also differs from the patterns one can observe in Euro-America. The Soviet-era origin of so much of Sakha (Yakutia)’s cultural production suggests that the region’s distinctive treatment of visual aesthetics also has its roots in the Soviet period. Could Soviet government policy therefore have generated a specific perception of aesthetic value? How did this perception influence cultural production, the expression of sensibility, and, finally, the emergence of social differentiation? How could the trends initiated by Soviet-era policy be influencing the contemporary Sakha lifestyles described above?

Soviet policy, kul’tura, and lifestyle

As the introduction to this chapter indicated, the whole spectrum of activities devoted to negotiating and expressing meaning and value in the Soviet Union — be they involved with the education system, cultural production, recreation, or mass media discourse — was heavily and consistently influenced by strategic state policy. The essentially modernist nature of the Soviet project meant that normative conceptions of aesthetic experience and value were deliberately incorporated into the array of expressive forms that manifested officially legitimate patterns of sensibility, along with the forms of social differentiation they generated. Official representations matched the perceptions and values they were seeking to promote with a series of expressive practices, much in the way that the lifestyles Chaney describes “perform” the clusters of sensibility that unite social groupings. As the historical literature on the Soviet Union shows, and as this section will explain, the Soviet population was encouraged from the mid-1930s onwards to adopt a changing spectrum of tastes and styles, which could include, for instance, a predilection for white tablecloths, silk lampshades, and curtains (Volkov 2000: 221).
The Soviet political elite therefore hoped to effect the “rebuilding” of Soviet citizens by offering them the possibility of taking on a new “lifestyle”, in Chaney’s sense — complete with the patterns of expressive behaviour that would enable them to signal their new incarnation and identification as members of the Soviet community. Successive Soviet administrations generated their own “cultures of spectacle”, which incorporated specific forms of aestheticised communication — even if the various ways of reproducing and responding to this communication that developed over time eventually enabled it to signal patterns of sensibility the early Soviet government had not intended, as will be explained below. Later, I will return to the way official Soviet strategy played out within the government’s handling of cultural difference.

Morality in cultural production: the meaning of Soviet kul’tura

The historical literature on the Soviet Union testifies to the hegemony the Soviet government was able to exert over all forms of public discourse, a hegemony that had huge implications for almost every aspect of daily life (cf. Boym 1994; Dunham 1990; Pesmen 2000). This hegemony did not and could not have existed as a straightforward imposition by one powerful elite over the rest of the population — in common with mass societies across the modern world, the size and complexity of the Soviet state meant that most of its citizens were co-opted in some way into the state’s overriding interests. Large proportions of Soviet citizens regarded the various norms, conventions, and values generated by state practice as inherently meaningful and worthwhile, as part of a broader personal commitment to Marxism and its ideals, if not also to the Soviet state itself (Yurchak 2006; Grant 1995). In addition, Soviet state policy, although generally produced as an instruction delivered by the central government to the entire Soviet territory, was of course realised in different ways and to differing extents, according to the varying

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2 Work on the anthropology of the state has emphasised the difficulty of distinguishing between “state” and “citizen”, given the extent to which state institutions and infrastructures emerge out of the collectively held practices, values, and understandings of the people who run them (e.g., Gupta 1995; Mitchell 1999). Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov has made good use of this literature in his analysis of Soviet governmentality (2003).
circumstances, territories, cultural communities, and personalities that fell within its remit (İğmen 2011; Kotyleva 2004).

Yet the overall effect of the Soviet Union’s configuration of power relations and state practice was an unusually consistent, repetitive, and omnipresent system of authoritative discourse, which, as Bruce Grant (2011) suggests, constitutes an important distinguishing characteristic of Soviet modernity. The strength of the Soviet Union’s centralised power structure afforded a high cohesiveness between the different strands of state activity. Policy goals related to state building or industrialisation, for example, could also inform the ubiquitous state-sponsored cultural production — thus generating an authoritative discourse that encompassed all these different public spheres of action.

Cultural production was only one activity within the huge network of institutions and activities devoted to the Soviet state’s culture. The Russian word kul’tura itself came to refer to a complex but nonetheless recognisable set of attitudes, aspirations, and practices over the Soviet period, to the extent that, as Grant notes, Soviet society seems to have been unique in knowing what the term “culture” meant (2011: 264–65). Kul’tura in fact came to stand for the process of both assimilating and signalling dominant Soviet patterns of value and community: it became a key paradigm within a process of social differentiation that bears resemblance to Chaney’s description of the lifestyle phenomenon, in that it took place through the expression of particular sensibilities. Like the different modes of lifestyle expression Chaney identifies, the ideas and practices associated with kul’tura incorporated a reflexive philosophy of the aesthetic, which emerged via an emphasis on a person’s engagement with cultural production as both demonstrating and enabling their formation as a “good” Soviet citizen.

As Vadim Volkov (2000) describes, the word kul’tura and its derivatives came into use during the late nineteenth century, in the context of the liberal intelligentsia’s efforts to transmit education and enlightenment to the peasantry. Within this movement, kul’tura came to refer to “a kind of value that could be accumulated, purposefully transferred to and acquired by wider groups of the population” (Volkov 2000: 212). The meaning kul’tura acquired during the Soviet period drew from this tradition: the Bolsheviks took on the mantle left by the Tsarist intelligentsia, aiming to transfer Marxist-Leninist enlightenment to
the population. As time went on, the attainment of *kul’tura* came to be understood as dependent on an individual’s self-motivation, in addition to a collective philanthropic mission towards the uneducated. Over the 1920s and 30s, an important aspect of *kul’tura* referred to the internal transformation of the Soviet Union’s population — the creation of Soviet man — which was to accompany the recreation of their economic system and society. By the end of the 1930s, a person’s *kul’turnost’*, or level of culture, was understood to manifest the extent to which they had worked on improving their inner moral consciousness, through studying both the Bolshevik political literature, and cultural works from around the world (Kotkin 1995: 181; Volkov 2000). A *kul’turnyi chelovek* (cultured person) had to be acquainted with a range of subjects as varied as the geography of Africa, classical music, the history of the Stakhanovite movement, and specific œuvres of the literatures of Russia, England, and France (Volkov 2000: 224–25).

The dissemination of *kul’tura* via cultural production was heavily influenced by the Soviet government’s conviction that the conversion of the population to Marxism-Leninism also entailed the reformation of such basic aspects of human communication and experience as language, and aesthetic value. As historians of the early Soviet Union describe, creative and academic workers of all kinds experimented with new forms of art, music, cinema, architecture, and language during the 1920s — even though this experimentation was explicitly subject to the Communist Party’s overall project (Fitzpatrick 1970, 1992; Mally 2000; Stites 1989). The process of apprehending the qualities of sensual stimuli was itself under examination, as artists, musicians, writers, and architects strived to establish the indices of aesthetic experience appropriate for building a communist society. Right from the beginning, a reflexive notion of the aesthetic was understood to be inseparable from the transmission and manifestation of communist values — while the concept of *kul’tura* mingled ethical and aesthetic norms.

This experimentation was to generate some highly original *avant-garde* modernist art, music, cinema, and architecture — but Iosif Stalin’s accession to power brought with it a strict assertion of state control over cultural production (Papernyi 2007), limiting the cultural forms and genres cultural workers could safely use. From the mid-1930s onwards, the Soviet Union’s art, literature, drama, and film were to
have the function of representing the contemporary socialist reality, and therefore all cultural production had to be Socialist Realist in style (Slezkine 2000). The Stalinist regulation of cultural production was nonetheless also based on the premise that a specific appreciation of sensual experience and its meaning had to be inculcated into popular aesthetic values, as part of the new social order.

By the 1940s and 50s, aesthetic values were supposed to be based on the laws of “objective science”. Simple, harmonious representations of the Soviet Union’s Socialist reality, designed to cheer and encourage the population in its building of the communist world, were deemed beautiful. This notion of the aesthetic led to an emphasis on conventional, unchallenging shapes, colours, sounds, figures, and words, which remained present in Soviet cultural production throughout the later decades of the Soviet era (Dunham 1990; Papernyi 2007). Given the predominantly European provenance of both the Bolshevik leaders and Marxist-Leninist ideology, it is unsurprising that “harmonious” aesthetic experience was also presumed to occur within the parameters of European cultural genres and forms (Habeck 2011b: 65–66).

The primacy of the Marxist-Leninist project meant that aesthetic value was also conditional on the importance of cultural production to a person’s moral formation, mentioned earlier: an exposure to “good” art, music, theatre, architecture, film, and literature was regarded as essential to the process of developing an enlightened, kul’turnoe society and individual consciousness. Sensual experience therefore also gained its meaning in relation to the search for moral perfection understood to be central to the lives of those devoted to communism. Perceptions of the beautiful became bound up with an idealised, personal quest for moral value, in such a way that by the late Soviet period the notion of kul’tura “represented an elusive, ideal world outside the practical necessities of daily life: a dream of beauty, purity, and romance, of leisurely, endless conversations about the meaning of life, or of a happiness and wealth that would always remain out of reach, and whose very desirability perhaps depended on it remaining unattainable” (Nielsen 1994: paragraph 17).

This mingling of the beautiful with a personal quest for moral worth became a key paradigm within the process of Soviet cultural production, influencing both the nature of state-sponsored cultural institutions, and the ways individuals perceived and practiced art, music, literature,
and theatre. For an activity to be regarded as aesthetically pleasing, it had to index in some way a yearning for pure, abstracted ideals; in itself, it had to model the victorious transmission of kul’turnost’. A particular philosophy of the aesthetic had become an integral part of the functioning of Soviet society, generating the paradigms through which sensory experience was to be integrated into the formation and signalling of appropriate patterns of sensibility and value.

A dedication to producing or appreciating a conventionalised quality of sensual experience — one that conformed to dominant notions of the beautiful, and hence could be categorised as “aesthetic”, or as “culture” — came to be associated in authoritative discourse with a desirable spectrum of personal morals. It was possible to demonstrate one’s commitment to kul’tura, and hence one’s status as a kul’turnyi chelovek, through a myriad of different behaviours, or exhibitions of taste. In doing so, a person could signal their acceptance of the values associated with kul’tura, and hence their allegiance to the collectives expressing similar sensibilities. Mentioning one’s love of Shakespeare, for example, would also demonstrate a deeper preoccupation with elevated values and ideals, such as a selfless commitment to the common good. The aesthetic practices that constituted and displayed kul’tura encompassed much more than visual experience, as the previous example illustrates. The practice and demonstration of kul’tura did, however, rely to a large extent on visual forms — whether these consisted of cultural genres that specifically address visual experience, such as art, film, or theatre, or the stylisation of one’s personal appearance or living space. As Volkov notes, official discussions of kul’tura in the mid-1930s placed an especially heavy emphasis on the importance of a neat and tidy appearance, and carefully designed, “cosy” (uiutmyi) living arrangements (2000: 221); these ideals persisted throughout the Soviet period, albeit in attenuated and complex forms.

The plays and performances of kul’tura in Soviet community

Aleksei Yurchak (2006) describes in detail the shifts that occurred in authoritative discursive practice over the late Soviet period, and which caused authoritative discourse to lose its literal meaning, as it became incorporated into practices of community formation that the Soviet
political elites had not envisaged. After Stalin’s death, authoritative discourse — whether communicated directly as propaganda, or via state-sponsored cultural production — consisted increasingly of repeated poetic and aesthetic forms, rather than substantive messages (Yurchak 2006: 13–14, 44–47). The importance of reproducing the correct verbal or visual forms and sounds came to take precedence over transmitting arguments, ideas, or information. The production of authoritative discourse became the performance of a number of clear and well-understood formulae. As part of this, cultural production became so conventionalised that artists would produce portraits of Lenin according to a series of set poses, each with its own number; for example, a “sixer” (šestërka) showed Lenin in his office, while a “sevener” (semërka) was Lenin sitting on a tree stump (ibid: 55).

As the relevance of the substantive content of authoritative discourse decreased, the various performances and conventions its production entailed became assimilated into both signalling and establishing the communities and relationships that constituted Soviet society, and enabled its members to act within it. As Yurchak describes, when the members of a Komsomol organisation were asked to vote on a resolution they knew had to be passed,

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\ldots \text{they collectively responded not to the constative meaning of this question (“Do you support the resolution?”) but to its performative meaning (“Are you the kind of people who understand that the norms and rules of the current ritual need to be performatively reproduced, that constative meanings do not necessarily have to be attended to, who act accordingly, and who, therefore, can be engaged in other meanings?”) It is this latter address that the audience at the meeting recognized with an affirmative gesture and that therefore brought into existence the public of svoi [ours] […] (2006: 117)}
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Authoritative discourse and its rituals thus became incorporated into a set of expressive practices that shaped communities of complicity: their members knew what the official agenda was in relation to their own, and how to balance a degree of conformity, mutually supportive cooperation, and the resources their own positions offered, in order to achieve their ends. These communities of “ours” (svoi) did not necessarily correspond to the working collectives that officially constituted Soviet institutions; rather, they formed the complementary networks that
were integral to late Soviet social differentiation, agency, and morality. Individual Soviet citizens could formulate and express their personal values and ideals through these relationships, as well as using them for more strategic purposes, such as furthering their careers.

As Yurchak describes, the cohesiveness of svoi communities intensified in the larger population centres during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, creating small networks of people who sought to emphasise their detachment from mainstream Soviet culture (2006: 126–57). These small groups were able to exploit the Soviet system in order to create the time and resources they needed to interact with each other, pursuing activities that could often be self-consciously idealistic, and external to everyday Soviet life — such as researching ancient history, foreign systems of writing, literature, or religions (ibid: 151). Yet the influence that mainstream Soviet culture — and, in particular, kul’tura, with its specific configuration of ethics and the aesthetic — could exert is evident from this choice of pursuit. The intention to seek knowledge, values, and ideals existing in separation from the Soviet world by studying unfamiliar histories and cultural traditions resonates with the motivation to attain kul’turnost’ through moral and intellectual self-improvement. The configuration of the aesthetic and ethical that underpinned authoritative discursive practice is also in evidence in the implied assumption that positive sensual experience occurs in juxtaposition with a search for ideals.

The emergence of these small communities can be regarded as an instance of the way social differentiation could occur via the expression of a set of sensibilities — amounting in some cases to recognisable lifestyle choices — in the late Soviet context. Notably, the type of expression — and the sensibilities themselves — were conditioned by ideas, perceptions, and practices that were circulating within authoritative discourse regimes. Specifically, these were the sets of ideas associated with kul’tura, aesthetics and cultural difference, and the practices of community formation that both utilised and reacted against authoritative Soviet convention.

Yurchak’s account describes the more extreme cases of this type of expression, contending that they were symptomatic of a broader shift occurring within Soviet society. For example, he presents the group of Leningrad artists known as the Mit’ki, who exaggerated
their detachment from mainstream Soviet culture into the absurdly minimalist ways of life that in themselves constituted their art (Yurchak 2006: 238–43). The Mit’ki did the minimum amount of work, for the minimum amount of pay — one shift per week in a boiler room, for seventy roubles a month — and spent the bulk of their time telling stories about themselves and their lives, in a highly stylised form of social interaction (ibid: 239). The social trends Yurchak describes would have occurred in many different forms, in the Soviet Union’s highly variable local contexts: the attempts to carve out a space for communal and individual self-expression within Soviet discursive systems would have occurred alongside other forms of expression, and their corresponding sensibilities, creating patterns of social differentiation within Soviet society. However, no matter how ingenious, witty, shocking, or absurd these demonstrative practices were, and no matter how limited the Soviet elite’s capacity to influence citizens’ actions had become, the display of personal sensibilities always had to take place with reference to the assertive presence of authoritative discourse and its aesthetic — even when denying them. Hence, the sensibilities that formed the backdrop to this social differentiation always implied an attitude towards authoritative discursive practice — whether detachment, conformity, resistance, or approval.

The influence Soviet state policy exerted over the expression of sensibilities also took the form of reducing the range of both consumer goods and cultural products, through the strictures exerted by the planned economy, and the state’s attempts to limit the circulation of foreign goods. Therefore, to signal a love of western rock music and fashion was also to demonstrate that you were the kind of person, with the kind of values, who was willing to sidestep state restrictions and look for unofficial modes of consumption and self-expression (for example, by obtaining foreign goods on the black market). The restricted resources, in combination with the prevalence of authoritative discourse, would also have both reduced and homogenised the “insistent visual chatter” Chaney describes as an integral part of contemporary urban experience. This is perhaps why groups such as the Mit’ki made their comment on the Soviet Union’s social reality primarily through caricaturing their way of life, integrating the aesthetic and the ideal within a grotesque parody of “the everyday”. On the one hand, the centrality of a specific
and prominent aesthetic, expression, and sensibility is likely to have reduced the everyday experience of the relativity and reflexivity of the aesthetic and ethical. On the other, it encouraged some members of the population to channel their desire for alternative forms of expression, value, and community into plays on the semantics of the available and well-known objects and visual forms, rather than the semantics of sensual experience.

**Kul’tura and the emergence of ethnicity**

As this section will show, the Soviet policy relating to cultural difference is a good example of how the ideals of Marxism-Leninism — unity, harmony, and peace — converged with the practical requirements of governing the Soviet territory, to generate a strand of official discourse that referred not only to Soviet institution-building and the values behind it, but also to the ways individuals were encouraged to perceive and express themselves, their identities, and their values. The huge cultural variation among the populations of the Tsarist Empire complicated the task of orientating these peoples towards the building of a communist society. The Soviet government believed the solution to this problem was to inculcate the values, practices, and institutions that would enable their transition to communism — or, as the Bolsheviks understood it, to modernise its undeveloped citizenry, removing the attitudes that hindered their progress. As part of this, the Soviet state aimed to re-form popular perceptions of cultural difference, and the social differentiation associated with it — which, as the following paragraphs will show, required the generation of new understandings of culture, community, and personal identification. Kul’tura and cultural production had an integral role in this initiative, and its consequences.

Soviet ideological discourse described its modernisation as the “liberation” of the non-Russian peoples from Tsarist colonisation, which had prevented them from reaching their full potential — thereby distinguishing the benevolent Soviet policy from exploitative capitalist colonisation, in an attempt to gain non-Russian support (Hirsch 2005: 14; Martin 2000: 353; Vihavainen 2000: 80). This “liberation” also entailed the public celebration of non-Russian cultures, despite its incongruity with the Soviet government’s primary intention to
disseminate a Marxist-Leninist worldview, and in doing so to eliminate cultural difference. The contradiction was resolved through the Soviet establishment’s understanding of cultural production as consisting of European art forms, mentioned earlier. The Soviet state claimed to be guiding its non-Russian peoples into bringing out their own national cultural and academic achievements, as part of their modernisation (Slezkine 2000: 335). It would provide non-Russian peoples with the intellectual and material resources they needed to produce their own European-style operas, ballets, literature, art, and academic research, and to record their traditional dances, songs, and oral traditions for future generations. This process also involved adapting these traditional art forms to fit a Europeanised understanding of “folk” cultural production.

As the vital role cultural production played in the Soviet Nationalities Policy indicates, the effort to re-mould notions of cultural difference into the appropriate paradigms was one aspect of the wider reformation of social differentiation and sensibility, described in the previous section. The perception and practice of kul’turnost’ occurred in a wide variety of different ways, reflecting the size and complexity of the Soviet Union, and its various communities. Nonetheless kul’tura became a central paradigm within both authoritative discussions of value and personal morality, and individual expressions of dominant sensibilities. As such, expressions related to kul’tura provided the means by which different patterns of community and social differentiation could emerge, as individuals and associations responded in different ways to the opportunities and restrictions the practice of kul’tura presented. And as part of this, the aspect of kul’tura that related to the “folk” cultural genres mentioned above provided a framework for expressions of cultural difference that served to anchor the peoples involved into the overarching Soviet community, despite the essentialised perceptions of ethnic identity that remained dominant throughout the Soviet period (Hirsch 2005; Shanin 1989; Slezkine 1994). Adaptations of the cultural forms deemed specific to the Soviet Union’s different ethnic groups were integrated into the repertoire of kul’turnoe cultural production.

As might have been expected from the importance of systematised learning within kul’turnoe personal development, the practice of Soviet folk culture was closely connected to academic ethnography (Hirsch
Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North

2005; Slezkine 1994). The Soviet Union’s corpus of ethnographic work identified each officially recognised ethnic group with a series of cultural forms, which fell into neat folkloric categories. The ethnographic literature re-framed non-Russian cultural practice using the Marxist-Leninist paradigms that underpinned Soviet academia as a whole, creating a “family” of Soviet peoples, each with their own set of dances, songs, folk stories, applied art, and national costumes. The more expedient cultural forms would be emphasised and adapted to suit the overall genre, while other practices were excised. For example, Soviet-era Sakha “folk dances” combined costumes and shapes inspired by the Sakha decorative tradition with Russian dance steps, melodies, and instruments such as the balalaika. Meanwhile, the circle dance that for centuries has formed a vital part of Sakha shamanic practice, the Ohuohai, was officially only permitted to take place within carefully controlled dance competitions, if it was allowed at all (Crate 2006; cf. Vitebsky 2005: 232).

As time went on, these sets of cultural forms became codified through the process of disseminating ethnographic work into popular knowledge. Informative books on non-Russian cultural practice could set out a given ethnic group’s various “traditional” cultural forms, while explaining their relationship to the people’s pre-Soviet way of life and religion. Non-Russian cultural practice was thus a priori either an anachronism or undergoing a process of transformation, since it referred to the historical period that had given way to the advance of a communist society. At the same time, the non-Russians who were producing European cultural forms were encouraged to incorporate their own “national” culture into their work, thus creating their ethnic group’s first classical operas, for example, or ballets, or sculpture. The first Sakha opera, N’urgun Bootur, was staged in 1947, and is based on a story recorded from the Sakha epic tradition, the Olongkho.

In this way, non-Russian cultural practice was assimilated into cultural forms that coordinated with the prevailing and officially acceptable aesthetic, along with the pursuit of kul’tura. Positive official representations of specific ethnic cultural forms could afford them a similar abstracted moral dimension to the Soviet Union’s classical European cultural production. This abstracted dimension was only enhanced by the apparently out-of-date pre-Soviet worldview that had
generated this cultural production, and which prevented it from having a direct relevance within everyday life.

Thus, a television film about traditional Sakha culture made in 1970 could assert that Sakha folk cultural production inevitably reflects the talent and goodness of Sakha craftsmen. The artistic achievements of Sakha artisans are inseparable from their personal moral worth. Meanwhile the film shows this generalised Sakha artisan along with their morals to exist in an ambiguous and abstracted temporal dimension: the action is apparently taking place in the present, as the film company records it, and yet it consists of the Sakha practices that were rapidly fading out of contemporary life, as the film’s makers and viewers would have known perfectly well. The Sakha dancers, craftsmen, and housewives, resplendent in their national costumes, exist in an archaic present, infused with a timeless celebration of beauty and artistic endeavour. The point of the film is that the Sakha people have their “own” kul’tura that is beautiful not only in the harmonious shapes, colours, and sounds of Sakha art, music, and song, but also in its association with abstracted moral value.

Many contemporary Sakha citizens might well have been more excited by the prospect of obtaining a motorcycle or telephone line than a traditional wooden goblet — and yet the existence of their national cultural production endowed them with a repertoire of practice and value that enabled them both to express and to perceive an affiliation with dominant state aesthetics and patterns of sensibility. There was nothing to prevent a Sakha person — though fully conscious of the essential Sakha-ness that distinguished them from the European peoples — from signalling their own pretensions towards kul’turnost’.

The Soviet Union’s different ethnic artistic traditions became increasingly codified into sets of dances, songs, folk stories, and crafts, as part of the increasing formalisation of authoritative discourse Yurchak describes. Likewise, the Soviet-era awareness of cultural difference played its role in some of the forms of expression and sensibility that took shape against the background of authoritative discourse, during the 1970s and 80s. Those who empathised with the mainstream practice of kul’turnost’ could carry on attending and producing concerts of

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3 I would like to thank Sakha (Yakutia)’s State Film Archive in Yakutsk for sharing this footage with me.
different folk dances and songs, or building up the new non-Russian canon of classical art, music, and literature. Those who were drawn to the values and ideas they imagined in realms beyond the Soviet everyday could research the different ethnic-specific cultural traditions — as did some Sakha intellectuals, who since have become shamanic spiritual specialists.

Shamanism became an especially prominent theme in Sakha theatre and art during the 1980s and 1990s, as a small coterie of enthusiasts emerged through the cultural and intellectual establishments. In fact, the constant depiction of non-Russian culture in authoritative discourse as existing in an idealised, ambiguous temporality, external to the flow of Soviet reality, could perhaps have made ethnic cultural tradition an especially attractive subject for those seeking to reach beyond everyday Soviet life, especially for non-Russian populations such as the Sakha.

Finally, those interested in political reform could articulate their democratic leanings through raising the banner of national autonomy, leading to the “national revivals” that paved the way for the transformation of the Soviet Union. The Sakha national revival, led by a small but determined group of Sakha intellectuals, cultural workers, and politicians, was the vanguard of a sudden mushrooming of interest in Sakha history and culture among the general population, as the contemporary Yhyakh testifies. The early Soviet intervention into identity and social differentiation had produced some very unexpected results: the expressions and sensibilities surrounding kul’tura had broken loose from their Bolshevik moorings into systems of value that identified a new social formation — the Sakha nationalists.

Conclusion: Soviet aesthetics and the Yhyakh

Returning to the Sakha communities one can identify at the Yhyakh, I can now suggest the connections between their characteristic sensibilities and expression, and the Soviet heritage. For example, traces of the kul’tura concept and its history are evident in the assumption that a commitment to reviving the Sakha people’s shamanic heritage also manifests a praiseworthy attunement to higher values, morals, and ideals. Contemporary Sakha shamanism increasingly combines concepts of an abstracted realm of higher value, with experiences of the real presence
Soviet Kul’tura in Post-Soviet Identification

and agency of area spirits and deities. An interest in engaging with spiritual forces is nonetheless often couched as a yearning for higher ideals, within a lexicon that also derives much from post-Soviet Russian mysticism, and new-age religion (Peers & Kolodeznikova 2015).

Most importantly, a look at Soviet policies, and the forms of expression, sensibility, and community they generated, can shed light on the distinctive repetition of visual forms, discussed earlier. The ways communities of svoi expressed and maintained their cohesion depended more on the presentation of fixed forms within precise configurations of community and context, than on reflection and variation within the forms themselves. This close attention to the community who witnesses the expression, and their probable response, rather than to the content of the expression itself, correlates with Yurchak’s description of the highly conventionalised cultural production and public discourse of the Brezhnev era. It seems to be the reason why similar visual forms can be incorporated without comment into very different expressive acts, acquiring multiple meanings with reference to varying communities.

Aesthetic expressions of sensibility seem to be formulated with a greater awareness of the response of the sympathetic viewer, in the Sakha context, rather than alternative configurations of expression and sensibility. This suggests that the power of aesthetic expression to articulate and create social differentiation depends much more on the individual viewer’s response, rather than the process of reflecting on the forms of everyday objects. Thus, the people who regard the shamanic temple’s picture of Baiaanai as a sacred representation are the people who belong to the community of shamanic revivalists, since they share and support this community’s sensibilities. Meanwhile, those who perceive ALROSA’s tree of life as a beautiful manifestation of Sakha (Yakutia)’s cultural richness are the people who either belong, or aspire to belong, to the political and commercial establishment. As the lack of acknowledgement of contrasting sensibilities within these representations implies, the people who do not perceive these expressions in the way their creators intended are clearly not part of svoi, and are thus external to the communication — in the way that those who found the Mit’ki incomprehensible and ridiculous were simply alien to the movement. Alternative patterns of sensibility, and the communities who express them, are a relevant aspect of the context of
these representations — however, their presence is less integrated into the process of the expression itself. Hence the artists at the shamanic temple do not consider a cubist evocation of Baiaanai, for instance, to contrast their appreciation of Baiaanai’s real nature with the simple, realist representations produced for tourists and politicians.

The theoretical literature on lifestyle, and Chaney’s work in particular, can certainly enhance the analysis of value, power and social differentiation in contemporary Russia. It can be applied to the case of the Sakha people’s national revival, and this relevance could increase, as migration and information technology integrate Sakha communities further into the wider world. However, the characteristics of Sakha lifestyles, and their aesthetic expressions, show that the twentieth-century incorporation of cultural production and aesthetic response into sovietisation has had an effect on the interplay of community formation and expression in Sakha (Yakutia). Patterns of sensibility and expression do not correspond exactly to the cases Chaney describes. The differences, however, usefully indicate a certain exclusivity about social differentiation within the Russian Federation, both manifested and perpetuated by an exclusive orientation of expression towards fellow members of svoi.

References


7. Soviet Kul’tura in Post-Soviet Identification


