

Sakha Pop Music and Ethnicity

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Introduction

This paper focuses on popular culture in the Republic of Sakha, the largest territory in the Russian Federation covering over 3 million square kilometers. Sakha is an autonomous region within Russia, as are many other regions, regardless of whether they are officially designated as a republic, a province (*oblast*), a district (*krai*, *okrug*), etc. The population of Sakha is only about one million, 35% of whom are natives – either Turkic-speaking Sakha, or the so-called Less Numerous People of the North. The so-called “newcomer” (*priezzhii*) population is mainly Russian, but there are also Ukrainians, Belorussians etc. The People of Sakha like to say that over 80 different “nationalities” live on the territory of their republic. The population is divided roughly between Russian-dominated industrial districts and Sakha-dominated agrarian ones. What makes the ethnic situation in Sakha interesting is that, whereas the economy is dominated by newcomers, the Sakha dominate in the political sphere, including the capital, Yakutsk. Yakutsk is also the center for science, theater, art and music in Sakha. Not only the government but also the state TV and radio stations, the most influential private radio stations, the only opera and other institutions important for “cultural life” in the republic are all located in Yakutsk. It is quite a dangerous town, where visitors are advised not to walk the streets after dark. As the popular saying goes, “darkness is the friend of the youth.” (*Temnata drug molodezhi!*) A high crime rate means that when people want to go out for the evening to bars or clubs, they have to join together with friends to feel safe. The clubs and bars stay open quite late, and are usually filled every evening.

In this paper I want to discuss the multiple layers of popular culture and their connection to Sakha ethnicity. “Popular” or “pop” culture is used here in the sense of a culture of leisure (Frith 1983), and not in the sense of something that stands in opposition to “mass culture.” In Siberian popular culture, the culture of dance and rock music, current fashion, etc., is seldom considered to be part of native culture. I am sure that many of my colleagues in Russia will disagree with my argument that listening to modern music and going out to dance can be interpreted in terms of ethnic identity. Nevertheless, popular culture has always existed and was often related to leisure. Musicians in markets and all kinds of traveling artists have been part of society since the Middle Ages, and the art they offered the people

was often related to ethnicity (Burke 1978). In this article I want to rely on vernacular theory and show that there are different ways of understanding contemporary Sakha pop music. People who produce the music see it more as a business, or as “cultural activity,” where different styles have different meanings. At the level of the consumer, music, independent of the genre, becomes a marker of ethnic identity.

This paper is mainly a presentation of data that I collected during my visits to the capital, Yakutsk, and going to local village discos or clubs. I will begin by offering a possible explanation of why the urban culture of Siberian natives matters when looking at current ethnic and political processes.

A short history of Sakha popular music

Sakha people are very musical. During my fieldwork in the Republic of Sakha, I was constantly amazed at how many people could play the guitar and perform well-known songs at festive events. Music is not only loved, but an integral part of the culture. Most social events, such as birthday parties, weddings or any other kind of celebration require that any person who makes a speech or offers a toast has to follow it with a “musical greeting” (*muzikalnyi privet*), meaning that he has to sing something. The tradition of the “musical greeting” was one reason why all such events made me uncomfortable. Foreigners cannot avoid the obligation to give a speech of greeting. Afterward, everyone expected to hear some exotic song from me, and I constantly had problems explaining that I cannot sing at all. Most people were very surprised because, as they kept telling me, they simply could not imagine anyone not being able to sing.

Aside from celebrations, Sakha music was performed in the theater, played on the radio and in concerts. The Sakha had their own native music stars as early as the 1960s and 1970s. Artists like Arkadii Alekseev, Petr Toburokov, Marina Popova etc., competed with the best known Russian entertainers in 1970s, and are well known even today. In Soviet times, Sakha music was recorded at local studios, and the state record company, “Melodiia,” released a few albums of Sakha music. As everywhere in the Soviet Union, most entertainment music was performed for local radio and in concert halls. The few recordings that somebody got access to, or taped from the radio, were then re-recorded at home and circulated among people from “hand to hand.” The Sakha, whose national pride was recognized even by those few foreigners who visited the region (Mowat 1970, 125), loved their music not only because of its musical quality but also because it was performed in their native tongue. Traditionally, the lyrics

of Sakha entertainment music invoked the beauty of Sakha nature, home (*alaas* – open spaces in the taiga where Sakha historically lived and pastured their cattle and horses), very often their beloved mothers, and even more often love. These topics are still popular in all types of Sakha music today. By the end of 1970s and early of 1980s, there appeared a stylistic difference between two genres in Sakhan dance and entertainment music. The slower, more elaborated and artistic approach was later to be called *estrada* (stage music). Another stream in music, faster and, as people told me, “more fun” (*bolei vesiolyyi*), was influenced by such Russian pop acts as Alla Pugacheva, Valeri Leontiev, Sofia Rotaru or the well-known Estonian singer Anne Veski, and was a forerunner of what later became known as *popsa*.

In the 1970s, the first Sakha rock group Dapsy (Guys), which is still the number one rock group in Sakha, was established.¹ Dapsy were the first guitar band, and performed danceable rock music influenced by the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. In contrast to other regions in the Soviet Union, Sakha “rockers” had hardly any problems with the local Communist institutions. “People were very glad,” I was told by a musical mentor (*muzikalnyi rukovoditel*) of Dapsy, Grigori, “We played music in the Sakha language, and people liked us for that very reason. There had been no such thing as a Sakha guitar band before. People helped us a lot. And there was no jealousy. We were the first band, and all the other bands grew out of the people in our circle. The musicians from Cholbon and Aital carried our guitar cases at the beginning.” Dapsy retained their exalted position in the Sakha “guitar landscape,” but in the 1980s new groups were formed, such as Cholbon, Aital and Serge, who played progressive rock-influenced music with strong ethnic elements, using traditional instruments (mouth harp) and traditional singing techniques (*toiuk*). Unlike the typical situation in the West, in Sakha there was no polarization between rock and pop (Frith 1983). Many rock or ethnic artists had parallel careers as rock musicians and performers of light entertainment music. *Estrada* entertainers often recorded using rock musicians as studio musicians. Moreover, patriotic and ethnic lyrics were used similarly by rock and *estrada* acts. Whereas Sakha *estrada* remained music for the Sakha people, at the end of the 1980s the fame of Sakha rock groups expanded beyond the borders of Yakutia. With the arrival of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, new forms of music could leave the underground and be performed openly. Heavy metal, punk, rock, *avant garde*, etc., festivals were organized all over the Soviet Union. The interest in exotic and “other” music increased rapidly. I can remember seeing Aital for the first time

on Russian TV in a program for alternative music, "Programma A." They were presented as a "Yakutian shamanic-rock group." Sakha rock groups started touring within and outside the Soviet Union. This time period coincided with the general rise in interest in world music, and at its peak Aital released a CD in Finland. In 1992, Cholbon released their first and only vinyl LP, "Prokliatyi Kamen" (The damned stone), with liner notes by Artemi Troitskii, a Russian cult alternative music critic, who praised Cholbon as "the Pink Floyd of the Tundra" (Troitskii 1992).

In Sakha during the Soviet period, as was the case all over Siberia, folk music and the presentation of the "traditional culture" were centrally organized and supported by the state as "preserving the ancient wisdom, purity, and 'imperturbable calmness'" of Siberian indigenous people (Slezkine 1994, 363). Folklore was a genre cultivated by professional and amateur artists and collectives. Many Sakhan folklore artists belonged to the theaters, were official cultural workers or on the staff of local museums. Organized "support and preservation" of culture guaranteed, on the one hand, that such music could be openly performed. On the other hand, it turned it into a branch of culture that was supervised by a closed circle of people, where only certain kinds of "authentic and unspoiled" music, dances and arts were recognized.

By the end of the 1990s, there existed an established pop music culture in Sakha. For a long time, the only channel that played local music was a Sakha state radio station that was a branch of the Russian radio, and local district radio stations. Concert life was active and nearly all local and major state celebrations included some form of concert. When new private local radio stations were opened, local music received more air play and the artists became better known. The local TV station NVK Sakha lengthened its daily program and included more live music and studio recordings. This was also the start of the music video era in the Republic of Sakha. Still, the artistic community remained small, and the artists were mostly ethnic Sakha or of mixed Sakha-Russian origin, but with Sakha as a mother tongue. The fact that all prominent musicians, concert organizers, producers and artists knew each other played an important role in the development of Sakha popular music culture.

Contemporary music styles

Sakha music was divided into four categories that were not homogenous, but rather defined by the way they were performed. In any case, they were not absolute. There were two competing styles that enjoyed the greatest popularity. *Estrada* is a very broad category that includes every kind

of light entertainment music performed publicly (the closest equivalent might be German *Schlager* music). To *estrada* belonged Russian and Sakha romances, dance music performed with an orchestra, ballads, and even slow twists, rock and roll or waltzes. Sakha *estrada* artists performed their songs overwhelmingly in Sakha, and this kind of music was therefore known among all age groups of ethnic Sakha. Ballads, in particular, were often performed only with guitar or harmonica, and often contained elements of traditional Sakha music and *Heimatlyrik* (“homeland lyrics”). For this reason, *estrada* is often referred to as folklore music (*natsional-naia muzyka*). Most Sakha *estrada* performers were already popular in the 1970s, and this music is mainly associated with adult or older people.

More youth-oriented music was called *popsa*, which is in Russia a general term for “commercial music” (Cushman 1995, 259). *Popsa* was actually disco pop, but it often contained rap, techno or rock elements. It was electronic synthesizer-based pop music with emphasis on the beat. Melodies, especially by cheaply produced village pop singers, were trivial and simple; what was important were the beat and texts. *Popsa* acts were, as a rule, made up of young people, often no older than 25-30. There were popular solo artists (Varia Ammanatova, Petka Petrov, Askalop Pavlov), but also boy (XUpp, North Lights) and girl groups (Maxima, Sardanalar). Although *popsa* artists often sang about nature and their home villages or towns, the percentage of texts about love was greater than was the case with *estrada*. *Popsa* artists also distinguished themselves visually from the *estrada* artists. While *estrada* was performed in rather conservative outfits, with dark suits for men and long dresses for women, the *popsa* artists preferred to wear trendy, expensive and “youthful” designer clothes that were up to date with current fashion. As will be shown, the outfit and styling of pop artists was important not only in terms of marketing but also in involving a “young pop elite” in the music business. Ballads were also extremely popular in the “commercial pop” genre. The effect of such sweet ballads was the same as in the concerts of the Backstreet Boys, where teenage female fans often screamed and yelled in delight, waved their arms and fell onto their knees. While *estrada* music was performed with the help of playback or orchestra music, *popsa* was generally sung to previously recorded instrumental tracks.

Sakha rock music, as already described, was in most cases progressive rock, or even jazz and funk influenced, and was more popular outside of Sakha than at home. Besides, there were several groups that were called rock (i.e. they played guitar music) but that mainly played dance music à la Dire Straits or Chris Rea (Dapsy, Hardy) with light blues elements.

Sakha rock artists were, in comparison to *popsa* artists, older and less “youthful.”

Last but not least, there was folk music (*folklornaia muzyka*). Folk music was seen as a representation of “authentic Sakha culture,” and, like rock, was in many cases more popular outside of Sakha. Sakha folk artists often performed in Europe, North America or at folk music festivals within Russia (mostly in Tuva or Bashkiria). In this style, as in other genres, mixing was also very common. Thus one Sakha folk group, Iekhei-Chuokhai, mixed Sakha folk music with country and western, but on stage wore Sakha folk costumes. Often Evenki and Yukagir songs were performed as Sakha folk songs. One of the most successful folk artists, Stepanida Borissova, performed some years ago in Halle using “authentic” throat singing, which is more a part of the ethnic music traditions of Tuva and Altai.

The music scene

While the music genres were seen by the public as separate styles, this did not mean that the performers were dedicated only to one style. Many Sakha artists were full-time professionals who worked at *Teatr Estrada* (the best translation would be Theater of Light Entertainment) and had meet their concert plan commitments throughout the whole year. The Artist Council of the theater confirmed the programs at the beginning of the year and distributed money for costumes and making playbacks. A huge event in the cultural life of Yakutsk was the big “accounting concert” (*otchetnyi kontsert*) of a season, where all the artists who worked at *Teatr Estrada* were obliged to perform. This was an event where the *crème de la crème* of Sakha artists presented their best-known songs. There were three such concerts with similar programs, all in the same week, and they were always sold out months in advance. (I was able to attend only through the help of my journalist friends, who forged a press card for me.)

According to the program plans, artists were not only obliged to give concerts in Yakutsk, the capital, but also to tour district clubs (*vyehat' na gastroli*). The gigs in village clubs featured mainly *estrada* programs, whereas in Yakutsk both *popsy* and *estrada* were performed. When I asked my musician friends where they had toured, I found out that the artists very often visited villages and small towns in Central Sakha, populated mostly by ethnic Sakha. Some of them had performed in such industrial cities as Neringri or Mirnyi, but this was rare; it usually meant only the Sakha mid-summer celebration of Ysyakh, or a festival of Sakha *estrada* in the city of Mirnyi. Touring and active participation in “concert life” did not mean that Sakha pop stars were rich. The average monthly salary at the

theater was low, around four thousand rubles a month (\$140). In Yakutsk, where the prices for food were two to three times higher than in European Russia, and clothes usually cost twice as much as at markets in Moscow, a monthly income of around 10,000 rubles was considered a very good income. The costs of being an artist were high: they had to pay for most instrumental playback tracks and costumes out of their own pockets. The price of an instrumental track was, depending on the reputation and technical facilities (synthesizer, sampler, etc.) of a composer, between 500 and 3000 rubles per piece. All the musicians and singers I met lived very spartan lives. Their tiny one-room apartments were filled with stage costumes, tapes and CDs of playbacks. Some artists shared their flats with a spouse and children, or with dependent relatives from the villages. This meant that alternative performances outside of the theater program were not only matters of prestige, but important sources of income as well.

The management of music

The office, studio and home of Petka Petrov or Püökka Pötürüöp of Sakha is located in a ramshackle peasant-style wooden house on the edge of Yakutsk. The yard is patrolled by a small barking dog and contains two jeeps. The house had 3 rooms, the biggest of which is filled with computers, an RCD [Recordable CD] recorder, synthesizer, microphones and a huge working desk. The corners are stacked full of cassettes. Petka Petrov established “Duoraan (“Echo” in Sakha) Records” in 1998 with the aim, he told me, of “supporting and developing Sakha culture.” Petka, an artist himself, is a gray eminence of Sakha pop music, producing roughly 80% of the tapes sold in every village and market of the republic. The variety of music produced by Duoraan Records is broad. Petka showed me an album filled with his cassette covers. They ranged from classical folk music to re-releases of old Young Communist League songs, *estrada* and techno-rap, and on to disco pop. All styles were represented, the main requirement being that it had to be performed in the Sakha language. The studio-office where we sat was one of three studios in Yakutsk, and the only one dedicated to recording and mastering pop music.

Duoraan’s work style is quite different from that practiced in West. At the beginning of our interview, I asked Petka how he finds his artist. He smiled and replied: “We do not find them, they find us.” Usually artists contact the record label and express their wish to release an album. The artist or group negotiates with Petka about the layout of the tape cover, the number of copies, and the grade of re-mastering of their master tapes. When “buyer” and “seller” have agreed on a price, Petka starts his work.

After producing several thousand album tapes (average issue between 2000 and 4000), he gives the boxes to the artists and receives his money. Petka makes around \$1000, and the new album is ready for sale. I was very confused by the explanation I was given. I wanted to hear about copyright, how the profit was normally divided, and other details of how an “average” music business operates. And it did not explain the jeeps outside.

After a few more questions, I found out that the networks involved in such a music business were more complicated than they seemed. The artist and the record label agree over the number of tapes to be released. Petka produces twice this number and is free to sell the tapes in Yakutsk and a few places around the capital, where he personally knows some retail traders. The artist tries to sell his share of albums as best he can. For this, it helps if he knows some wholesalers and shop keepers willing to stock his tapes. In many cases the artists were *ulusnye*, i.e. they came from outlying districts, were sponsored with local money and seemingly had no great difficulty selling their tapes at home. Duoraan Records had rights to publish songs from these albums on their sampler cassettes. These samplers were collections that reflected the current state of Sakha pop music, and they enjoyed great popularity among all groups in ethnic Sakha. To fill the samplers, Petka used songs from not yet released albums; artists, especially young and unknown ones, often paid him to get their song on a sampler. The Duoraan samplers were generally filled only with pop music, either dance hits or sweet ballads; there was only occasionally space for retro *estrada* or folk music.

Modern Sakha pop music is not entirely dominated by Duoraan. Some artists released their albums independently with the help of sponsor money. Usually, the sponsor had the right to place the logo of his enterprise on the tape cover. Finding a sponsor was, for artists, a normal strategy if they wanted to get albums published or organize an expensive show, with good lighting, equipment, and elaborate costumes. The decision – whether to release an album with Duoraan or not – depended on the amount of sponsor money available and the likelihood of being able to sell a cassette outside of Duoraan's network. It was more expensive to release an album through a record label, but on the other hand Duoraan already had well-established marketing networks. If there was insufficient money, the artist was confident of his success, or there were personal conflicts with Duoraan, then the release could proceed independently. Thus a newcomer hip-hop group, Rhythm Crew, young guys of Sakha and Buryat origin sponsored by rich parents, released an album on their own record label. Rhythm Crew was the most popular hip-hop act of 2002, and had no problem selling their tape. Still, even “independent” producers had to rely

on Duoraan to expand their popularity. Duoraan samplers were an important way of publicly introducing new hits and new acts. Petka sometimes included songs that he felt had potential for commercial success, regardless of who had released the album. I asked Petka how such transactions were regulated in terms of copyright, and who pays what to whom. He smiled and said: "It is not a problem. We know each other. I just ask people, no one has ever refused to give me a song. We are just friends. I don't have to pay for it."

Promoting the music also takes place via this network of friendships. There was only one Sakha radio station in Yakutsk, radio Victoria Sakhalyy. The popularity of radio became clear to me when I noticed that, in almost every Sakha home I visited in the city, the radio was tuned to Victoria. Those few who preferred some other station mostly listened to Sakha state radio, which offered a mixed Russian-Sakha program. Radio Victoria, having only been in business for five years in 2001, was a developing radio station with seasonal financial problems. Duoraan and other music producers supplied Victoria with music for free. There was a regular music mail shipment from Duoraan to Victoria on a weekly basis. The staff of the Radio sent boxes with blank RCDs to Petka, and Petka filled these with newly recorded hits. Many times a week, Radio Victoria broadcast a show run by its popular radio DJ and concert manager, Georgi "Gosha" Nikolaev, where Gosha introduced new songs, and at the same time people were able to ask him to play certain favorite and popular songs. Gosha knew most of the top singers and club managers in Sakha personally, and was able to help get the artists concerts in clubs. So, many singers gave him their recordings themselves, and asked him to play them, hoping that he would like the music and would organize a concert for them with some other, better known artist.

In recent years, another young Sakha producer, Eduard Gavrilov, became famous. He studied media communications and worked for a while in Moscow for Russian MTV. Edik, as he is commonly known, began to produce music, organize concerts, and was very active in producing videos.² The most common way to make videos in Sakha state television, NVK Sakha, was to have a singer pose, with or without a guitar, in front of a colored wall and let them sing. Edik introduced new skills and techniques into the video business. The first video he produced was "Dzol" ("Luck" in Sakha) for Varia Ammanatova, using computer tricks, special effects, flows of different colors, and extremely extravagant outfit designs; the soundtrack was mixed and produced by a top-DJ, Sibirtsev. By this time, around Edik there had congregated a coterie of DJs, photographers, designers and computer graphics artists. This rather closed circle saw itself

as a young pop elite. Although Edik produced Sakha music and at least the first videos were sung in Sakha, the “new elite” was ethnically mixed. Video clips became an important cultural manifestation for this young cultural elite group. In the Republic of Sakha, even for those “creative workers” living in the capital, employment opportunities were limited. Thus, video production constituted a true expression of “urban creativity and complex identity” (Dörfel 1996) by a young elite who were already indifferent to ethnic creativity. Videos were a platform where, in addition to the artists, fashion designers were able to show their work, computer specialists could test new effects, and DJs creating soundtracks had a chance to work with expensive equipment, to which they had previously had hardly any access. Gosha invited me to a few exclusive club parties with these “young, creative and dynamic” people. The audience was mixed Russian-Sakha, but the dominant language of communication was Russian. During the parties, a few artists would perform their songs in Sakha. After the show, they joined the crowd and communicated with other people mainly in Russian.

Edik earned most of his money by organizing concerts and political election campaigns. He invested lot of money in videos, and was able to collaborate with top specialists. His strategy was to sell music both to the Sakha and the Russian audience, which soon led to a change in the nature of the videos. Edik produced videos of Sakha groups and artists where they sung in Russian (Sardanalar), or where both Russians and Sakha were shown among actors in the video (Igor Egorov’s “Naraana” and Xupp’s “Eder Saas”). He managed to increase the popularity of Sakha acts among Russians living in Yakutsk, and attracted more youths to the concerts. On the other hand, Edik’s taste was a bottleneck that filtered out any music he did not personally like. His favorites were *popsa* acts, and he himself confessed to me a few times that he could not stand either rock or *estrada*. Thus his music was focused mainly on a young audience of up to 25 years of age, those able to identify themselves with the music and the fashion linked to it.

Besides Duoraan and Edik Gavrilov, quite a few other people in Yakutsk called themselves either independent producers, music managers, or DJs, and earned their money by organizing performances for artists. These concerts were in most cases performances in bars, restaurants or clubs, and were a major source of income for artists. Short concerts in local discos, where artists performed three to five songs during breaks in the DJ-music, were very popular. Such mini-concerts were preferred by artists because they got paid for the number of songs they performed, whereas solo concerts were either part of their regular jobs, or the pay was not as good, considering

the amount of work and time invested. On the other hand, big concerts were important as symbol of status.

Another way to earn some extra money was to perform at private social events, mainly weddings. At these venues, the artists might sing old Russian and Sakha ballads, but, if requested, their current pop hits too. The more famous the artist was, the more offers he had. Some artists I knew, such as Varia Ammanatova, were booked up many weeks in advance. *Nouveau riche* Sakha competed among themselves over who could invite the most famous artists to sing at their private functions. Varia told me once that she did not actually like singing at such parties. The rich people were rude and arrogant, quickly got drunk, and their behavior worsened with their intoxication. "But they pay very well. And they bring you back and forth in jeeps. There's food to eat at these parties that you never dreamed of. That's why I perform these gigs!" she said.

Ethnicity and Sakha music

At Yakutsk airport I once happened to meet a young reindeer herder from the north whom I knew from my fieldwork. He was in the capital to be examined for army enlistment. We exchanged phone numbers and agreed to meet. He was living with his relatives, and told me that there were some other reindeer herders from the tundra living with him. He called the next evening and invited me to come and visit. When I asked what they were doing, he said: "Nothing. We just sit and listen to music, Sakha music." The last part was emphasized, so I was able to understand it despite the poor telephone technology in Yakutsk.

I had already become aware of the popularity of local pop music during my field work in the tundra. Once I stayed with a hunter's family, far from the nearest village, Uurung Khaia, and not far from the Arctic coast. When I entered the house for the first time, almost the first thing I saw was a small shelf with a tape recorder and lots of cassettes on it. In the evenings, the father switched on a diesel generator, and, beside the electric light, we also enjoyed music. The youngest son of the family, Nikolai, was the one who changed the albums. We listened to every kind of dance music, but half of the time Nikolai put on various "Duoraan" tapes, sometimes saying: "Let's listen to *our* music again!" (*Bihigi muzykbytta istekke!*). Once we listened to a recording of very poor quality. Not only the quality of the sound, but also the quality of the music itself was awful. It was some Sakha artist who sang to an extremely minimalist synthesizer melody, accompanied by a simple rhythm machine beat, with a very primitive text about love and the beauty of nature. After I had had enough of this tape, I was about to ask where

they had found it and request something else. I'm glad I did not, because Agnia, the daughter of my host, suddenly piped up and said: "This is our nephew Andrei. He makes music in Uurung Khaia." I wanted to know more about the nephew. Agnia told me that she and the nephew had formed a duo a few years earlier, and that the district administration had sent them to the central districts to perform in village clubs. "But now we do not do it anymore. I got married and live here in the tundra. But he still composes music. He records the cassettes with his songs and sells them in the village. People like him."

Once in a village, I visited a celebration of the Day of Reindeer Herders. After the "official" part, which included different sporting events, long talks and the bestowing of gifts upon especially respected reindeer herders, the so called "cultural program" (*kul'turnaia programma*) under the name *Sakhabyy Yryyng Tyyn* (White Night of Sakha Language) began. I was talking to some people when my friend Igor, a young hunter, came to me and interrupted my conversation. He said: "Come quickly, Andrei is going to sing. He is a star, you must record his performance!" In the huge celebration hall the music was switched on and Andrei began to sing. He performed some slow *estrada* songs and then switched to a faster song that was a cover of a well-known hit by a Sakha pop star. In this concert a total of 19 singers from two district villages performed. All the songs were in Sakha, and in most cases the lyrics were either about the "beloved homeland, Sakha," the "beloved home village" or the "beloved North." People in the audience knew the songs and sang along. Halfway through the concert, when the song themes began repeating themselves, I asked one of my friends if this was a festival of patriotic songs. He smiled and gave me no answer.

Throughout the Soviet period, and already in Tsarist times, Sakha people displayed "great adaptability" (Forsyth 1992, 159). Not only were Soviet power structures in Sakha infiltrated and, later in the 1990s, taken over by native peoples (Kotkin and Wolff 1995, 151). The Sakha also saw their own culture as constantly developing and modern (Dobrizheva 1998). They were proud of their literature, poetry, cinema and theater (Doidu 2001). The prevailing opinion was that the emergence of Sakha pop music did not entail a loss of Sakha identity, but that this was a process of evolution, whereby Sakha culture was enriched with elements of European and Russian tradition to create "new Sakha music" (Dobrizheva 1998, 170–1). For the Sakha audience, this new Sakha music signified, above all else, "pleasure" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2001). My friends, and other people, went to the concerts and discos to have fun. To dance, drink and spend time. Because they knew the lyrics of the songs, they could sing along with

a song, and even perform these songs at home on the guitar. At concerts and discos, people young and old met their friends and got to know new ones. Boys picked up girls, and girls flirted with young guys and tried to get them to buy them alcohol.

It all sounds simply like good, innocent fun. On the other hand, at the “Sakha disco,” or at village concerts where most songs were performed by Sakha people for Sakha people in Sakha, the place itself became Sakha ethnic terrain. The “we-group” feeling (Elwert 1995) was based not only on place, but became associated with the music too. Once I said to one of my friends that I was really fed up with the “love-lyrics” of Sakha pop. I could not stand to hear the word *taptal* (“love” in Sakha) one more time, I told her. “But what should they sing about?” she replied. In the case of a concert, knowledge of lyrics (however commonplace they may be) enables people to sing along with the artist; the music then creates a perception of cohesion (Willis 2000). In the case of the Sakha audience, this feeling of being part of a group, and of sharing a “common culture,” was interpreted in ethnic terms. A friend of mine, who works at Sakha state TV, gave me a video tape of an episode of the popular Sakha youth magazine-show “Tynnyk” (“Window” in Sakha). This program was about the popular artist Varia Ammanatova. She was shown performing at a huge Siberian pop music festival in Ulan Ude (Buryatia), where she won the third prize. In the program they showed a cut from an interview that Varia gave to another program, “Zontik” (“Umbrella” in Russian), which is produced in Russian but moderated by a Sakha. The comment of the interviewer was: “Our Varia reached third place!” In Ulan Ude, Varia represented the Republic of Sakha and the culture of Sakha. The prize she won was for Sakha people also “our” prize, because it demonstrated to “them,” as one friend told me, that we “can sing and have a beautiful culture.” The symbolic and social potency of music (Bryson 1996, 885) was expressed through the “meaning” (Hebdidge 1979) of Varia’s performance at this festival, which was seen as showing Sakha superiority over ten other Siberian “nations” that participated but did not get the prize. In an interview afterward, Varia presented herself as a “real” Sakha. People who saw this program heard that she loves to visit her mother in the village, because the best food she has ever eaten is made by her. Varia’s favorite dishes were typical Sakha meals, such as various meat and milk products. My friends absolutely ignored the fact that, although she wore a stylized Sakha folk costume and performed typical *popsa* at the festival, she was interviewed in the Russian language and was known for performing well known Russian ballads in duets with other singers.

This “stylistic ignorance” of the style of music often nearly drove me crazy. Knowing from my own background that more or less every music style has its “own culture” surrounding it (Muggleton 2000), I was confronted in Sakha with “illogical” mixtures of genres. Not only did artists switch between the styles, but people seemed to like them, whatever the style. While trying to identify some system in all this, I was totally astonished at a presentation by a new youth magazine in December, 2000. After the presentation of the new journal with the help of various kinds of multimedia equipment, a new video clip of Varia Ammanatova was premiered. After Varia had finished, three women appeared on the stage with huge harps and played for about half an hour. After them, the stage was occupied by the boy group North Lights, which performed slow and romantic ballads, to be followed by the performance of a folk music collective. When I asked one of the organizers why they had invited harp players, music that I could not see as relating to the youth, he said: “But people like it!” And people did indeed like the harp players. A few days later, I heard that the harp players were students at a Sakha State Music School. The school had produced many famous classical musicians trained by respected maestros, and its students had won prizes at Russian classical music festivals. Many Sakha people were proud that the Republic of Sakha had such a school, and they were convinced that its teachers and pupils were well-known all over the Russia.

In Yakutsk, clubs and other venues had, with only two or three exceptions, “ethnic colors.” Discos, particularly, were informally divided along ethnic lines. In “Sakha discos,” such as Tsaroiit, Katiuusha, etc., I hardly saw any Russians, and particularly in Tsaroiit I was sometimes the only European. On the other hand, it took a long time to convince my Sakha friends to go with me to a Russian disco, such as Redut. They told me that they felt uncomfortable in a “Russian disco.” They also feared that drunk Russians might provoke a fight in a situation where they, Sakha, were greatly outnumbered by Russians. In summer, open-air concerts are very popular all over the Republic of Sakha. I attended many such concerts at Lenin Square in the center of Yakutsk. I noticed that there was a slow but regular movement within the crowd. Whenever a Russian artist sang, the Sakha youth moved toward the edges of the square, to be replaced by overwhelmingly Russian youth. When a Russian singer or group was replaced on the stage by a Sakha, the movement was the opposite. Even when a Sakha singer sang in Russian, a large portion of the Russian youth preferred to stay in the background and smoke, chat with friends, and drink beer from bottles they kept hidden in the inside pockets of their jackets.³

Conclusions

This paper makes no claim to presenting a complete picture; it just presents a preliminary analysis. I wanted to explore the urban commercial music culture in Siberia and how it relates to the indigenous population as it establishes ethnic identities. This paper was an attempt to discuss various layers of popular culture in connection with Sakha indigenous ethnicity in Russian Siberia. Both media and popular culture produce “socializing agents and images” that help to “characterize societies” (Fuller 1998, 143). In the wider context, popular culture could, in times of a “new ethic of pleasure and consumption” reformulate cultural and ethnic identities (Cawelti 1990, 87). Chye and Kong (1996) discuss the relationship between state and underground circles in Singapore, where the state manipulates music and popular culture in general for its political ends. The rock music circuit’s response is resistance by means of different music and socially unacceptable behavior. This approach, where the relationship between state/producers of culture/media and the consumer is seen as a power relationship, is rather typical for academic analysis. The outcome of this “power relation” concept is seen as a situation where a politically and economically dominant group tries to establish its “cultural hegemony,” and the lower classes or other oppressed groups react with resistance by creating their own “rituals” (e.g. Foucault 1994, Gramsci 1999, Hall and Jefferson 1986). Here, I wanted to show that the attempts to create and manipulate Sakha pop culture by producers and state institutions were not resisted, but were ignored in the sense of “vernacular” behavior.

There are many different views among Sakha “producers of culture” about how culture should be understood and made. Whereas the theater channels its notion of “Sakha culture” in a planned economy and supports certain kinds of culture, other producers manipulate music according to their own views. Duoraan records defined its activities as an attempt to support and develop Sakha culture. The “modern producer” Gavrilov, for his part, produced “youthful” and “commercial” culture with the help of a “progressive young elite.” Musicians, especially in the rock and folklore branches, had their own perception that the “message” they were delivering was different from what other music styles wanted to say. These attempts to create certain kinds of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1999) were doomed to fail because of the way the music business was managed in Sakha. The lack of money in the state sector, non-existent income from sales of cassettes, and non-working copyright rules – all of these forced musicians to switch back and forth between musical genres and perform as much as they could to earn steady incomes.

Barth has questioned identity as a fixed phenomenon, and demonstrated that the boundaries that determine the notion of culture are in constant fluctuation (Barth 1969). In another text, he wrote that culture should not be studied as “abstract ideas” and “shadow figures,” but as “empirically manifested events of social action” (Barth 2000, 33). I went to the ethnically Sakha bars and clubs in Yakutsk just to have a break from my fieldwork routine, and found that these places have a meaning of consolidation for people. Music, performed by Sakha people and in most cases in the Sakha language, was viewed by a broad audience as being part of “our culture,” regardless of the specific style and form. As McLaughlin has pointed out, the “vernacular receiver” of marketed culture has his word to say; he chooses among the “products,” avoids some and picks up what he prefers (McLaughlin 1996). This is the contradiction between the “strategy” of institutions that produce culture, and the “tactics” of the “vernacular receiver” to make his choice (Certeau 1988). Dance music and club culture are able to create sub-cultural identities, which can at the same time involve racial or ethnic identity (cf. Toop 1992). In the case of modern Sakha ethnic identity, pop music was seen as an “ethnic” terrain, and the sub-cultural and style boundaries were ignored. The audience recognized a few elements that turned the performed music into a “vernacular” marker of ethnic identity. In Arctic native studies, such creative constructions of “creole identities,” where various symbols are seen by insiders themselves as representations of their own “traditional culture,” are associated mostly with language or aspects of material culture (Vakhtin, Golovko, and Schweitzer 2002, Vakhtin 2001). In the case of current Sakha identity, “the culturally imagined community” rests on music played at social events, various celebrations and in clubs as a leisure activity (cf. Borneman 2000, 282). Paul Willis wrote that “cultural forms provide material toward confirmation of identity” (2000, 173). Sakha disco, rock, *estrada* and “traditional folk” music were all more or less equally well known and listened to among ethnic Sakha. The stylistic distinctions created by producers, artists and managers were reduced to the phenomenon I call *the narrative of the music*. The main topics of the song texts (the beauty of Sakha nature, respect for one’s mother, love, praising the home village) were the features that created the feeling of solidarity among listeners and audiences at a concert. These issues were understandable for everyone, and the fact that the music venues, discos and concerts featuring Sakha performers were filled with mainly ethnic Sakha audiences made them into symbolic ethnic territory. The fact that Sakha performers were forced to earn money from concerts, and that these places were informally ethnically divided between Russians and Sakha, gave the performers a meaning as carriers of “our

culture,” regardless of what they performed and how they were seen outside of Sakha. When Varia Ammanatova performed a pop song at a festival where all the music was rather commercial pop in Ulan Ude, she was seen by Sakha music consumers as an *Abstraktionsprodukt*, a person who defended the honor of a country by showing how “beautiful our culture is,” and not simply as just another pop artist performing a hit (Adorno 1990, 147).

Notes

- 1 Here we have to distinguish between the Western and Russian concept of rock. Whereas Western rock is often aggressive, loud, fast and has electric guitars, in Russia almost every kind of guitar-dominated music is generally called rock. Russian rock bands tend on the whole to be very ballad oriented, and not very aggressive in their style (compare the late Bob Dylan). They also differ from “commercial” music in their texts, which very often speak “from the soul of people” and are rather mystical and/or philosophical.
- 2 Eduard Gavrilov’s connection to MTV did not help gain publicity for Sakha music on MTV. Instead, Sakha pop music accessed the world-famous music channel through the “back door.” Russian MTV has a special program where the worst music videos from all over the Russia are played. They quite often played Sakha pop videos, including some produced by Eduard Gavrilov.
- 3 At big open-air events, the consumption of alcohol was forbidden. The patrolling police officers kept an eye on drunken youth, and occasionally confiscated bottles of beer and hard liquor.

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