

'Political' animals of Sakha Yakutia

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ABSTRACT

The reindeer has since long held great symbolic importance for Sakha Yakutia as a region in the Northeast of Russia. Political developments of center-region relations, national movement and cultural revival in the last decades, have subordinated the symbol of the reindeer under that of the horse, which has become central for the region as a national symbol placed on the regional emblem. It is remarkable that in economic terms, both the reindeer and the horse play a very minor role in the region's economy. In recent years, however, in political debates there has been a growing significance of special local breeds of cows and horses for the Sakha agriculture and as an identity marker. A fascinating example of this notable shift in animal symbols can be found in the region-building policies in Sakha Yakutia. This paper examines the political power of animals as symbols and their exchangeable nature in the process of forming a regional identity and in relations with the center. The research focuses on the questions of how animal symbols might vary in their political construction and deployment, the change over time of these symbols, and how they are related to systems of power, inequality and value-making. In doing so, I analyze the factors that contribute to the establishing of animal symbols, functions of animals' symbolisms as political capital, and political implications of cultural symbols. Examining the nature and location of particular animal symbols in their political use can greatly contribute to research of multiple and many-layered meanings of human-animal relations.

Keywords: Political symbolism of animals, human-animal relations, centre-periphery relations, building of identity, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

INTRODUCTION

Like in all human societies, past and present, the Sakha¹ people have coexisted with animals of many species. The disintegration of the Soviet Union tremendously politicized the domestic animals of this region. Three animals of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) – the reindeer, the horse and the cow – have separately or in shifting alliances taken their prominent symbolic places in the forming of the region in the late Soviet, early post-Soviet periods and in current political developments. Reflecting the key trends of certain historical developments, these species, which the Sakha agro-pastoralist groups and indigenous peoples have had the closest links with,

¹ Sakha is a self-designation of the most northernmost Turkic-speaking ethnic group in the north-eastern Russia. Yakut is the ethnonym in Russian.

have always had a significant presence in the societal dynamics of this northern region. However, they have never dominated the political scene as collective representatives as in the past two decades. Under the influence of the atheistic ideology of the Soviet age, these animals lost their previous spiritual value and were referred to in society mainly in the sense of a socio-cultural tradition. In the post-socialist period animal symbols have been infused with particular meaning in the regional politics of building identity and in the shaping of the interaction with the centre.

During the 1990s, Sakha Yakutia, like other ethnic entities, challenged the center using the chaos and centrifugal force created by the disintegration of the old hyper-centralized Soviet state. The tension between central and regional claims focused not only on practical issues of governance and finances, but also on the argument of defining sovereignty (Kempton 1996; Mandelstam Balzer 1999; Sakwa 2005). At the beginning of the 1990s, Sakha Yakutia declared that its local laws supersede those imposed by Moscow and that it will retain all revenues generated by the use of its resources. These 'sub-national' sovereignty claims granted special privileges to some resource-rich, ethnic regions. The power balance between center and regions began to change with the establishment of the Federal Constitution (1993) and has since gradually shifted towards the central authorities. After the election of 2000, Putin set out to strengthen the 'vertical flow of power' and the era of special privileges for territorial entities was over (Sakwa 2002: 16).

The specific ethnic profile of the republic has always been a great source, out of which regional politics have been shaped. In the last Soviet census (1989), the Sakha comprised 33,4%, indigenous peoples 2,2% and ethnic Russians 50,3% of region's population. This proportion changed in the census of 2002 to 45,5%; 3,4% and 41,2% respectively. Other ethnic, non-native groups have often been commonly viewed by native residents as 'Russians'². The Sakha, having their own administrative unit named after them, are classified as a so-called 'titular nation' (Stammer-Gossmann 2009a: 74). As in other ethnic republics, the idea of the exceptional value of small peripheral peoples within whole of the Russian Federation has been combined with the thoughts on civilizational commonality between remote parts and the center (Humphrey 2002: 261–262). At the same time, the regional authorities, faced with ethnic diversity, have had little choice but to appeal to multiple constituents (Mandelstam Balzer 2004: 240).

In 1992, the horse was chosen as a symbol for the national emblem, a reproduction of a cliff-pictograph from the Lake Baikal area, referring to the southern roots of Sakha people³. Other suggested 'deviant' wild animals⁴ as well as symbols related to

² I use the term 'Russians' referring to ethnic Russians and, consistent with Sakha perception, 'Russian speaking' residents referring to all other non-native groups migrated to the region in the past.

³ Many authors who share the ideas of the southern origin of the Sakha presume that the Sakha had southern roots and migrated to the North in the wake of a territorial reorganisation in Asia caused by Genghis Khan's Empire.

⁴ Amongst the projects for the contest for the Sakha national flag and emblem, announced by the Sakha parliament in 1992, was the white crane (*kytalyk*, *Grus leucogeranus*). It is said that seeing this sacred bird, which is registered in the International Red Book, brings good luck and a long life. Another popular 'deviant' wild animal of Sakha Yakutia, the sable, having been depicted in the regional emblem of the Tsarist era and carried in the claws of the 'Russian Empire's' eagle, has been outrightly refused as an obviously imperial symbol. The exploitation of fur, especially the valuable

the environment or natural resources were not accepted (Saprykov 1995; Perfilev 2001; Andrianov 2009). The metaphoric, romanticized image of the crane or the 'imperial' significance of other wild animals did not have enough capacity to represent the variety of politically loaded messages on the specifics, the character and disposition of the society in question.

The horse on the national emblem became a central symbol of obtained sovereignty and gradually a source of excitement and revived or invented tradition. Placed on the regional emblem, the horse has subordinated the symbol of the reindeer, the most common symbol of the Soviet era associated with this northern region. Currently the cow has also turned into an animal that embodies the essence of the Sakha people and their identity. The cows as well as the horse are appearing in societal and political debates as particular unique breeds, namely the Sakha horse (*Equus caballus*)⁵ and the Sakha cow (*Bos Taurus*).

The attitudes towards particular breeds in the politics of the Republic of Sakha Yakutia, express themselves in different ways; first of all in heraldic activities and legal acts. An animal or group of animals may come to represent, in arbitrary fashion, a particular ethnic or social group, or maybe an entire region. Politically significant animals are recognizable from the displayed pieces in the shops and buildings, in museums and art exhibitions. Animal symbols give way to new forms based upon science, education, performance, media celebrity, images and taste.

Clarifying the political implication of cultural symbols, Cohen points out that a politically significant symbol is often overtly non-political (Cohen 1979: 87). This is not surprising; people frequently turn to animals for symbolic expression in 'naturalizing' social classifications and distinctions or 'humanizing' nature. The different properties ascribed to symbols as triggers of social mobilization in the studies of symbols – ambiguity-clarity, open-endedness, complexity of association – are connected with their dynamic quality (see Cohen 1974; Turner 1975).

A variety of studies have given a great deal of insight into the character of various symbolic relations between humans and animals related to religion, cultural ecology, animal metaphors (see Shanklin 1985; Mullin 1999), but still little is known how this interrelation operates in ideological and political processes. Even though the case of the 'sacred cow', generated more political and academic attention than by any other animal, still many open questions are subject to continuous debate (Copland 2005; Deryck 2006). Only a small body of empirical research focuses on evaluating the changing presence of animals in political articulation over time in modern society (Franklin 2006), or various symbolic relations between one animal and different societies (Lawrence 1985), groups (Miles 1997), different governments (Copland 2005), or gender (Pink 1997).

However, the research done on the cultural and political use of domestic animal symbols, tends to examine the varying nature of one specific symbol, focusing on matters of meaning and interpretation. At the same time, the shifting nature of animal symbols is still a field, where science can say very little about it (Haraway 1989;

sable pelt was the main aim of Russian Tsarist policies towards the Siberian native peoples. Iasak (a tax in Tsarist Russia) was collected mainly in sable furs.

⁵ Often referred to by scientists as the 'true animal'.

Franklin 2006). There are many open questions left to reply, which can greatly contribute to our understanding of flexibility of human-animal boundaries. Why particular animals have been chosen as political agents and others have not? Why have some symbols been accepted or reinterpreted while others have not? What constitutes politically dynamic properties of individual animals and what is its interplay with others? We may also ask how different species fulfill the assigned role in the realization of political ends.

In Cohen's analysis on political symbolism, the less obviously political symbols are, the more efficaciously political they prove to be (Cohen 1979: 87). However, as Franklin states, based on the example of Australia's 'animal' nation, once an animal is charged with this presentational status, it means that every positive act towards it simultaneously endorses the nation or group that it represents (Franklin 2006:7). The balance between the proposed ambiguity of political symbols and their instrumental character could be examined in the context of still contested ideas about the relation of humanity to animality in political and economic imperatives.

Employing the famous dictum of Lévi-Strauss that animals are 'good to think with' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 89) to the complex societies of the present, I add the dimension of 'good to act'. Derived from his idea, I consider the interplay between rational, material dimensions and values attributed to animals in the context of ideological and political pressure. I examine to which extent the economic value of animal species ('good to eat' perspective) offers conceptual support for political acting ('good to act' perspective)

The main thrust of this paper is to understand not only the instrumental value and interpretation of the animal symbol but also its exchangeable properties. In this context I focus specifically on two mentioned aspects of animal symbolism in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). I analyze the potential and the limits of 'neutral' political symbols of different species as well as the relation of their political value with their social and economic values in the society. Along these lines I try to link regional political fields to 'closed' local levels based in particular on my fieldwork studies in Sakha agropastoralists communities of the Tatta District, thought to be one of the most famous agricultural and 'most Sakha' province.

'GOOD TO EAT' AND 'GOOD TO ACT'

The establishment of official regional symbolic began in the time of Peter the Great and remains an important channel for the central government to control the regions. The new political situation of the post-Soviet years has provided the regions with an opportunity to create their own official symbols. The introduction of new symbolic attributes was one of the first activities of the regional governments. Various national and social movements, political ideologies, religious and spiritual concepts in post-Soviet Sakha (Yakutia) have offered themselves to define and symbolize regional society, but none have been able to articulate a concrete political vision of regional elite and gain popular support. The symbol of change became the horse and its representational role was assigned on the republic emblem. Animals in general have been the most popular symbols in the regional symbolic of the post-Soviet Russia (Perfilev 2001: 330) Animals are also dominantly present in the symbolism of

regional districts in Sakha Yakutia (Rubtsov 2003; Andrianov 2006).

The animals that have accompanied the political fluctuations of the regionalization process have had a great social and economic significance for the Sakha cattle and horse breeders and indigenous reindeer herders. According to the census of 2002 35.7% of all regional residents live in rural area. Among them Sakha and indigenous peoples constitute with more than 60% (Pozolotin 2005:30, table 2) the majority of the rural population, for whom agriculture remains a vital part of their economy (Takakura 2003; Crate 2006; Granberg 2006; Maj 2009). In addition, the agricultural sector is politically influential since many of the officials currently in charge of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) have family ties to rural areas or have worked in the agricultural sector. The former President was a former head of the Ministry of Agriculture under the Soviet government. Domestic meat and milk products, potatoes and cabbage continue to make a significant proportion of the regional diet (Tichotsky 2000: 128; Crate 2006: 102–103). However, the appreciation of regional symbolization and its implied political use does not necessarily reflect the regional economic value of 'real life' animals.

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the biggest administrative unit of the Russian Federation, is also the number one province for diamond mining. In 2002, in the structure of Gross Regional Product, agriculture together with hunting and forestry made up around 3.4%, whereas the extraction industry accounted for 45% (Rosstat 2002a). According to regional statistics, the production of meat dropped in the region drastically from 23,000 tons in 1990 to 1,100 tons in 2006; whole milk products from 142,000 tons to 35.8 tons (Rosstat 2002b). Since the collapse of collective state farms, cattle and horse breeding is practiced on the level of a cash economy with patterns of a subsistence economy (Crate 2006: 3). From the 1990s, reindeer livestock has reduced by a factor of ten within ten years (Novikov 2006: 81; Vinokurova & Boiakova 2009: 31).

Moreover, the portrayed natural world obviously contrasts with reality in the way that the particular local horse and cow breeds are considered to be facing extinction (Zakharov et al 1993; Popov et al. 2004). Many Sakha people have never seen neither a reindeer nor a Sakha cow. Only one overview published in a local newspaper by Sakha researchers, points out this fact: 'The Sakha who have never seen a Sakha cow' (Nikolaeva 2008), 'The branch-phantom: what is disturbing the reindeer herding?' (Vinokurova 2007).

Past and present regional development is heavily dependent on industrial mining, whereby the diamond industry plays a principal role in the economy (Gossmann 1997, Gossmann 1999, Tichotsky 2000). The majority of the region's inhabitants, Russian speaking residents, is involved in industrial development and constitute an absolute dominance of the population in southern industrial towns. The native residents are hardly involved in industrial mining (Kuzmina 1998: 64–65; Gossmann 1999: 193–195; Tichotsky 2000: 134–135). The ethnic structure of the republic also shows a disproportion in the distribution of power. While the Sakha have dominated in political positions, Russians have controlled economic power within the region (Gossmann 1996: 193–194; Mandelstam Balzer 2004: 239–240).

This remarkable ethnic division of labor, geographical diversity and distribution

of power lead to the situation, where the Russians are detached in an emotional sense from 'acting' animal symbols. In the same way, Sakha residents hardly have an emotional attachment to the diamond symbol, which is represented on the emblems of industrial *uluses* (regional districts) (Andrianov 2006). The sociological micro-survey from 1997 shows different orientations among Russian and Sakha residents towards their sense of belonging. While 37.7% of the Russians consider themselves as Russian citizens, only 1.3% of the Sakha share this feeling. The question 'I think I am citizen of Russia and Sakha (Yakutia), but more of Sakha (Yakutia)' was answered positively by 10.1% of Russians and 46.1% of Sakha residents (Gorokhova 2000: table 2).

Ethnic diversity in the region where there are two dominant groups (the Sakha and the Russian speaking group) is intertwined with that of political power, economic viability and interethnic relations. The fact that the legitimacy of the presence of a particular animal species in official regional symbolic can be challenged in its 'natural' base shows the activities of the Russian *obshchina* (association). In its appeal to President Putin in 2005 and to the Heraldic Council of the Russian Federation in 2007, the *obshchina* asked to return the Tsarist symbols for the region and for its capital, Yakutsk (Obrashchenie 2005; Shcherbakova 2007). The debates about regional symbols have been reinforced by the long process of establishing the emblem of the regional capital Yakutsk (Adrianov 2009).

Political sensitivities of the city's symbols are related to the fact that Yakutsk is the administrative capital and as such a symbolic 'common place' for a diverse society. The declaration of a regional 'Yakutian' (residents of Yakutia) identity, introduced in 1990s, has been used in support of preserving the volatile unity of different ethnic groups within the region and of building a common regional identity. Under the first Sakha Yakutia President Nikolaev, many Sakha, as Mandelstam Balzer points it out, 'have been hoping to achieve an improved form of federalism, both at home and within Russia' (Mandelstam Balzer 2004: 240). The moderate concept promoted by current president Styrov is stronger 'Moscow ties' oriented.

When particular animal categories reach the limits of their 'neutrality' and create distinctions between humans, another animal can take over the representational function. Among symbols to appear in recent years, which apply to the regional commonalities, is a new 'discovered' animal – the mammoth. From tourist advertisements to street posters and the President's speeches, this 'real/unreal' animal is often referred to as a symbol of the republic (Styrov 2007). The mammoth was chosen for the golden coin made in the republic as a symbol for the 360th anniversary of being within the Russia. The provided annotation has a historical introduction of incorporating Sakha (Yakutia) into the Russian state. Additionally, it describes the importance of the mammoth: 'With respect to the past of their land, the Sakha consider the mammoth as its symbol. Mammoths helped the ancient man to survive in this harsh permafrost climate'. However, according to the article in the local newspaper, in the Sakha mythology the mammoth has rather been perceived as an 'inert' animal that does not enquire for communication and esteem and could be associated with some alarming signs of death (Marasyukov 2005). In 2005, President Styrov adopted the decree 'On the special status of natural resources – ancient remains of mammoth

fauna and regulations of their turnover on the territory of Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)' (№ 2044, 30.03.2005).

'Nature', as represented by the actual biological, ideological or cultural traits of a particular animal, becomes in this case transformed into a construct that does not reflect any of the empirical reality, historical or religious values concerning that animal but involves much embellishment. Currently, it is beginning to occupy the stage held by 'environment' referring to the commonalities of living in cold conditions. The non-ethnic dimension of the mammoth symbol, the absence of any political bounds and its attachment to the territorial characteristics of a place has a certain potential to tie all of the residents to the region. On the other hand with its rather pro-Russian 'filling', the mammoth symbol can exceed its 'moderating' function. The new 'deviant' specie appears on the regional scene in a period of intensive re-centralization when the word 'sovereignty' is literally abolished from the text of the constitution of the republic. The gratitude the mammoth deserves for elevating a sense of identification and providing power for regional commonality efforts is, at the moment, not competing with the power of domestic animals that still foster the human feelings and continue to allow native residents to stick to their real or perceived bonds.

The next period of shifting negotiations about the degree of sovereignty between the center and the republic seems to be more or less completed with the final changes in the regional constitution. However, as Sakha researcher and former parliament deputy Vinokurova writes, 'after years of sovereignty consolidation of the Sakha titular nation has not happened'. In her account, the Sakha society is split into local spatial, kinship and social ties (Vinokurova 2006: 121). In the absence of a unifying national identity in Russia, which was formerly occupied by the ideological construct of a 'single united Soviet people' (*edinyi sovetskii narod*), the ethnic entities of Russia try to fill the gap by articulating in ethnic categories. Lack of national political symbols remains a point of confusion in Russian society that creates social and political instability and leaves the state-regions relations a high balancing act. Under these conditions the 'acting' animals of Sakha Yakutia continue to construct political realities, codify power relations and influence how people act towards them. Serving different purposes within the last two decades and producing limits of their political use, in effect animal categories remain more neutral than other 'acting' symbols and reinforce human morality by giving it a 'natural' basis.

'SOVIET' REINDEER

Reindeer herding is practiced only by a small number of indigenous groups of the region, who constitute around 3.5% of the regional population. The number of reindeer decreased massively after the collapse of the Soviet plan economy (see above) and today less than 2,000 people are registered as reindeer herders (Vinokurova 2007). Only a very small part of northern Sakha is involved in reindeer herding. As mentioned above, the economy of rural Sakha is based on horse and cattle husbandry. Nonetheless, the reindeer has long held a surprisingly great symbolic importance for Sakha Yakutia as a northern region, especially during the Soviet period. The Sakha people have been sharing Soviet images and symbols related to

the reindeer with legally recognized so-called 'small numbered indigenous peoples of the region' (Even, Evenk, Yukagir, Dolgan, Chukchi).

De-sacralized by politics and science, the reindeer became a main ideological symbol of how the northern republic manifested achievements of the Soviet national policy. Soviet reindeer herding in Sakha Yakutia belonged to the most successful in country and reached its peak economic performance with a number of 380,000 animals at the beginning of the 1980s (Vinokurova 2007).

The showcase reindeer herders' village Topolinoe was good evidence of 'the march of indigenous people towards the bright era of communism'. As in the Tsarist time, the Soviet government was deeply wedded to the 'civilizing mission' and to the idea of getting the locals up to the an equal level of societal development as that of the dominant group, 'bypassing thousands of years', straight from the 'stone age to socialism' (Stammer-Gossmann 2009a: 82). The first foreign researchers on reindeer herding in the Soviet Union were recommended to go to the Topolinoe settlement for the field work and to allow them to be convinced of the successful state policy towards indigenous peoples (personal conversation).

As a powerful ideological construction, the 'Soviet' reindeer replaced the economic and spiritual values of animal. Simultaneously, ambiguous boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous spheres within the republic have caused an ambivalent ideological and societal meaning towards this symbol. On the one hand, the Sakha people are not accepted as an indigenous group within the Russian legislation (Stammer-Gossmann 2009b: 33-35), on the other hand, the expression of an indigenous identity in terms of 'being rooted' has been a rather natural concept for the Sakha people. Both the titular nation and the indigenous groups are seen as 'indigenous' in the sense of time and space; having been inhabitants of the region at the time of the arrival of Russian settlers in the 17th century. (Stammer-Gossmann 2009a).

Referring to the reindeer as a symbol of a flexibly expressed indigenous identity, the Sakha have shown a remarkable ambivalence towards the concept of shared 'indigenusness', on the one hand being its 'creators and users' and on the other hand keeping a 'proud distance' to indigenous peoples. As Rethman points out, the political culture of the Soviet Union, the recognition of Russia's non-Russian constituents was situated at the threshold between negation and affirmation, between the denial of 'culture' as a site of difference and its avowal as folkloric aesthetization (Rethman 2004: 268). Accepting the reindeer as a regional symbol, the Sakha, at the same time, have rejected evolutionary stereotypes of 'backwardness' associated with



FIG. 1. A souvenir plate depicting the reindeer as a symbol of Sakha Yakutia (photo: Stammer-Gossmann)

reindeer herding. This discrepancy between avowing the Sakha to the reindeer symbol and its 'practical' negation was prevailed in the regional politics of performing tradition during the Soviet epoch.

The loss of its ideological basis after the fall of the Soviet Union diminished the political significance of the reindeer symbol and revealed its 'material' features based on economic realities and marginalized attributes. The republic of Sakha Yakutia, a region hardly known even by many inhabitants of the Soviet Union, has become one of the most active actors in the process of regionalization (Kempton 1996; Gossmann 1997; Mandelstam Balzer 1999). Political aims of establishing relations with the federal center and increased ethnic priorities that arose by the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s subordinated the reindeer symbol in its role of representing the northern republic. At the same time, the symbol did not completely disappear from the political scene and was not fully denied as a marker of regional identity. Its ideological function was transformed into the 'therapeutic' one, making it an integral part of new political concepts.

The introduction and intensive promotion of the concept of a 'circumpolar civilization' in the 1990s has effectively served Sakha Yakutia's regional goals in receiving a new quality of standing within Russia. The circumpolar concept was very useful to Sakha in providing a channel into a global Arctic community and in building international alliances, bypassing Moscow (Stammler-Gossmann 2006). From an emotional point of view, the 'circumpolarity' or rather its 'civilization' aspect has been important in overcoming the inherited Soviet complex of inferiority. The northern concept of spatiality has effectively demanded its articulation under the banner of indigenous cultural and political references. The affiliation of the Sakha people with the reindeer, through the flexible use of 'indigenusness', has been a supportive component of these circumpolar activities.

In spite of its lost significance that originated from Soviet stereotypes, the association of the Sakha people with reindeer and reindeer herding still remains an external as well as an internal symbolic constituent of regional representation (Sidorov 2006; Vinokurova 2007). In 2007, Sakha traditional sport jumping (*ystanga*) was included into the program of the federal cup in athletic sport. A *Russian Reporter* describing *ystanga* wrote: 'The reindeer that has gifted us this kind of sport is the main animal of the Sakha people and the base of their economy. It is not possible to survive in the North without the reindeer' (Lytkin & Levchenko 2007).

The connection to the reindeer in the sense of belonging to the North still has its 'uniting' feature. Different to Russian speaking residents of the republic, who identify themselves as 'Siberians' (*sibiriaki*), none of Sakha and indigenous inhabitants uses this definition. They clearly define themselves as northerners (*severiane*). The ethnic division of labor in the republic, whereby indigenous reindeer herders and the Sakha people are hardly involved in industrial development and mostly live in rural areas, also contributes to the fact that the reindeer symbol has been always accepted by the Sakha. The souvenir shops in Sakha Yakutia are still filled with items representing the republic using the reindeer image. A 'reindeer' dance, as in the Soviet Union, is an obligatory part of Sakha dance groups' programs and any official dance performance, where the region is to be represented.

Conversely to seeing the reindeer in terms of the codified Soviet ideological meaning, a state of backwardness, many Sakha people have turned the symbol into a positively perceived. Some people may explain the 'spatial' value of reindeer for the Sakha as an amplifying indicator that emphasizes the specifics and beauty of their land and justifies a particular spiritual wealth of northerners (personal conversation). The reindeer is also a typical character in northern



FIG. 2. Performing a reindeer dance (photo: Stammer-Gossmann)

residents' jokes with which they provoke non-northerners: 'We in the North, live in the chums and go to our offices by reindeer sledges; bears are our domesticated animals and diamonds our toys'. These kind of provocative jokes are spread throughout the North and can be considered as a constituent part of local folklore (Razumova 2004), which distinguishes the northerners from the image that poorly educated and poorly informed non-northerners have of them.

Simultaneously, many Sakha people may have some prejudices towards reindeer. For example, reindeer meat is not very popular among the Sakha because 'it is too dark'. Urban Sakha may be suspicious about the quality of reindeer meat offered in shops or at the market, as it 'arrived from the North and possibly was not stored properly' (personal conversation 2008). On the contrary, for indigenous reindeer herders, the smell of the cows can be perceived as very penetrating: 'When Even girls had to work at cow farms during the Soviet era, parents did not allowed them to bring their work clothes inside the house because of the smell', I was informed by a local who was referring to the different significances of different animals in the republic (personal conversation 2008).

Today, the ambiguous meaning of the 'post-Soviet' reindeer and its prevailing marginal image cannot compete with its previous 'socialist' moral filling. The strong attachment of the circumpolar idea to indigenous peoples turned out to be a potentially impeding factor for its regional significance. The dominance of its indigenous aspect has kept the non-indigenous majority rather indifferent. Some voices wanting to bring the recognition of the Sakha as indigenous people to a federal level did not have the support in the politicized atmosphere of the early 1990s. In economic terms, it has not reached the proposed financial value (Stammer-Gossmann 2006) and the 'northernness' of the Sakha with its association with the reindeer symbol has gone to a rather 'hibernating' state.

The loss or abandoning of the wide range of symbols composed on an ideological basis has become especially pressing at the regional level in the ethnic entities of the Russian Federation. The regional politics of the ethnically defined republics have been challenged by a shift from marginalization to their new role within the center-

periphery relationship, which has massively increased awareness of their repressed ethnic identity as well as interethnic sensitivities. The tremendous importance of political symbols has not only been a way to mark out regional particulars for all regions in the Russian Federation, but a way to express their sovereign claims and define their position in relation to the center. The new symbols appeared in regional legislation as official 'state' and 'national' attributes of the republics.

'HISTORICAL' HORSE

The new republic required a clear and unambiguously different representation in order to distinguish it from all other regions and strengthen its position on the political map. While the reindeer symbol has been strongly influenced by Soviet national politics and stereotypes, which reduced minorities to exotic ethnographic groups, the horse symbol assumed its particular prominence on the wave of the perestroika. After declaring its sovereignty within Russia, the former Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic changed not only its name by putting the de-Russified name of Sakha as the official denomination, but also placed the horse on the new established national emblem of the republic. Having emerged on the national emblem of Sakha Yakutia in 1992, the horse symbol has revived the southern strands of the Sakha's origin, who supposedly traced their roots back to the time before the migration of the Sakha to the North, following the collapse of the Mongol Empire.

With the new animal symbol, political orientations have moved to opposite spatial directions. Instead of northern references, parts the Eurasian concept, particularly the idea of Genghis Khan Empire, became a relevant historical template for new center-periphery dimensions and awakened ethnic awareness amongst the Sakha people. The 'Eurasianism' itself, in its spiritual and religious context has offered, at this time, fewer possibilities for this northern region. Economically, the contemporary state of Mongolia has also been much less attractive than Arctic countries. The power of the southern concept has been mostly in its historical importance: it has offered a possibility to be connected to the big events of world history. The 'invented tradition' has fulfilled an important gap for many ethnic groups within historical Russian context. An attachment to the world of Genghis Khan has been evidence proof of historical continuity for non-Russian people, who were supposed to be 'stateless' and 'unhistorical' people outside of Russian and Soviet history.

The statements of southern belonging go to arguments of existing forms and attributes of statehood of the Sakha people before they came to the North. The symbol of the horse cultivating these traits became a more 'acting' political power than the reindeer, which is associated with the not very clearly defined concept of circumpolarity. From the official introduction onwards, the popularity of the horse increased rapidly. The economic importance of Asian connections in Russia and the growing potential of the region, with the ongoing construction of the East-Siberian pipeline, act to support for political agenda.

Historically, the horse was always a central element of Sakha life (Gabyshev 1966; Bychkova Jordan & Jordan Bychkov 2001; Maj 2009). In the 1860s, the politically exiled researcher Khudiakov wrote: 'It will be no overstatement to say that the Sakha themselves have so much of horse blood as any Sakha horse' (Khudiakov 1969: 231).

The culture of cattle breeding was forced under Russian influence and the number of horses declined from the 19th century (Seroshevski 1993: 250-255). Following the economic and social transformations of the Soviet periods such as the collectivization during the 1920s and 1930s, the value of horse breeding further lost its economic significance to the advantage of cattle breeding. Horse breeding, similarly to reindeer herding, is economically irrelevant for the overall region and only a minority of rural areas practices horse breeding. Although most rural, private households possess this animal, keeping the horse is almost entirely for subsistence purposes. The highly appreciated horse meat and *kumys* (fermented mare's milk) remain a celebrity's diet.

However, economic factors do not play a role in the regional symbolic power of the horse. As Maj argues, the loss of the horse's utilitarian significance during the Soviet era even intensified its symbolic need (Maj 2009: 69). Symbolic attributes of the horse cult survived under the atheistic Soviet regime. The variety of horse related events and symbols (*ysyakh*, main ethnic summer celebration or horse races), even though in moderate format, were important elements in keeping ethnic ties alive within the common ideological framework of a 'united Soviet people'.

The significance of the horse for the Sakha people is manifested in several statements of Sakha officials (Stepanov 2006), research arguments (Vinikurova 1994; Romanova 1994; Tyrylgina 2000; Novikov & Pudov 2005) and personal interpretations. Undoubtedly, the horse was and is a most prized domestic animal. However, it has gained such significant emotional expression and political dimensions for the first time in the Sakha society. Restoration of historical events, epitomes related to Genghis Khan's history has found enthusiastic support within society and its expression in popular culture. Several events related to the 'historical' horse (conferences, festivals, theater and sport performances, horse races, exhibitions, commercial advertisements) massively entered the academic and cultural sphere as well as every day life.

The horse can be found not only on official blanks, as logo of some enterprises or shops, but also on beer bottles. Horsemen from the heroic past, decorating a huge sign-plate in Yakutsk, seen during my fieldwork in 2009, were an advertisement for the production of the local poultry factory. The question of historical relevance is rather secondary. Even the critical audience of a film about Genghis Khan, made by a Sakha filmmaker and screened in 2009, has mainly seen the historical links as positive (personal conversation 2009). Symbols' use within ethnic units has been seen in Moscow as a manifestation of national particulars, the significance of the 'titular'



FIG. 3. 'Preserving tradition' – an advertisement for meat rissoles (photo: Stammer-Gossmann)

group and the level of separatism (Perfiliev 2001: 335). Indeed, with its 'historical horse', Sakha Yakutia has become one of the most active actors in the Russian political scene and frequently figured in Russian media as a region with separatist tendencies (Vertiachikh et al 2003; Sokolov-Mitrich 2007).

Once emerged as an official national symbol and introduced in the regional legislation as an element of the 'state emblem', the horse provided a channel for the passing of legal and political acts. The importance of a symbolic form for the region was institutionalized not only in official national attributes of the region, but also in the 2002 introduction of the Heraldic Council to the president of Sakha Yakutia. The Council has been particularly concerned with establishing and registering the symbols of regional districts, where the horse and reindeer are dominantly present (Andrianov 2006). During the Soviet period, activities related to horses, such as *ysyakh*, races, and symbolic manifestations of Sakha's horse-related identity were marginalized. The opposite has been happening for the past decades, when such horse-related events gained a lot of attention and support by the republican government.

In 1991, the *ysyakh*, Sakha traditional summer festival, gained state status and became a national holiday (Nazarov 1994). The horse race is experiencing a significant revival. During my visit to a horse race in the regional capital in 2008, the head of the Sakha government established an award of 1 million rubles. The year 2002 was declared as the year of the Sakha horse (Yakutia 2001). The acceptance of the Sakha heroic epos '*Olonkho*', where the mythological qualities of the horse take a place of honor, by UNESCO as a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage' in 2005 became a supportive event for the new animal discourse.

One of the important questions in human-animal relations is not only the way animals come to represent things other than themselves, but also the way this influences how people act towards them. Once the political elite was persuaded that a positive human outcome could be established by supporting the existing practice with animals, other legal regulations were introduced. In the perestroika time, Russian state regulations on the genetic protection and recognition of a local horse breed as a particular Sakha horse were adopted (N 680 07.09.1985; N 871, 01.10.1987). It was reinforced by adopted regional Laws 'On selective breeding in animal husbandry' (N 1484-XII, 19.05.1993), 'On horse husbandry' (Z N55-II, 28.12.1998); and the Law 'On *kumys* production' (64 Z N 465-II, 17.10.2002). Selective breeding was included into the list of national priority programs (Stepanov 2006). Finally, large efforts towards separate economic sectors in agriculture were consolidated for the first time, in the 'Program on socio-economic rural development for 2002-2006' (Decree № 435, 29.08.2002). In 2006, the regional capital Yakutsk hosted the first Congress of horse breeders, where the establishment of a World Horse Breeders Association was suggested.

Activities related to horses have also determined a new interpretation of the animal in practice among rural as well among urban Sakha. The Minister of agriculture encouraged urban residents in 2007 to become horse owners through leasing one and through memberships in herders' cooperatives (Rostovtsev 2007). Today, the horse is treated not only as an agent with motives, values and morals, but it also

delivers to the state with its human-animal interaction, what Tapper calls the 'implicit denying of differences between animals and people' (Tapper 1994: 51).

While attending a horse race in 2008, I experienced how individuals can attach themselves emotionally to the constructed symbol. The first day of the race was reserved for non-local breeds with the runway capped at 800 meters. On the second day, there was the race of local Sakha horses with a runway of 10 km. Especially, many female viewers were amazed at the patience and endurance of these small horses: 'Poor thing, they are just amazing, you cannot compare them with the non-local horse breed, they are like we, Sakha people'. Some kind of personification of animals can also be seen in the way Sakha people consider the horse, like themselves to also be a victim of Soviet economic policy (Maj 2009: 72).

The discovered, revived or invented attributes of the animal such as its healing power, contribute to this psychological proximity. Many urban residents of rural origin have recently become 'absentee' horse owners (Takakura 2003). The practice of having horses kept in the village by professional horse breeders for the consumption of the horses' meat has become more popular. According to the rapidly increasing popularity of the horse, the cost of horse meat in the past decade has increased heavily as well. Claims about healing properties and the high quality of Sakha horses' 'marble' meat are justified by research, present in mass media, amongst individuals and there are stories about Japanese people purchasing it. In one of these stories, my dialog partner mentioned that the quality of the Sakha meat in Japan decreased because of the lack of the homeland cold and grass.

Among local domestic animals, the horse illustrates especially well the symbolic power that it has been endowed within Sakha society. History has served as a common symbolic corpus from which the symbol of the horse was extracted. It has since been used as a symbol for the 'state-in-state' sovereignty and revived ethnic self-confidence. At the same time the horse symbol has a very exclusive nature. Justifying exclusively Sakha-own historical rights it leaves indigenous and Russian speaking members of the regional community detached from this concept.



FIG. 4. 'My homeland – Sakha', a street advert in Yakutsk (photo: Stammer-Gossmann)

'ABORIGINAL' COW

During my fieldwork (in June-July 2009), every newspaper debated the question of the end of the long term process that meant to bring the regional Constitution in line with the Federal one (Egorov 2009; Kryukov 2009). The process of changing this main document of the Constitution of the republic, which was adopted (1992) before the Federal Constitution (1993), had already started in 1994. Since then, the Constitu-

tion has been revised several times in order to bring it in a line with Russian federal requirements. Nevertheless, together with a few other republics, Sakha Yakutia has angered the center by keeping the word 'sovereignty' in its Constitution. On the session of the 17th June 2009, the regional Parliament finally supported the draft of a law on the revision of the regional Constitution. Two particular points of the draft were at the center of the republic's attention: according to the draft, the word 'sovereign' should be removed from the Constitution. Additionally, a new statement about the region's 'voluntary entry into the Russian state in the 17th century should also be added to the historical part of the preamble (692-Z N 275-IV, 17.06.2009).

With the change of the Russian presidency in 1999/2000, a new dynamism appeared, driving a centralization process, which had already started earlier. It considerably changed the balance of center-periphery relations, due to the recent administrative merging of regional units, centralized control over resources and changes in regional Constitutions. Sakha Yakutia lost most of its sovereignty rights and privileges gained in the 'sovereign' phase, too. The new trend observed in this northern province can be defined by three general directions on the regional, political agenda: an intensive reassurance of tight relations with Moscow, a growing awareness towards keeping interethnic viability of the region and a maintaining of ethnic identity.

The inspiring spiritual value of the horse symbol currently becomes too vague in fulfilling these political needs. After the euphoria of the 1990s, the earthbound cow⁶ seems a better fit to the new situation. Although it is hard to imagine that the cow can replace the horse in its attributive symbolic, this specie offers an opportunity to participate in the political life of the republic in a more moderate form and infuse an existential meaning into the center's managed regionalism. The differences between two animals do not necessary have to be transformed into their oppositions.

The representation of the cow is mobilized as another option in support of the same discourse of rural life, nature and certain political objectives, but without the strong excluding potential of the horse symbol. It is rather about forming the alliance of the horse and the cow in the process of adjusting political ideas in the fear of being marginalized by the Russian Federal center. The symbol of the cow turns the challenging issues of autonomy level inwards towards one's own roots, downplaying some sensitive aspects. The tendency in representing the cow as an animal that embodies the essence of Sakha culture does not replace the presence of the horse in political symbolism. Instead it makes the cow symbol more competitive on the regional level and more tangible as a political symbol.

Following Firth, symbols are 'instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control' (Firth 1973: 77). If we apply it to these particular animals, then the horse has been more of an instrument of control in regional politics, while the cow is more of an instrument of expression and knowledge in serving the same goals. The cow, in this function, provides even more familiarity in its relations with humans. The disappearing of Soviet factory farming led, at the same time, to an

⁶ The term 'cow' is commonly used in politics as well as in society instead of the collective plural form 'cattle' (in Sakha and in Russian language), indicating the economic and cultural importance of milk production for the Sakha people.

increased proximity of human-animal interactions within individual households and also moved them from a more impersonal to a personal sphere.

On the way to deliver milk to the local processing plant, my host family in Tatta told me about the low fat milk from the cows of their neighbor. Some people suggested to him for a long time to slaughter them, because the milk prices have been based on the fat content. His response has always been the same: he cannot do it

'because they are *his* cows' emphasizing his intimate relation to the animals. The cow is seen as less mobile than the horse and as an animal demanding more work. On the other hand, a horse independently grazing on far wild pastures is also regarded as demanding hard work, but less tedious than the cow. Many people in Tatta villages have drastically reduced their milk consumption in the need for cash and sell almost their entire milk production to the processing plant in the summer time, or they sell it frozen in the administrative center in the winter. However, the significance of *yryng aas* ('white food', milk products) remains essential, while meat demand can be diversified by consuming more fish or wild animals.

Through its closeness to the people, the cow symbol provides them an opportunity to participate in what it symbolizes. Many people remember the shift from local cow breeds to the Kholmogor and Simmental breeds in the name of productivity, following a government Decree from 1932 – it is part of their personal histories. The amazing, undemanding abilities of the Sakha cow are in accordance with self images and reinforce intimate human-animal ties. Certain productive capacities like the 'marble' meat and the high fat content of milk are linked according to a Sakha genetics expert to traditional diet: 'The traditional diet should be in 'genetic' memory of the people. Before the real Sakha cow, the *Bos Taurus* was slaughtered in 1950s, the Sakha people had a second highest life expectancy rate. Currently, we are somewhere on the end of the rate' (personal conversation 2008).

In addressing an animal the Sakha may use the same adjective '*barakhsan*' as for a human, a combination of the word 'dear' and some compassion. Sakha cattle are characterized by smaller size, lower milk and meat production and the smaller udder that is not well suited for mechanical milking. This was the reason of the Soviet force mixing the Sakha breed with European cattle. The history of marginalizing animals and humans can be seen along the same time (Vinokurova 1994: 34-35; Kulakovskii-Diengkir 2008; Nikolaeva 2008). Simultaneously, the use of the term *barakhsan* applies to the unique ability of the Sakha cattle to adapt to cold winter temperatures of up to minus 50, the quality of the milk (the high fat content) and the great taste of the meat (Popov et al 2004; Neustroev 2006). The exceptional, adaptive



FIG. 5. A Sakha cow in the regional museum of Yakutsk (photo Stammer-Gossmann)

capacity of Sakha cows may symbolize in a more personalized way, the unique and creative talent of Sakha cow breeders.

The Sakha cow became an object in the regional museum and even arrived in S-Petersburg's zoo. Images of *alaas* (fertile meadows for grazing sites and hay grounds), the part of personal identities, are increasingly visualized in museums, theater performances and art. Another outcome of supported ruralism in regional politics is some kind of 'back-to-the roots' movement among Sakha authorities, within some social frame. It was first started by President Nikolaev, who initiated the construction of certain social objects in his home villages. Nowadays regional politicians may promote their villages of origin by investing state money in the social sphere. A special prize from an 'urbanized' governmental person during the *ysyakh* summer festivities in his or her rural home place is one of the most popular actions among politicians.

The unique and creative qualities of particular local breeds are recognized at governmental level and find their support in the regional subsidies program (Stepanov et al 2007: 41-42). In 2001, the Parliament of the republic adopted the Law 'On the protection and use of the gene pool of Sakha livestock' (Z N 291-II, 07.06.2001). In the following years the 'Decree on state support for the gene pool of Sakha livestock' (№245, 24.04.2003) and the 'Decree on establishing state institutions for the preservation of the gene pool of Sakha livestock' (№630, 21.12.2004) were introduced. The legal recognition of cultural values of the Sakha cow and horse contributes to the shaping of more 'local' features of animals, which are authentically inherent for the residents or what is perceived as inherent.

Like the horse symbol, the cow symbolizes its historical traces. At the same time, the cow symbol changes the focus of spatial references and emphasizes its 'autochthonous' property. Rethinking the role of the Sakha cow goes along more confident lines than roots going back to 'Genghis Khan'. It is mainly considered in the context of debates on the ethno-genesis of Sakha. The historical origin of the Sakha people, who speak a Turkic language while also having Mongolian and other cultural substrates, has always been one of the most exciting and contested issues in regional studies. In the 1990s, this previously purely academic discussion became highly politicized. Defenders of the 'autochthon' origin of the Sakha people consider historical evidence based not only on linguistic or genetic components, but also on the local origin of pastoralism in the area. According to the proponents of this hypothesis, cow breeding was already present before the arrival of southern groups of Sakha (Nikolaev-Somogotto 2007; Petrova 2008).

The topic is discussed not only amongst historians, archaeologists, linguists and folklorists, but also circulates in political and public debates on issues of first occupancy of the territory, cultural rights and cultural distinctness (Stammler-Gossmann 2009b: 38-39). Research results from molecular-genetic, medical and molecular studies are also put to public attention (Fefelova 1990; Pakendorf 2006; Tayurskii 2007). However, the historical discourse of discussion finds its consensus. The currently prevailing perspectives on the origin of Sakha among experts on southern 'migration' as well as 'autochthon' theories, is the view that Sakha as an ethnic group evolved completely in the area of the middle Lena river (Gogolev 2005).

The new prestige of animals and their use as cultural symbols enables Sakha to articulate cultural distinctiveness and support cultural practices in a form, where ethnicity is less visible and oriented towards defending rural economies. At the same time, animal symbolism provides a supportive potential in economic and political context. Proponents of the 'Eurasia' movement raise the question that cow and horse breeding of the Sakha should be regarded as a traditional economy that requires the same state support in traditional land use as for indigenous peoples. (Egorov et al 2004).

In the current political atmosphere in Russia, animal symbolism seems to be the most productive 'tool' in a situation, when regional authorities are torn between promoting regional identity for all residents of Sakha Yakutia and sensitivities towards ethnic identity. The appearance of the cow as a symbolic animal signifies the process of moving away from symbolic ambiguity and acquires a more existentialist meaning. However, the cow symbol has limitations in its capacity for the entire region. Whilst maintaining a sense of Sakha identity and appealing in its rural nature more than the horse to indigenous groups and rural Russians, the cow symbol has nevertheless a weak attachment to urban Russian majority. The position of the symbol is not a permanent or unchangeable state of affairs as the previous developments in this northern region showed. The common ground is continually contested and a new animal symbol, the mammoth, is already in vision.

CONCLUSION

The symbols of animals that prominently act in the political landscape can display extreme flexibility as was shown on the example of the remote northern province in Russia. The analysis has proven that they are dynamic entities and that they can fluctuate from order to disorder or back to order again. As political symbols, animals may become detached from the original experiences that had produced them or they may re-emerge in new interpretations. The process of symbolizing species may demonstrate, as in the case of Sakha Yakutia, their very 'situate' character and reflect different phases of political negotiations with the center and the forming of identities. According to the situation, the animal symbols may also serve different goals of regional power. They reflect particularities or cross-cut each other and complement their meaning. Animal symbolism reveals a potential to constitute commonalities and has a unifying power in designing regional politics but may also tend to a greater diversification of the regional community and lose their unifying value.

As 'acting' symbols, animals of Sakha Yakutia confirm the thesis of being 'a center of immanent, self-generating or creative power' (Ingold 1994:2) and can display at the same time not only certain kinds of relationships among humans (Ingold 1980), but also state-region interactions. In their exchangeable nature, 'political' animals have a significant capital for adjustment strategies in a society, which undergoes societal and economic changes. Animals that render the idea of a post-Soviet northern region are not only domestic but distinctively native. As in other cases (Franklin 2006), the nativity of animals is applied to reject a previous marginalized regional status. The introduction of 'foreign' animals could be associated with a marginalized status of native animals and as endangering a group's identity. From the example of

Sakha Yakutia we see that animal politicization is a process, which may run along the lines of 'inclusion and exclusion' not only within society, but among animals as well.

The applied 'good to act' perspective could be also understood in terms of double movements in the political symbolism of animals. Particular animals become 'good to act' because of their particular significance as 'good to think'. At the same time, the shifting use of the animals and their relative symbolic importance has repercussions on the social and economic significance of 'real' animals. The appearance of animals as political symbols has caused remarkable cultural revival activities towards particular species as well as demand for policies of protection. In this sense animal symbols can be seen as transmitters and transformers of a society.

The ways of using and classifying them shows that the economic significance of animals in Sakha Yakutia plays a minor role in their political use in the region's building process. Political symbols are not necessarily connected to the material reality and are often the result of constructed meanings. Simultaneously, they are accompanied by the significance of 'real' animal essence that is, for example, made up of actual biological or behavioral traits of particular animals, or influenced by existing material, cultural or societal conditioning. Using the example of Sakha Yakutia we could observe that this discrepancy can make animal symbols more ambiguous and neutral. They could refer to different meanings as they do not operate in a clearly political form in support of one particular group in a multi-ethnic society. In the latter case, they can reach their symbolic limits, lose their 'neutrality' and become transformed into signs.

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