

Exploring the Concept of Mitho Pimachesowin

Pimachesowin for the Sakha (Yakut) People of Northeastern Siberia

Кри норуот Пимачисуин өйдөбүлэ Сибиир
хотугулуу-илин Саха норуотугар

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Abstract: This article provides a case study of the Sakha (Yakut), an Indigenous People in Northeastern Siberia, Russia, and their concept of *Aiyy Yorege*, which shares a similar meaning as *pimachesowin* (making a good life), a Cree word. The Sakha (Yakut) concept is reflected in the fundamental epic tale known as *Olonkho*, which constitutes the framework for the belief, culture, traditional knowledge, laws, and language of the Sakha (Yakut) People. The article introduces the main ideas of the tale and its narrative whereby people find the basis for their self-determination. Furthermore, this article elucidates the political events of the Soviet period and the ways it impacted the Sakha (Yakut) People with their traditional culture silenced under the policy of unification, and how this was followed by a period of resurgence in the late twentieth century after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throughout the article, parallels are drawn between the Sakha (Yakut) and the Cree People in Northern Saskatchewan, specifically in relation to the aspiration of sustaining a good way of living. This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.

Introduction

It is becoming an increasingly shared knowledge that Indigenous Peoples of the Circumpolar North share common beliefs, practices, and knowledge (Settee, 2013). This article contributes to that understanding through providing a case study that compares Indigenous Peoples in Northern Saskatchewan with those in Northeastern Russia, identifying common traits in their cultures, beliefs, and ways of living. Specifically, a concept similar to the Cree concept of *pimachesowin* (making a good living) can be found in the Sakha (Yakut) culture and its representation in oral traditions, particularly in the people's masterpiece—the body of knowledge and cosmology of the Sakha (Yakut) People that is embodied in the epic tale *Olonkho*.¹

Olonkho is inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as one of the oldest epic arts, compiling the constituents of belief, culture, traditional knowledge, laws, and language of the Sakha (Yakut) People. *Olonkho* represents, “the way of life of a small nation struggling for survival at times of political unrest and under difficult climatic and geographical conditions” (UNESCO, 2008, p. 1). The fundamental framework that came out of *Olonkho* is *Aiyy Yorege*, an approach for a sustainable way of living and for establishing the fundamentals of life. This article first provides an overview of the Cree concept of *pimachesowin*. Second, it provides the background for understanding the assimilation processes of the Sakha (Yakut) People in the late Soviet period. Then the article investigates the resurgence of the Sakha (Yakut) culture and the role of *Olonkho* and *Aiyy Yorege* in it during the late 1990s. The last section reveals similarities in the cultural approaches of the Sakha (Yakut) and Cree Peoples, and emphasizes their meanings for the self-determination of both Peoples.

Overview of the Cree Concept of *Pimachesowin*

Settee (2013) discusses that Indigenous knowledge systems include traditional forms of knowledge, passed from one generation to another, with ways of knowing, relationships, codes of conduct, and daily living, which have helped to sustain Indigenous communities for millennia. This knowledge is embedded in the Cree People's concept of *pimachesowin*, an ability to make a good living (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). Similar to Cree, Anishinaabe Peoples in North America have the concept of *bimaadiziwin*, or the Good Life, described as “a long and healthy life” (Gross, 2002, p. 15). Gross (2002) argues that the concept was revitalized as a means to rebuild Indigenous communities today, where people live with what

he terms the post-apocalypse stress syndrome (PASS). He refers to colonization as the apocalypse, i.e., the collapse of the existing world of Indigenous Peoples.

The concept of “making a good living” is especially relevant today in the context of the threat of environmental and technological disasters. The main cause of climate change is human activities, including resource extraction operations that are prominent in the North and disproportionately affect Indigenous Peoples living there (IPCC, n.d.). Shorter winter periods affect the ice cover, and, as a result, the mobility of animals and the opportunity for Indigenous people to hunt and sustain traditional lifestyles, which is an inextricable part of their lives. In this context, understanding the life concepts of different Indigenous Peoples is of critical importance and is fundamental for decolonization.

The Sakha (Yakut) People of Northeastern Siberia

Preserving their traditional cultures has been a priority for Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities in Siberia. The Sakha (Yakut) People are an ethnic group, located in Northeastern Siberia, Russia, who I am a part of. The Sakha (Yakut) People comprise the majority of the population in the federal state of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). This means that the Sakha (Yakut) People possess a separate administrative entity, a distinctive culture and language, and a right to self-determination that can be practised within the Republic. The lands are abundant with natural resources. However, in comparison with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the Sakha (Yakut) People have rather nominal rights, with no signed treaties, an absence of formal land rights, and no revenue shares from resource extraction. The state was created in April 1922 as the result of the Sakha (Yakut) activists' struggle for independence and state autonomy.

There is a distinction between international and Russian definitions of “Indigenous.” By granting the right for a separate administrative entity, the Soviet government also disenfranchised the Sakha (Yakut) People on “Indigenoussness,” setting a mere demographic criterion of 50,000 representatives to be officially considered “Indigenous” or “Small-numbered” Peoples. With a population of approximately 450,000, the Sakha (Yakut) People do not fit in this category; therefore, they have no Indigenous rights and benefits. This similarly applies to any Indigenous People in Russia with a population of more than 50,000. However, this definition is contrary to international law, in particular the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Convention, which both set the criteria for “Indigenous” based on the origin, history, and traditional lifestyle of a People and whether they have undergone a colonization process, regardless of the number of individuals.

The cosmological origin of the Sakha (Yakut) People is described in the myths of the Olonkho epic tale. The plots of the myths are unravelled in a three-dimensional world in which the upper world deities struggle with the lower world creatures, with the main idea of keeping stability for human life in the middle world. One of the theories of the Sakha (Yakut) People origin is that they came from in the Asian steppes where, as the result of interior battles, they travelled north to the basins of the Lena River to find pastoral lands for living. However, most researchers agree with the theory that the Sakha (Yakut) People's origin is based on the mixture of Turkic-Mongolian and Tungus-Manchurian tribes with local Paleasian tribes, most likely Ugro-Samoyedic (Gogolev, 1992). Thus, the Sakha (Yakut) People possibly have a mixed ancestry of Asian and European.

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Olonkho

Olonkho is the people's heroic epic tale that contains elements of folklore, rites, customs, and ceremonies. The Sakha (Yakut) People refer to Olonkho as the most ancient work, created since time immemorial, representing occurrences and ways of life of the people in broad artistic generalizations. Olonkho represents formation, development, and preservation of the people and their culture. The main ideas and images of Olonkho express the deepest life interests and expectations of people. It declares the Sakha (Yakut) self-identification as a nation but, most importantly, Olonkho provides the basis of the Sakha (Yakut) People's origin, which is transmitted into the resilience, perseverance, and adaptability of the people today.

The Sakha (Yakut) People have a holistic world view and origin story. The Sakha (Yakut) researcher Novikov (1995) explains,

The Sakha people, because of its small number, do not own messianic consciousness. Besides, the Sakha (Yakut) people did not have statehood. Their worldview is rather opposite. It reflects the idea of *panpsychism*—unity of nature and spirit. It means that, in the Sakha (Yakut) religion, there is no distinction and opposition between physical and spiritual. (p. 15)

In the Sakha (Yakut) history, mythology is a representation of the traditional Indigenous world view, including wisdom, moral values, ethics, and principles (Ergis, 1974). The world view presumably originated from the belief system of Tengrism, also called Zoroastrianism, with the main idea being a person's free choice to think good thoughts, tell good words, and make good deeds. Thus, the Sakha (Yakut) People worship *Tangara* (literally, the sky) that has a derived meaning of God in the system of *aiyy*, deities of the traditional beliefs, where he is

the highest in ranking. *Aiyy Tangara* means “God” or “Creator.” He is depicted as an elderly man and as the main deity in the hierarchy of heavenly arbiters, rulers of the three worlds' residents' fates (Baisheva et al., 2017). The Sakha (Yakut) belief model is represented with three worlds in the form of the mythological tree called *Aal Luuk Mas*: upper (the residence of good deities); middle (people's place of living); and lower (the residence of evil beings).² These “worlds” are the layers of the tree, located on the crown, in the trunk, and in the roots inhabited by supernatural beings, such as *itchi* (nature spirit masters), *aiyy* (celestial deities), and *abaahy* (evil beings), respectively. In this model, humans are residents of the middle world, which occurs as the outcome of the resistance between the upper and lower worlds.

Thousands of verses, with a variety of heroes and plots, comprise Olonkho. One of the principal characters who is believed to be a predecessor for the Sakha (Yakut) People is *Er Sogotokh*—literally “the man without any relatives,” sent off to the middle world—the protogenic hero and ancestor of the Sakha (Yakut) People. He is believed to be the first person on Earth, the son of the higher *aiyy* settled by the supreme deities in the middle world to populate the country, who meets resistance from the evil beings *abaahy* and has to fight to preserve peace and unity of his people. His father is *Aar Toion* (or also known as *Aiyy Tangara*, the Creator) and his mother is *Kubei Khotun*. In the folklore, *Aar Toion* is the constant epithet of the word Father and *Kubei Khotun* of the word Mother. According to Kulakovskiy (1979), *Aar Toion* is “the creator of the universe and of all humans, the head of the heavens and of the remaining gods” (p. 17). The overall idea of all the Olonkho plots revolve around the resistance of good and evil and the triumph of good over evil, where the main hero is sent from heaven for the main battle on the land. The battle ends with the main hero's win and a celebration in his name. This includes a summer solstice celebration called *Yhyakh*, and a marriage of the main hero to the daughter of the other deity.

Olonkho is more than simple mythology; it represents a higher level of aesthetic relation to reality and development of intangible culture. People worshiping nature created fantastic images of deities and spirits to whom they appealed with prayer and entreaty. The ancient Sakha People treated spirit masters with respect and reverence, and they held ceremonies for them. This mythological world view required people to perform certain rites. Thus, interconnected myth and rite became a basis for development of a special kind of poetic art—rite poetry. In the Sakha (Yakut) language, rite is called *sier duom*, where custom is *sier* and ceremony is *duom*; blessings or prayers performed at the ceremony are called *algys* (from the verb *algaa*—to bless, conjure, praise). With the help of *algys*, a person can be saved from negativity or can make their prayers be heard. According to the traditional world view, everything must be enlightened with *algys* words

assisting *sier duom* with special sacrifices of food and milk (Ergis, 1974). Being an independent genre of intangible cultural works of the Sakha (Yakut) People, *Olonkho* includes elements of other types of folklore. There are a number of story themes and images similar to characters of historical legends and songs. All these elements are organically included in *Olonkho*.

The Sakha (Yakut) “Pimachesowin”: A Way of Resilience?

Similar to the long-lasting attempts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Russia’s federal authorities, driven by the ideology of a unified nation, suppressed the traditional culture of the Sakha (Yakut) People. Specifically, a policy that was extremely critical with respect to the spiritual culture became the main challenge for the Sakha (Yakut) People during Soviet rule. Under the ideology of the “struggle against religion and its vestiges,” new Soviet campaigns with politicized ideological ideas took place all over the country, in which the Sakha (Yakut) traditional ceremonial culture underwent significant transformation and lost the basic connectedness to the belief model. The ceremonies and holidays lost their original contents and true meaning. This period was characterized by the neglect of culture and a tense relationship between the Sakha (Yakut) People and the Russian people in Yakutia. The situation was slightly different for people living in rural communities, where the pressure had less impact on the lifestyles of those keeping their traditional roots. In urban communities, however, the communist ideology of the equity of all nations and races became prevalent.

The Soviet system was based on the idea of nation-building, united with the ideology of centralization and a vertical system of power. Consequently, it accepted the ethnic diversity as part of nation-building yet propagated a unified ideology of one nation, Soviet people. This has allowed the Sakha (Yakut) and other ethnicities with a predominant population in one territory to form a sovereign federal entity, based predominately on their territorial division. A critical movement towards recognizing the culture and language began since the end of the twentieth century. In general, a declaration of the national revitalization of the languages’ program and territorial independence raised national and ethical awareness and seeded the predeterminants for language and culture revitalization (Sleptsov & Vailyeva, 2000). President Mikhail Nikolaev, the first president of the Sakha Republic, became a role model who accelerated the enshrinement of the language policy in the Law on Languages of the Sakha Republic in October 1992 (*Law on languages in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)*, 1992). This law occurred as a consequence of an earlier enacted constitution of the Sakha Republic, which guaranteed the independence of the people in the territory in accordance with federal legislation.

All these movements in legislature facilitated the process of revitalization of the written art work, including the most prominent, the *Olonkho* epic. The physical representation of *Olonkho* as the phenomenon of the Sakha (Yakut) People’s self-determination through culture became the embodiment of the national holiday *Yhyakh* as a ceremonial national holiday. In *Olonkho*, *Yhyakh* plays the role of celebration of the universe. It can be arranged both in the sky and on the Earth. It is believed that the Supreme Universe Founder *Urung Aar Toion* (the Father) married the daughter of *aiyy* living in the upper world (the Mother), and arranged a big wedding in the form of *Yhyakh*. In one of the *Olonkho* tales, *Kuruubai Haannaah Kulun Kullustuur* is described as a heavenly feast. The ritual details of the celebration were important, including the specific elements used—in the middle of a wide glade, the sacred pole named *serge* was raised. Around the pole were placed twelve *tuhulge* (a designated area bounded by wooden poles and ropes made of horse hair, a sacred square where rituals and celebrations take place) and young birches were planted. Numerous families of *aiyy* tribes gathered together, and the strongest men competed in different sports activities, including wrestling and jumping. In honour of the supreme deities, songs were devoted, and spells are improvised. The visitors were treated with the traditional wooden goblets called *choron*, filled with fat foamy *kumys* (fermented mare’s milk). Epic *Yhyakh* proceeded for seven days. Horse racing and other kinds of competitions were arranged. In general, any *Olonkho* story plot’s climax is the description of a traditional celebration of *Yhyakh*, which symbolizes the beginning of a happy life for all the Sakha (Yakut) People (Utkin, 1998).

Despite a long, difficult history and repeated foreign influences, the Sakha (Yakut) holiday *Yhyakh* has kept the ritually ceremonial form, with round dances, *kumys* drinking, and horse racing competitions, which later became core practices of *Yhyakh* (see Figure 1). Today, the summer celebration of *Yhyakh* is a national self-expression of the spirit and creativity of the people and their aesthetic and ethnic ideals. The holiday brings out the values of family and connection of all people as a unity, which implies that people from one nation are one family. This is emphasized with ceremonial round dances, where people dance in circles and sing along together repeating and echoing a lead singer. Among other traditions of *Yhyakh* are the ceremony of “feeding” the spirits, praying to the supernatural beings, and singing gratitude songs to the patrons of horses and horned cattle that are the traditional companions of the Sakha (Yakut) People. All of these provide a sense of common belief that strengthens the self-identification of people as a nation.



Figure 1a. The round dance at the Yhyakh celebration. Source <http://yakutia.com/tourism/835/>



Figure 1b. Inside the circle during the round dance at the Yhyakh celebration. Photo Author, 2015

For me personally, the first realization of being a carrier of a different yet unique ancestry and culture came during my first Yhyakh in 1996, where a number of people gathered together in a circle and sang a traditional song in the Sakha (Yakut) language. That made a strong impression on me as a child when I understood I have a bigger family, i.e., members with the same ideas, beliefs, and world view. I grew up in an urban environment, but the traditional way of life has always been present in my life. It is only the realization that came to me later. Since childhood, we would go out to the land to do any kind of activities. For the Sakha (Yakut) People, there are essentially “two seasons”—preparation for winter and winter itself. This is conditioned by the extreme climate conditions, where winter is nine months long with an average temperature of -40°C and summer is simply too short. Once it begins to warm up outside, my family and I go out on the land because there is always something to do. In May, we start picking herbs and plants; from June to August, it is hay harvesting, and berry and mushroom picking; in September, people harvest farm products and butcher cattle.

Every summer, I spent time at my grandparents’ off-grid country house in a reserved area that is relatively close, yet quite secluded from the urban area. There was no power and no heat; they had cows and horses to sustain their lives. Dairy and farm products were the substantial source of their diet. My grandparents played a significant role in me becoming a carrier of the traditional knowledge and culture. My grandfather was always teaching me not to be idle. For him and his ancestors, constant physical labour was a lifestyle. It helped them to maintain their spiritual and mental stability in difficult life conditions. He always lived according to the rules of nature, where the main rules were to respect nature, not to waste anything, and be modest. For instance, as children, we would want to play outside in open land, but grandfather would forbid us to talk loudly or scream, especially in the evening; he used to say that we would disturb the spirits of the land. We were not supposed to go out to the forest in the evening either, as *abaahy*, the evil spirits, would be out hunting for food. In response, my grandmother was always teaching us to feed the good spirits of fire and nature called *itchi*, i.e., the protectors of human beings and land. One of the rituals if you’re going to travel was to place the fried bread *alaadi* on the side of the road; or before starting an open fire you’re supposed to provide food for the fire to befriend the spirits and receive their blessings. People believe that everything has its spirits, and everyone needs to communicate with them.

Language was, and continues to be, one of the main prerequisites for maintaining the traditional lifestyle. I was taught the native Sakha (Yakut) language since I was born; it is my first and native language. The connection of language and culture is inseparable. My grandparents, mother and father, and all my relatives speak Sakha (Yakut) language. This is partly due to the fact that they

were raised in the villages, where the language bond continues to be strong. I believe that speaking the language provides you with a thread to deeper understanding of the culture, epic tales, and nature. The ideology of the three worlds and the spirits continue to be present in our everyday life up until today.

Parallels to Cree Culture

The traditional celebration Yhyakh, along with the wider traditional belief and mythology, outlines the ancient traditions of mutual help, which is part of ayii yorege, the sacred teachings, which also represents mercy as a national trait of the Sakha (Yakut) People (Novikov, 1995), and correlates with notions of northern solidarity and tolerance developed by Indigenous scholars (Robbek, 1996). This bears similarities with the Cree term of relationship values *wâhkôhtowin*. Sette (2013) writes “Our symbol of the circle reflects the equality of all people and their capability to care for, nurture, protect, and heal the people and the land” (p. 12). In addition, according to Macdougall (2006), the adoption of *wâhkôhtowin* permits an interpretation of socio-cultural and economic activity as part of a larger cultural world view: “a set of values encompassed by an overarching world view based on familial—especially inter-familial—connectedness, *wahkootowin* established appropriate social behaviours that, in turn, affected economic decisions” (p. 434).

In fact, there are a number of similarities between the Cree and Sakha (Yakut) culture. Similar to Cree, there is one Creator. In Cree, it is *wiyôhtâwimâw* (the Father/Creator). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) emphasize,

the relationship between the Creator and First Nations peoples is understood to be like that which exists between the various members of a family and is thus governed by laws of *wâhkôhtowin*, laws detailing the duties and responsibilities which take effect for each member of the family unit. (p. 18)

Thus, we can see that the concepts of Creator and kinship are closely interconnected. Particularly, the concept of family is a conceptual framework through which relations between nations and peoples are represented where, “the Creator created different peoples and placed them on different lands all around the world” (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 19). It follows that there is an interconnection between the Creator and land because people do not own the land, but the Father/Creator does.

The same idea of spirits is found in the Cree and Sakha (Yakut) culture in which the First Nations rely on the spiritual strength represented by the Creator’s children—the spirit community that surrounds them, such as those of the eagle,

the buffalo, the wind, the thunder, and the trees. Despite different backgrounds, the Cree ceremonies provide similar purposes. Sweetgrass, fire, the pipe, and tobacco serve as the primary connection between peoples and their Creator and His Creation. Spiritual traditions help to connect or become the medium for people to communicate with and relate to the Creator and His Creation, and for the connectedness of people to Mother Earth and her forces.

There is another parallel in the Cree culture where stories have important value for understanding Indigenous Knowledge. Settee (2013) emphasizes that “stories have taught Indigenous Peoples how to conduct themselves in a good way for the good of the community” (p. 3). The Elders tell stories of the Cree People’s creation, including the stories about the great flood as the consequence of people’s misbehaviour and abuse of ways of life, which leads to Grandfather Spirit in one way or another. Stories teach us to live in accordance with the Traditional Knowledge in the modern world. *Wîsahkêcâhk*, a Cree culture hero, created men and women with the help of the Creator, and some stories include the help of animals, such as otter, beaver, and muskrat. This is similar to *Olonkho*, where animals are an inseparable part of every story, including a horse being the sacred animal and one of the deities of the upper world. We can see that *Olonkho* is also a representation of knowledge transfer through generations.

Conclusion

The study of the interconnection of beliefs and mythology of the Sakha (Yakut) and the Cree People emphasizes the mutual foundation of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge. Both the Cree and Sakha (Yakut) People have one Creator who populated the land with the help of humans. People and nature with spirits are inseparable concepts; there is no division between the universe of humans and the universe of animals or spirits. They and people themselves are interconnected, which is described by the concepts *wâhkôhtowin* in Cree and *ayii yorege* in the Sakha (Yakut) culture. Stories in both languages have a special place in the explanation of the world and origin of people.

However, for the Sakha (Yakut) People, these have an embodiment in one epic tale that is *Olonkho*, the main source of the people’s world view, which is strongly interconnected with mythology and belief of the Sakha (Yakut) People. In general, the epic tale explains the origin of the Sakha (Yakut) People and represents the idea of a man overcoming impediments and preserving his identity, language, and culture through belief. *Olonkho* strengthens belief in humans, and our power and our capacity to overcome everything. The principal idea of *Olonkho* is the establishment of a sustainable life and eradication of the evil in the universe, implying the idea of a fight for social justice for Indigenous Peoples. The content could be described, interpreted, and integrated in various ways but nevertheless it

represents a social and historical phenomenon. Olonkho is archaic but remains an actual way of thinking and being. It provides an understanding of collectivity as the prerequisite of social integration. Mythology and belief are collective memory, which preserves ancient spiritual experience. Mythology and belief provide an understanding of the sense of origin, which establishes and strengthens the Sakha (Yakut) *pimachesowin*, the way of making a good life.

Notes

1. This article contains ideas, views and opinions of the author that might be different from others.
2. Illustrations of the Upper World, Middle World *Yhyakh*, and Lower World, from *Olonkho Worlds and the World Tree* (1979) *Aal Luuk Mas*, from a series *The Sakha (Yakut) Heroic Epos Olonkho*, by Timofei A. Stepanov, can be found here https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/_awHKUGwuhiliQQ and at the National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) <http://www.sakhamuseum.ru/>

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Acknowledgements

To my grandparents.

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