

PROMOTING AND SPREADING SAKHA ETHNOCULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE MEDIATION OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE: THE PHENOMENON OF YAKUT CINEMA

GIORGIA POMAROLLI*

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8593-021X>

UNIVERSITY OF VERONA

Abstract: The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is nowadays one of the main centres of cinematographic production in the Russian Federation. Films are often low-budget and boast a wide spectrum of genres. They are mostly shot in the Sakha language and draw on local history, heroic epic, cosmogony, heritage, costumes, and spiritual values. In the present work the phenomenon of Yakut cinema is investigated as a means to promote and consolidate the ethnocultural Sakha identity in the Republic. To explore this issue, I briefly describe the sociolinguistic context, featuring the Sakha Republic. Further, I provide an overview of Yakut cinema, examining the process of its rapid development, and identifying its main themes and characteristics. Then, I discuss the resonance of Yakut films, which goes beyond the local context. A dozen of Yakut movies have screened at international film festivals, reaching out to the global audience by means of indirect translation, i.e., from Sakha to English, via the Russian language. As a result, the Russian language plays a pivotal role in the circulation of Sakha cinema, and hence, Sakha identity on the world stage.

Keywords: Yakut cinema; Sakha ethnocultural identity; Sakha language; Russian language; intermediary language

1. Introduction

In recent years Russian cinema has witnessed a sharp rise in regional film production. Regional films are to be understood as films made by a producer and a film crew based outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg – the traditional centres of Russian cinematographic production – and distributed to cinemas primarily in their own region with no mediation of a film distributor (Fontaine 2018; Kravchenko 2022). The phenomenon of regional cinemas involves, particularly, the Republic of Tatarstan, the Sverdlovsk Region, the Kemerovo Region, the Republic of Bashkortostan, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the Omsk Region, the Samara Region, the Irkutsk

* giorgia.pomarolli@univr.it



Region, and the Ulyanovsk Region (Egorova 2017). Generally speaking, regional films aim at exploring and making visible the traditional culture of peoples of Russia by claiming an indigenous narrative based on local knowledge, folklore, spiritual values, and worldviews. In this respect, regional cinematography reflects the aspirations of ethnic groups and peripheral regions to promote and consolidate their identity within Russia and in the globalized world.

Over the last years several festivals have been organized annually to develop Russian regional cinematography and popularize it abroad. See, for example, the Baikal International Film Festival “People and Environment,” established in 1999 on the initiative of public environmental organizations of the Irkutsk and Chita Regions, and the Republic of Buryatia, now in its 25th edition; the Cheboksary International Film Festival, that has been held in the Chuvash Republic since 2008; the Arctic International Film Festival “Golden Raven,” that takes place in Anadyr City in the Chukotka Autonomous Region and is now in its 8th edition; and the Yakutsk International Film Festival, that was opened in the Republic of Sakha in 2013. These events are supported by local governments, together with the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and/or the Union of Cinematographers of the Russian Federation (UCRF). In 2022 the UCRF witnessed the establishment of the Regional Cinema Support Fund, which is intended to support and develop regional cinema, increase its competitiveness, as well as popularize it both in Russia and worldwide (Ustav FPRK 2022: 3). At the end of June 2023, in Kaliningrad the Fund organized the First Forum of Regional Filmmaking “New Vector,” with the purpose of bringing together filmmakers from different regions of Russia, exchanging experiences and best practices, as well as creating an open platform for dialogue between the film industry and the State authorities (Forum Regional’ nogo kinematografa “Novyy Vektor,” n.d.). Along with the Government of the Kaliningrad Region, the Forum enjoyed the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and the Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives, which confirms the commitment of the central government in supporting the development of the regional film industry.

This paper discusses the phenomenon of indigenous cinema, taking into consideration the case of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), which boasts the most prolific Russian regional cinematic industry.

2. The Sakha Republic: A Sociolinguistic Overview

With over three million square kilometres, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is the most extended subnational unit of the Russian Federation (it covers one sixth of its entire area). It is located in the North-Eastern part and is firstly well known for its extreme climate, as well as for the rich diversity of its natural resources, i.e., diamonds, gold, silver, oil, coal, etc. According to the 2021 Census, the population of the Republic amounts to 995,686 inhabitants (the density is only 0.32 per square kilometre) with a major concentration in the cities, mainly in the capital, Yakutsk. The titular ethnic

group of the Republic is the Sakha people or Yakuts¹, who nowadays represent around 55% of the entire population (469,348 people). Next to Sakha, the Republic is inhabited by representatives of the so-called Indigenous small-numbered people of the North, Siberia and the Far East (*korennye malochislennyye narody Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka*) among which Evenks (24,334), Evens (13,233), Dolgans (2,147), Yukaghirs (1,510), and Chukchee (709), that amount overall to approximately 5% of the Republic's population. The largest non-indigenous group is composed by Russians (276,986), who constitute around 32%, followed by Kyrgyz, Ukrainians, Buryats, and other groups².

The linguistic landscape of Yakutia is quite unique: given the vital interaction of Sakha, Russian and other Northern languages, one can speak of consistent bilingualism, if not trilingualism (e.g., Russian-Sakha-Even, Russian-Sakha-Yukaghir, Russian-Sakha-Chukchi; cf. Robbek 1998). If we focus on the Sakha language, another trait of uniqueness emerges: as Borsaro (2022, 28) pointed out, “among the indigenous and minority languages spoken in the Russian North, [Sakha] has a quite high number of speakers, not resembling the situation of a typical indigenous endangered language”³. According to the 2021 Census, in Yakutia the Sakha language is spoken as native language by 474,162 people, of which 93% are Yakuts, 4% Evenks, and 2% Evens (approximately 93% of them know also Russian; cf. Rosstat 2022).

The Sakha language is a Turkic language, that is written using the Cyrillic script (since 1939). It developed deviant features if compared to its sister Turkic languages due to its centuries-old isolation from the Turkic main branch, and to the contact with non-Turkic languages, such as Mongolic, Tungusic, and Siberian languages (Pakendorf and Novgorodov 2009; Petrova 2011).

Sakha are not indigenous to Yakutia. Most scholars agree that their ancestors moved from an area around Baikal steppes, in Southern Siberia, in the 13th or 14th century, as a result of the tribes' movement caused by the rise of the Mongol Empire (Pakendorf and Novgorodov 2009; Ushnitskiy 2016)⁴. The first Russian contact dates back to the 17th century, precisely to 1632, when a fort was founded in Yakutsk, which soon became a Russian-speaking city (Ferguson and Sidorova 2018). At that time Sakha were concentrated mainly in central Yakutia between the Lena, Amga and Aldan rivers (Pakendorf 2007); their expansion over the territory of nowadays Yakutia, and particularly in Yakutsk, occurred between the 17th and 18th centuries (Pakendorf 2007; Pakendorf and Novgorodov 2009). As documented by Ferguson and Sidorova (2018, 28), at the time of the Russian Empire, the Sakha language enjoyed a very peculiar

¹ ‘Sakha’ is the ethnonym that Sakha people use to designate themselves, while ‘Yakut’ is the Russian denomination which derives from the Evenki word *ya:ko, ekod*, (cf. Ushnitskiy 2016, Johanson 2021). In this paper I will use both terms interchangeably, since the use of the ethnonym ‘Yakut’ has a well-established tradition in anglophone literature (cf. Pakendorf 2007).

² All data are retrieved from the 2021 All-Russian Population Census (Rosstat 2022). It should be noted that, out of the total population living in the Republic, 146,918 informants did not declare their ethnicity.

³ Indeed, although it has been described by UNESCO as potentially vulnerable, Sakha language is not considered in a state of immediate risk (UNESCO 2021).

⁴ For an effective overview of the main theories on the ethnogenesis of Sakha people cf. Borsaro 2022.

status: during the 19th century, in Yakutsk, which back then had turned into an important centre of trade and industry, the use of Sakha was prominent, even among Russian settlers, functioning as a lingua franca. If in the early period of the Soviet Union, schooling in Saka language was promoted, things changed radically due to the strict Soviet policies of Russification which reached their peak in the 1930s. In these years the Sakha population suffered a demographic decline, particularly in Yakutsk, due to the massive settlement of Russians and Ukrainians who moved in the area to pursue the plan of industrialization. Sakha ceased to be spoken in the public spaces in Yakutsk and other urban centres, and was downgraded to non-progressive, a language of the rural population (Ferguson and Sidorova 2018: 29; Ventsel 2016: 17).

The attitude towards the Sakha language changed radically in the 1990s: after issuing a declaration of sovereignty in September 1990, a constitution of the Republic was instituted in April 1992, where, in article 46, the Saka language was conferred the status of state language (*gosudarstvennyy yazyk*) next to Russian (cf. Konstitutsiya Respubliki Sakha (Yakutiya)). In the “Law on languages in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia),” promulgated in October 1992, article 4 established that “the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) provides state protection of the Sakha language and takes care to expand its social and cultural functions”⁵ (Zakon Respubliki Sakha (Yakutiya) ot 16 oktyabrya 1992 goda N. 1170-XII). This period corresponded to a sort of “Sakha renaissance” (Ferguson and Sidorova 2016: 29), or to what Ventsel refers to as “Sakha nationalistic euphoria” (2016: 17): the Sakha language was restored in education and public sphere in general, while Yakuts took over dominant position in both politics and culture. The 1990s witnessed a demographic shift in urban population, especially in Yakutsk: if on the one hand, many Russians emigrated to central Russia, on the other, many ethnic Sakha moved from the villages to the capital. It is estimated that by 2010 Yakuts outnumbered those identifying as ethnically Russian in Yakutsk, with Sakha representing 47% of the city population and Russians at 38% (Ferguson and Sidorova 2018: 30). This ultimately resulted in the Sakha language becoming prevalent in the cities, especially Yakuts.

Nowadays the Sakha language is taught both in school and university, and is used in newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts, websites, TV channels, theatre, and films. As pointed out by Ventsel (2016: 112), at present the Sakha language represents “a ticket to success and entry into the local elite,” being it political, economic, and cultural.

3. The *Kinoboom* in the Sakha Republic

In 2018 the Nevafilm Research released a report commissioned by the European Audiovisual Observatory⁶ which provided an overview of the development of the Russian film industry for the five-year period 2013-2017. The data supplied in the

⁵ All translations from Russian are by the Author.

⁶ The European Audiovisual Observatory is the body of the Council of Europe devoted to collecting and distributing information about the audiovisual industries in Europe. Since the aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation is no longer a member state of the Council of Europe, or of the European Audiovisual Observatory.

report show that the Republic of Sakha has been the leader in regional film production (with 64 films released in the period considered), followed by the Republic of Buryatia (22 films), the Republic of Tatarstan (16 films), the Republic of Bashkortostan (9 films), and the Irkutsk Region (6 films; cf. Fontaine 2018: 11). Considering the population of the Sakha Republic – as we have already said, a little less than one million inhabitants – the figure is quite notable: more than half of the Russian films made outside Moscow and St. Petersburg are realized in the Sakha Republic (Yegorov-Crate 2023). It is estimated that an average of 6 films per year has been going within the Republic in the last thirty years (Damiens and Mészáros 2022).

Yakut cinema emerged in the late 1980s-early 1990s and was initiated by a group of semi-professionals working in the national⁷ broadcasting company and theatre, as well as some Yakutia-born former students of the Moscow-based Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, i.e., Vasiliy Parfënov and Aleksey Romanov⁸, who in this period returned to Yakutia (cf. Damiens 2015; Leont'eva and Anisimov 2021; Savvina 2021). The date most commonly identified as marking the birth of Yakut cinema is 1992, when the national film company, Sakhafilm, was established, together with the Sakha Filmmakers' Union. The first Sakhafilm production was *The Middle World (Orto Doydu)*, Russian title: *Seredinnyy mir*; 1993) by Aleksey Romanov, who is considered to be the first professional director of Yakutia. The two-hours-long film traces the life of a young Sakha man and displays the rites of passage characterizing the Sakha society. As highlighted by Mészáros (2022), the film “builds upon the best traditions and stylistic language of Soviet cinematography, which the director mastered at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, and yet it still provides genuinely Sakha content.” These are years of great experimentation: in the five years period 1995-1999, Sakhafilm produced a dozen films of diverse genre and variable duration (from 26 up to 85 minutes; cf. Sakhafilm, n.d.), which were mainly broadcasted on the local television. These films were all low budget, a distinctive feature of Yakut cinema that will persist in the years ahead. Meanwhile, in Yakutsk a National Film Archive and a Cinema Museum opened (respectively in 1996 and 1997).

The new millennium witnessed a rapid and creative boom that led to the emergence of what is nowadays called *Sakhawood* – in analogy with Hollywood, Bollywood, and Nollywood. Alongside with Sakhafilm, a dozen of private companies arose (among them, Almazfilm, Arctic Cinema, Urgel V, Art-line, Argys-film, DetSat, Tuima-film, Magdis, ART Doydu). Films improved in quantity and quality, also thanks to the technological breakthrough and the shift to digital cameras. In these years the Yakut cinematic industry starts to attract directors and actors with little or no professional training, though driven by a great enthusiasm and motivation.

In the years 2000-2010, the first film to enjoy a huge commercial success within the Republic was *The Black Mask (Khara maaska)*, Russian title: *Chërnaya Maska*) directed by Nikita Arzhakov and released by Sakhafilm in 2002. The film is an

⁷ Throughout the article, I will use the term ‘national’ in the sense of its Russian counterpart (i.e., ‘natsional’nyy’), which is closer in meaning to ‘ethnic,’ ‘indigenous,’ ‘local,’ and therefore pertaining the Republic of Sakha.

⁸ Romanov is the director of what is considered to be the very first Yakut film, *Maapa*, that was realized in 1986 as his graduation project.

adaptation of the homonymous novel by the Sakha writer Yegor Neymokhov and is based on real events that occurred in Yakutia. It is a crime drama that tells the story of a criminal gang that was active in Yakutia in the post-war period. Another film worth mentioning is *My love* (Russian title: *Lyubov' moya*) directed by Sergey Potapov – known as the “Sakha Tarantino” (cf. Sibiryakova 2022) –, produced by Almazfilm and released in Yakut cinemas in 2004. The film combines features of a thriller and a social drama and tells of two brothers, living at the edge of Sakha society, who dream of robbing a bank and escaping abroad. The film enjoyed a splendid financial success – it grossed around 450,000 roubles (4,600 euros), with production costs being 120,000 roubles (1,200 euros).

In 2012 Sardana Savvina and Lyubov Borisova founded the association of independent filmmakers Sakha Cinema Club, in order to promote Yakut films in the Republic and build a channel of direct communication between professionals and the local community (Ivanova 2022). Meanwhile, Yakut cinema begins opening to the outside. Starting from 2013, Yakutsk has been hosting the Yakutsk International Film Festival (YIFF)⁹, whose goal is to “develop cultural exchange and creative collaboration between filmmakers all over the world” and to “improve the overall image of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)” (Festagent, n.d.). In this period various film festivals devoted to Yakut cinema started to be organized in several Russian cities, i.e., Kazan (Republic of Tatarstan), Kyzyl (Republic of Tuva). The year 2016 represents a turning point in Yakut cinema history, marking its official acknowledgment on the global stage: *The Bonfire* (*Kutaa*, Russian title: *Kostër na vetru*), Dmitriy Davidov’s debut film, received the Best Drama award at ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in Toronto. The film deals with redemption and revenge and tells of the encounter between a man who lost his son and an orphaned boy.

Since the very beginning of its short history, Yakut film production has been proven to be extremely diverse, encompassing a wide spectrum of genres: historical drama, mystical drama, crime drama, noir, thriller, comedy, romance, horror, as well as art house.

Films are primarily aimed at a local audience. As stated by Sakha producer Sardana Savvina,

“Our cinema is first and foremost something that is beneficial for ourselves [Sakha people – G.P.], because it speaks about us, about our life. It keeps track of our life and culture, it preserves our language, our cultural codes, our symbols for future generations.” (Savvina 2021)

The orientation towards the Sakha viewer finds confirmation in four main factors: first of all, the majority of films are made in the Sakha language; secondly, they are

⁹ The YIFF is realized with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and the Russian Cinematographers’ Union, and sponsored by the Ministry for Culture and Spiritual Development of the Sakha Republic. From 2013 to 2017 the festival took place uninterruptedly. The 6th edition of the YIFF, which was supposed to be held in 2020, was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The authorities of the Republic announced a new edition of the festival to be held in Spring 2024.

always shot locally, and depict the breathtaking landscapes of Yakutia; thirdly, they are often adapted from literary works, written by Sakha authors; finally, films draw on local customs, heritage, and culture (both in its material and spiritual manifestations). The main themes which find reflection in the Yakut cinematic discourse are daily life of the Yakut people, social and family issues, the relationship between man and nature, as well as the life in urban areas *versus* life in the desolated tundra.

Films convey an aesthetics of authenticity. As emphasized by Oturgasheva (2021: 177), such an aesthetics is achieved via multiple factors, i.e., via camerawork, location shooting, as well as realia of everyday life which are all-pervasive in the films. A key element that heightens naturalness is the participation of actors who did not receive any formal training. In some recent interviews, director Dmitriy Davydov declared: “I live in the Amga region, in Amga village. I shoot in the same place, and I only involve local people in my films: friends, acquaintances, and other residents of the village” (Davydov, n.d.); in addition: “most of actors are villagers. I like working with them because they are amateurs, and I can mould them into anything. Professionals often have their own style” (Davydov 2021).

It may happen that it is also directors who are self-trained. Let us take, for example, Davydov himself. At present he is one of the most acclaimed directors both in the Sakha Republic and abroad¹⁰. However, it is interesting to note that until 2021 Davydov conjugated filmmaking with teaching in a public school. In a recent interview he explains how he approached the world of cinema:

“I worked at a school and led a study group for teenagers where we filmed some videos – that was before 2011-2012. Just then, a boom in local cinema began in Yakutia, and there were full houses. I watched these films and realized that, in principle, I could shoot at the same level, and that I also had something to say.” (Davydov, n.d.)

The same goes for Lyubov Borisova and Stepan Burnashëv, who entered the cinematic industry as amateurs. Borisova is a director, screenwriter, and producer, who has a background in economics. Among her best productions as director and writer there are *The Sun Above Me Never Sets* (*Min ürdüber kün khahan da kïrbet*; Russian title: *Nado mnoyu solnce ne saditsya*; 2019) and *Don't Bury Me Without Ivan* (*Kereni körbüt*; Russian title: *Ne choronite menya bez Ivana*; 2022). Burnashëv used to be a professional athlete, former champion in kettlebell lifting of Yakutia. He became a director in 2009, after graduating in informatics (cf. Burnashëv 2023). Among the others, he directed and wrote *First love* (*Mannaygy taptal*; Russian title: *Pervaya lyubov'*; 2015), *Black Snow* (*Khara Khaar*; Russian title: *Chërnyy sneg*; 2020), and *Ayta* (2022).

Besides the consistent presence of directors and actors who did not receive any formal training, another characteristic feature of Sakha cinema is represented by the budget on which directors can count for realizing their films, which is generally very

¹⁰ Besides *The Bonfire* (2016), Davydov directed, wrote and produced *Scarecrow* (*Otohut*; Russian title: *Pugalo*; 2020), *Youth* (*Eder saas*; Russian title: *Molodost'*; 2022), and other films.

tiny¹¹. This aspect ultimately may have a significant impact on the films' aesthetics. As stated by Borisova, "small budget means very small film crew... it means that everyone makes a lot of work... Also, if you cannot [afford] a lot of decorations, you will [adjust] your script to existing objects, existing locations... which makes you think more creatively" (Klassiki 2021).

4. Reaching out to the Global Audience

As suggested by several scholars, the promotion and success of Yakut cinema have to be interpreted in the light of the Sakha renaissance that characterized the post-Soviet ideological shift within the Republic, and whose aim was (and is) to enforce and consolidate the ethnocultural Sakha identity (Damiens 2014-2015; McGinity-Peebles 2022). There is no surprise, then, that the internal market is its first target. As stated by cinema critic Anton Dolin,

"The true essence of Yakut cinema is its deep connection to the daily life, issues, and cultural richness of the Republic of Sakha. ...This authenticity is what draws local audiences in droves, making even the riskiest and most experimental of films profitable within Yakutia, whereas they might be deemed too adventurous to produce or distribute in cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg." (retrieved from: Dergacheva 2023)

While Yakut films find a dedicated audience within the Republic, they are often met with hesitation by the Russian mass public. In an interview with the Russian channel KinoTV, on occasion of the upcoming premiere of his film *Nuuccha* in September 2021, director and screenwriter Vladimir Munkuev describes the relationship that the cinema from Yakutia has with both the Yakut and the Russian audiences:

[journalist] - Does the Yakut cinematography consider itself part of the Russian cinematography?

[Vladimir Munkuev] - No. Why? In Yakutia we still don't understand whether we are appealing to the Russian audience. The film *Scarecrow* did well at festivals... The sophisticated audience went to see it... but the usual mass audience don't watch this type of films... Why?

[j.] - Our [Russian] usual mass audience don't watch these films. These are not the films that dominate the box office.

[V.M.] - You see, in Yakutia the average filmgoer doesn't watch Russian comedies... People watch blockbusters but they don't understand Russian comedies. Which is why Yakut cinema has boomed. Why do you think people watch Yakut films? Because they

¹¹ It is not unusual that directors produce their own films with their own money (this is the case, for example, with Davydov and Burnashëv). Within the whole cinematic production, the only exceptions in terms of budget are two films: the first is *By The Will Of Genghis Kahn* (original title in Russian: *Tayna Chingiskhaana*) by Andrei Borisov (2009) which represented the first Yakut blockbuster, realized through an international joint production, involving Urgel V Production Company (Yakutia, Russia), Nyamgaava Film Production (Mongolia), and Brown Wolf Production (USA); the second high-budget film is *Tygyñ Darkhan*, directed by Nikita Arzhakov and released in 2020.

talk about them. People understand that those films talk about things we have here, in our language, and that the problems and the mentality are completely those of the Yakuts. While Russian comedies, yes, they're interesting, but they relate to something alien to us, to something that exists on another planet. (Munkuev 2021)

Munkuev's words confirm the uniqueness of the Yakut cinema, its being a vehicle of the *Sakhaness*, and thus its orientation primarily to the local audience. However, in the same interview, Munkuev clearly states:

Yakut cinema only has one mission, to be watched by everyone, by the whole world. (Munkuev 2021)

As a matter of fact, in the latest years, the big screen has become an opportunity for Yakut directors to carry on an open dialogue with the Russian and foreign audience (Oturgasheva 2021: 175). On the heels of Davydov's *Bonfire*, since 2016 some Yakut films have been enjoying a great success at several Russian and international festivals. This is the case, for example, with Tat'yana Everstova's *His Daughter* (*Kini kyyha*, Russian title: *Ego doch'*; Grand Prize at the Festival "Window on Europe" in 2016), Eduard Novikov's *The Lord Eagle* (*Toyon kyyl*, Russian title: *Tsar'-ptitsa*; Golden St. George at the Moscow International Film Festival and Best Artistic Contribution at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2018), Borisova's *The Sun Above Me Never Sets* (Audience Award at the Moscow International Film Festival in 2019), Davydov's *Scarecrow* (Grand Prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival in Sochi and Faith Film Award at the Tromsø International Film Festival in 2020), and finally Munkuev's *Nuuccha* (among others, Best Director Prize at the Kinotavr Film Festival and Grand Pix in the East-West section at the 55th International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary in 2021). This success can be explained with the fact that, while bringing forward an idea of *Sakhaness*, Yakut cinema ultimately manages to position itself "at the intersection of multiple identities and film cultures – Asian, Arctic, Russian, Indigenous – so it is able to appeal to diverse audiences and film networks" (McGinity-Peebles 2021).

The possibility to engage the supranational (e.g., Russian) and international viewers is operationally made possible by the mediation of the Russian language, which plays a key role in propagating Sakha films and showcasing Sakha identity beyond the borders of the Republic. Adding Russian subtitles to Yakut films can significantly enhance accessibility for the Russian audience. In some cases, films may also be dubbed into Russian – in the form of simil-sync (voiceover) or, less frequently, lip-sync –; this allows the storyline and dialogue to be understood by a broader audience. However, Russian functions here not only as a target language. In most cases it serves as the intermediary language through which the English translation (in the form of subtitling) is realized, in order to facilitate international distribution at festivals and on online platforms, and ultimately provide Sakha films with exposure to the global audience. In its functioning as an intermediary language for translating Yakut films (from Sakha to Russian, and from Russian to English), the Russian language acts as a bridge to give full voice to an ethnic group that is seldom known outside the borders of Russia.

5. Conclusion

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yakut cinema has been experiencing a rapid and creative boom that has led to the emergence of an indigenous film industry, known as *Sakhawood*. The flourishing of Yakut cinema must be interpreted as part of a broader strategy to reconceptualize and consolidate the Sakha identity in the post-Soviet era. The promotion of the Sakha culture is conveyed in films by various identity markers, i.e., language, locations, themes, sound of traditional instruments, etc. While films are primarily oriented to the local audience, in recent years we have witnessed the ambition of Yakut filmmakers to be acknowledged by the Russian and world film industry. The spread of Yakut films beyond the borders of the Sakha Republic is made possible thanks to the Russian language, that serves as a mediating language in the circulation of Sakha cinema, and hence Sakha identity, on the supranational and international stage.

In response to the invasion of Ukraine, major Hollywood film studios suspended film distribution in Russia. This is a heavy blow, considering that prior to February 2022 U.S. films made up around 70% of the Russian film market. In addition to that, many international Western film festivals banned delegations from the Russian Federation (among them, the Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, and Venice film festivals). The risk is that the entire Russian film industry collapses (cf. Corcoran 2022). In the meanwhile, it is mostly domestic productions to drive audiences, which could represent an unprecedented opportunity for Russian regional cinematography in terms of distribution and exposure across Russia. However, in the environments of independent regional cinema there is concern, due to the policy of censorship that Russian authorities have recently initiated against it. In September 2023, Roskomnadzor – which is the State agency responsible for communications, information technology, and mass media – imposed a ban on showing Burnashëv’s film *Ayta* on all streaming platforms in Russia, accusing it of nationalistic (Sakha) propaganda. *Ayta* premiered on 30 March 2023 and scored a remarkable commercial success: with production costs being 4 million roubles (roughly 40,000 euros), it grossed around 26 million roubles (over 260,000 euros). According to Roskomnadzor the film provides “destructive information that contradicts the principles of unity among the peoples of Russia”; “positive aspects of characters belonging to one nationality [Sakha – G.P.] are contrasted with the pointedly negative traits of characters belonging to another [Russian – G.P.]” (retrieved from: Sonny 2023). Another Yakut film, *The Candidate* (*Kandidat*), in September, was denied a distribution license for allegedly violating Russian LGBT propaganda law.

Such actions suggest that the central authorities are closely monitoring the regional – particularly Sakha – cinematic production, perceiving the representation of indigenous narratives and cultural diversity as a potential threat to the State ideology and supranational (Russian-based) identity.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Rimma Urkhanova who brought to her attention the phenomenon discussed here and offered deep insights for the development of the present investigation.

References

- Borsaro, Lucrezia. 2022. "The Making of the Sakha between Ethnogenesis and Language Contact." MA Thesis, Università di Verona.
- Burnashëv, Stepan. 2023. "Yakutskiy rezhissër Stepan Burnashëv: 'Po suti, my stanovimsya kuskami myasa' [Yakut Director Stepan Burnashëv: 'Essentially, We Become Pieces of Meat]." Interview by Svetlana Khokhryakova. *MKRU*. Accessed November 22, 2023. <https://www.mk.ru/culture/2023/11/22/yakutskiy-rezhisser-stepan-burnashev-po-suti-my-stanovimsya-kuskami-myasa.html>
- Corcoran, Jason. 2022. "6 Months into the Ukraine War, Russia's Film Industry Is on Life Support." *Business Insider*. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/back-to-the-ussr-russias-film-industry-on-life-support-2022-8?r=US&IR=T>
- Damiens, Caroline. 2014. "A Cinema of One's Own: Building/Reconstructing Siberian Indigenous Peoples' Identity in Recent Cinema: Examples from Sakha (Yakutia) Republic and the Republic of Khakassia." *InterDisciplines. Journal of History and Sociology* 5(1): 159–85. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://hal.science/hal-01434148/document>
- Damiens, Caroline. 2015. "Cinema in Sakha (Yakutia) Republic: Renegotiating Film History." *Kinokultura* 48. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://hal.science/hal-01434159/document>
- Damiens, Caroline, and Csaba Mészáros. 2022. "The Cinema of the Sakha Republic: An Introductory Note." *Kinokultura: New Russian Cinema* 19 Spec. Accessed August 20, 2022. <http://real.mtak.hu/160084/1/40.pdf>
- Davydov, Dmitriy. 2021. "Director Dmitry Davydov on 'Scarecrow' and Yakutian Films." Interview by Yulia Skopich. *The Moscow Times*, March 25, 2021. Accessed August 19, 2022. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/03/25/director-dmitry-davydov-on-scarecrow-and-yakutian-films-a73362>
- Davydov, Dmitriy. n.d. "Once Upon a Time in Yakutia." Interview by ALROSA Magazine. Accessed November 18, 2023. <https://alrosamagazine.com/articles/interview/once-upon-a-time-in-yakutia/>
- Dergacheva, Daria. 2023. "Yakut Movie 'Aita' Was Censored in Russia." *Global Voices*. Accessed September 25, 2023. <https://globalvoices.org/2023/09/25/yakut-movie-aita-was-censored-in-russia/>
- Egorova, Nataliya. 2017. "Na 'Lenfil'me' obsudili regional'noe kino i ravzitie prokata dokumentalistiki [At 'Lenfilm, Regional Cinema and the Development of Documentary Distribution Has Been Discussed]." *Movie Start*, Accessed November

- 22, 2017. <https://moviestart.ru/2017/11/22/na-lenfilme-obsudili-regionalnoe-kino-i-razvitie-prokata-dokumentalistiki/>
- Ferguson, Jenanne, and Lena Sidorova. 2018. "What Language Advertises: Ethnographic Branding in the Linguistic Landscape of Yakutsk." *Language Policy* 17: 23–54. Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-016-9420-4>
- Festagent. n.d. "Yakutsk International Film Festival." Accessed October 26, 2023. https://festagent.com/en/festivals/yakutsk_fest
- Fontaine, Gilles. (Ed.). 2018. *Key Trends in Russian Cinema*. Strasbourg: Nevafilm Research for the European Audiovisual Observatory. Accessed October 26, 2023 <https://rm.coe.int/ru-2018-key-trends-of-russian-cinema/16808d7212>
- Forum Regional'nogo kinematografa 'Novyy Vektor' [Regional Cinema Forum 'New Vector']. n.d. "Osnovnye zadachi foruma" [The Main Tasks of the Forum]. Accessed October 26, 2023. <https://forumnv.ru/#rec589740965>.
- Ivanova, Svetlana. 2022. "Rol' Kinokluba v stanovlenii yakutskogo kino: ot refleksii k deystviyam" [The Role of the Film Club in the Formation of Yakut Cinema: From Reflection to Action]. *Yakutskoe-sakha informatsionnoe agenstvo*, April 1, 2022. <https://ysia.ru/rol-kinokluba-v-stanovlenii-yakutskogo-kino-ot-refleksii-k-dejstviyam/>.
- Johanson, Lars. 2021. *Turkic (Cambridge language Surveys)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klassiki. 2021. "Sakha Film: On Nature's Edge Round Table Discussion." Facebook, October 30, 2021. Video, 1:13:51. Accessed November 5, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/100052319903979/videos/388623382797442>.
- Konstitutsiya Respubliki Sakha (Yakutiya). 1992. Accessed November 5, 2023. <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/800200771>
- Kravchenko, Karolina A. 2022. "Regional'noe kino Rossii: k probleme opredeleniya [Regional Cinema of Russia: On the Problem of Definition]." *Paradigma* 36: 139–49.
- Leont'eva, Zh. V., and A. B. Anisimov. 2021. "Rol' fil'ma 'Tayna Chingiskhaana' v razvitiu i fenomene yakutskogo kino [The Role of the Film *The Secret of Genghis Khan* in the Development and Phenomenon of Yakut Cinema]." *Mezhdunarodnyy nauchno-issledovatel'skiy zhurnal* 107, no. 5: 174–8.
- McGinity-Peebles, Adelaide. 2021. "Sakha Film: The History of a Post-Soviet Cultural Phenomenon." *Klassiki*, October 21, 2021. <https://klassiki.online/sakha-film-the-history-of-a-post-soviet-cultural-phenomenon/>.
- Mészáros, Csaba. 2022. "Aleksii Romanov 'Uot Ajarkhan:' The Middle World (Orto Dojdu/Seredinnyi mir, 1993)." Review of *The Middle World*, by Aleksey Romanov. *Kinokultura* 19. October 21, 2021. <http://real.mtak.hu/160087/1/42.pdf>
- Munkuev, Vladimir. 2021. "Yakutskoe kino, 'Nuuccha,' Gil'ev i Balabanov [Yakut Cinema, Nuuccha, Gil'ev, and Balabanov]." Interview by Yaroslavna Frolova. *Telekanal KINOTV*, September 30, 2021. Video, 18:53. Accessed October 21, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gofj10nk0tw&t=400s&ab_channel=%D0%A2%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%9A%D0%98%D0%9D%D0%9E%D0%A2%D0%92

- Oturgasheva, Natalya V. 2021. "Modern Yakut Cinema: Logos, Ethos, Pathos." In *Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm* 118: 173–9. *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, edited by Olga Kolmakova, Olga Boginskaya, Sergei Grichin. London: European Publisher, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2021.12.22>
- Pakendorf, Brigitte. 2007. "Contact in the Prehistory of the Sakha (Yakuts): Linguistic and Genetic Perspectives." PhD diss., LOT – Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics. Accessed October 21, 2021. <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12492>
- Pakendorf, Brigitte, and Innokentij N. Novgorodov. 2009. "Loanwords in Sakha (Yakut), a Turkic Language of Siberia." In *Loanwords in the World's Languages: A Comparative Handbook*, edited by Martin Haspelmath and Uri Tadmor, 496–524. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Petrova, Nyurguyana. 2011. "Lexical and Clause-Linkage Properties of the Converbial Constructions in Sakha (Yakut)." PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo. Accessed October 25, 2021. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/900302422?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Robbek, Vasili. 1998. "Language Situation in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)." In *Bicultural Education in the North: Ways of Preserving and Enhancing Indigenous Peoples' Languages and Traditional Knowledge*, edited by Erich Kasten, 113–22. Münster: Waxmann Verlag.
- Rosstat. 2022. "Itogi VPN-2020. Tom 1. Chislennost' i razmeshchenie naseleniya [Results of the 2020 Census. Volume 1. Population Size and Distribution]." Accessed November 4, 2023. https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom1_Chislennost_i_razmeshchenie_naseleniya
- Sakhafilm. n.d. "Spisok fil'mov proizvodstva AU RS gosudarstvennoy natsional'noy kinokompanii 'Sakhafilm' s 1986 goda [List of Films Produced by the Autonomous Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) State National Film Company 'Sakhafilm' since 1986]." Accessed November 17, 2023. <https://sakhafilm.ru/movies/page/4/>
- Savvina, Sardaana. 2021. "How Yakut Cinema Takes Over the World." Filmed April 2021 at TEDxYakutsk, Yakutsk, Russian Federation. Video, 15:56. Accessed November 25, 2021. https://www.ted.com/talks/how_yakut_cinema_takes_over_the_world
- Sibiryakova, Maria. 2022. "Sergei Potapov: *My Love (Liubov' moia)*, (2004) and/or *Kito-Moto* (2007)." Review of *My Love*, by Sergey Potapov. *Kinokultura*, no. 19. Accessed November 25, 2021. https://www.kinokultura.com/specials/19/R_my-love.shtml#1
- Sonnyy, Semën. 2023. "V Rossii zapretili prokat fil'ma 'Ayta.' RKN uvidel v nëm propagandu natsionalisma [In Russia, the Film *Ayta* Has Been Banned from Distribution. The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) Saw Nationalist Propaganda in It]." *Gazeta.ru*, September 27, 2023. Accessed November 5, 2021. <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2023/09/27/17651869.shtml>
- UNESCO. 2021. "World Atlas of Languages." Accessed November 4, 2023. <https://en.wal.unesco.org/>.

- Ushnitskiy, Vasilij V. 2016. "The Problem of the Sakha People's Ethnogenesis: A New Approach." *Journal of Siberian Federal University, Humanities & Social Sciences* 8: 1822–40. Accessed November 9, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.17516/1997-1370-2016-9-8-1822-1840>
- Ustav fonda podderzhki regional'nogo kinematografa Obshcherossiyskoy obshchestvennoy organizatsii "Soyuz kinematografistov Rossiyskoy federatsii" (Ustav FPRK) [The Charter of the Support Fund for Regional Cinema of the All-Russian Public Organization "Union of Cinematographers of the Russian Federation"]. 2022. Accessed November 3, 2023. https://disk.yandex.ru/i/1U_qxn4KIxt30w
- Ventsel, Aimar. 2016. "Language, Economy and Nation-Building in the Republic of Sakha." In *Nation Building and Identity in the Post-Soviet Space: New Tools and Approaches*, edited by Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese, 104–15. London and New York: Routledge.
- Yegorov-Crate, Katya. 2023. "Sakha Cinema: Worldviews from Northeastern Siberia on Film." *Folklife Magazine*, February 21, 2023. Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/mtff-sakha-cinema>
- Zakon Respubliki Sakha (Yakutiya) ot 16 oktyabrya 1992 goda N. 1170-XII. "O yazykakh v Respublike Sakha (Yakutiya) [The Law of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) Dated October 16, 1992 No. 1170-XII "On Languages in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)"]". Accessed November 5, 2023. <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/804911252>

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.