All-Male Warrior Dances and Men’s Groups
Coping with the Decline of Manhood and Immigration in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)

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Abstract: In the late 1990s and early 2000s, much of social research on contemporary Russia focused on transformations of gender relations brought about by the closure of many state enterprises. In particular, scholars posited that men were experiencing severe insecurity about their gender identity, which they termed a “post-Soviet masculinity crisis.” However, little research has since been carried out to catch up with these findings. How have men’s experiences of gender insecurity developed? How have they responded? This article addresses these questions drawing on newly active Sakha (Yakut) men’s groups and shows how they are also arising and forming their consciousness in reaction to the immigration of male Muslim workers from Central Asia.

Keywords: crisis, immigration, male groups, masculinity, post-Soviet, Sakha

The Men’s Circle Dance

On April 27, 2018, Lenin Square and its adjoining areas in Yakutsk were cloaked in the sounds of drumbeats and the bellowing of a horn. With eyes closed, one could imagine being caught in a battlefield from some medieval period—a scene comparable to Hollywood-made epic war films like Mel Gibson’s Braveheart. Instead, it was a part of the celebration of Republic Day. Right where the father of Soviet communism was pointing in his monumental statue, hundreds of people were performing ohuokhay, a traditional circle dance of the Turkic-speaking...
Sakha (Yakut) people in which participants—who can be both male and female—move around holding hands and stepping back and forth to a rhythm set by a lead singer with whom they sing along. But this ohuokhay was nontraditional in that it was composed exclusively of men (Figure 1). Men in black leather and synthetic jackets were dancing in concentric rings of decreasing size, one inside the other. Inside the smallest circle several men were walking around holding large Sakha and Russian flags. On a makeshift stage overlooking the ohuokhay circles, a renowned Sakha ethno-rock musician with a particularly virile stage image was performing the role of the lead singer. Over a casual black rollneck, he was wearing a Sakha traditional male belt on which a knife, a prime symbol of masculinity, was hanging (Bochorukov and Yakovleva 2013). Swinging back and forth, he shouted ferociously into the microphone:

Sakha er berdere
Tyumsuleeh, kyusteekh buoluoghon,
Uustuktartan samnybakka
Djonmutun,
Noruopputun koomiiskur
Khalyng kuiaakhtakh buoluokka
Ohuo-ohuo
Ohuokhaya,
Ehie-ehie.
Ehikeey

Sakha men!
Let us stay together and strong,
Let us not bend under challenges,
Let us have a thick shield
To protect our people,
Our nation,
Ohuo-Ohuo
Ohuokhaay,
Ehie-ehie
Ehikeey!²

As I learned, it was a particular type of ohuokhay called sūr ohuokhaya or male ohuokhay (er djon ohuokhaya), as people more frequently dubbed it. Despite the organizers claiming it to be as old as the traditional one, composed of both men and women, this ohuokhay was clearly a new invention. Thus, in an interview for a local newspaper, a prominent Sakha scholar and godfather of ohuokhay studies, Vasily
Illarionov, described it disapprovingly as a show that did not exist in the past (Bagynanova 2018: 31). Another prominent local scholar, who specializes in Sakha dance culture, claims that there is archival evidence that points out that ohuokhays were, by contrast, initially performed by women only (Lukina 2005: 32). Nonetheless, the popularity of male ohuokhay had quickly soared since it was set up for the first time in 2016, and by the time of my fieldwork in 2018 it seemed to have become the major highlight of the Republic Day festivities. It is probably not an exaggeration to suppose that the majority of the crowd that gathered on the square that day had not attended the earlier parts of the celebration. They came from their homes specifically for the male ohuokhay: men to take part in it and women to watch it. The dance, with all the beating of the drums and its exclusive maleness, created an extremely belligerent ambience and people, regardless of their gender, were mesmerized by it.

Over the past five to seven years, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) has seen an unprecedented scale of male activism epitomized in the proliferation of the so-called “men’s groups” (er djon tümsülere). Although each of these groups has its distinct emphasis, they all share a common, overarching goal to empower Sakha (Yakut) men. Male ohuokhay is an annual spectacle in which these groups come together to strengthen and uplift the spirit or sîr of men. It is important to note that
these groups emerged and continue to function as voluntary initiatives of a handful of Sakha men who receive no regular support from either state or nonstate funding bodies. They are designed for men by men.

One of the consequences of the Soviet Union’s dissolution and the country’s shift from the state-controlled to the market economy has been the unsettling of traditional conceptions of masculinity premised on the image of men as main providers for their families and dominant figures both here and in the wider society (Ashwin 2000; Kay 2006, 2007; Kiblitskaya 2000). Across many variations, families in prerevolutionary Russia were largely patriarchal. Although this pattern of gender relations was challenged by the Soviet modernist ideology, which granted women rights for greater legal and professional participation, it nonetheless survived this period. A significant, if inadvertent, impact on this gender hierarchy was made by the closure or bankruptcy of many Soviet enterprises in the late 1980s–early 1990s—steel factories, mines, and farms—whose chief labor force was male. Anthropologists have posited that this led to the so-called masculinity crisis (Ashwin 2000 ed; Stépanoff 2004; Vinokurova 2010). Deprived of their ability to provide, men were said to have suffered serious problems with self-esteem, frequently finding relief in vodka, which in turn was the cause of many deaths of men of working age (Kiblitskaya 2000).

Although a wealth of literature exists on the origins, and some forms of the male crisis, little is known about how it has been addressed. Among the few existing accounts is that of Rebecca Kay (2006), who examined the work of the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men in Barnaul, Western Siberia. Established in 1995, it was the only organization that offered support to men experiencing psychological and health-related issues in the Russian Federation at the time of her research in the mid-2000s (Kay 2006: 8). The center was the initiative of Altai State University and was staffed predominantly by female specialists—psychotherapists, social workers, and doctors. Further, the center’s staff stressed that one of the major challenges they experienced was men’s reluctance to seek help, which Kay links to the reassertion in Russia of conservative ideals of men as the strong members of the community who should not openly express their emotions. As Kay observes, “Many men, even (or perhaps especially) when they find themselves in extreme situations, avoid all forms of social support, including welfare services and benefits agencies” (2006: 9).

The current article contributes to this literature drawing on Yakutia as an ethnographic example, with some distinctive features of its own. However, instead of focusing on external leverages of support it takes as
its centerpiece men’s own multiple and creative attempts to help themselves and each other. What do men themselves think of the challenges posed to them by the post-Soviet economic and social transformations, and how do they cope with them? 

Post-Soviet Economic Precarity and Male Immigration from Central Asia and the North Caucasus

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) lies in northeastern Siberia and is part of Russia’s Far Eastern Federal District. Before its colonization by the Russian Empire in 1632, it was inhabited by cattle- and horse-breeding Sakha (Yakut), as well as indigenous reindeer herding and hunting Eveny, Evenki, Yukaghir, Dolgans, and Chukchi. This article focuses primarily on the Sakha people, although many Sakha have Russians, Eveny, or other ethnicities in their immediate ancestry. Today, Sakha comprise the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)’s largest ethnic group and have a(n appearance of) dominance over its political life—a position they inherited from the white Soviet settler population after the mass exodus of the latter from the republic following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Like other pastoralists (High 2008; Hutchinson 1996; Meeker 1989), Sakha had a patriarchal gender and household structure in the deep, pre-Soviet past. The authority of Sakha men hinged primarily on the fact that they ran all the external affairs of their households, such as haymaking, construction and maintenance work, the procurement of livestock and firewood, and the negotiations over land use. For this, they were regarded as the breadwinners of their households on whom the rest of its members depended and were treated with deep respect (Seroshevsky [1896] 1993; Vinokurova & Boiakova 2009). As a local anthropologist cogently points out, “the presence of adult men was traditionally a guarantee of the economic prosperity and well-being of families” (Vinokurova 2010: 148).

This pattern of gender relations survived the Soviet emancipation policies, mainly because of differential treatment of the male and female labor force whereby men were hired for better paid jobs than women and because the bulk of household chores remained women’s responsibility. It was the breakup of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of many of its enterprises that delivered a blow to this structure, unsettling the men’s privileged status. In Soviet days, most of Sakha men worked as drivers, mechanics, and herders at the collective and state
farms. When most of these farms dissolved, they were left jobless and without guaranteed income. This significantly shattered men’s gender identity and self-esteem traditionally tied to their role of providers, causing high levels of alcoholism, depression, and early death among them (Vinokurova 2010; Vinokurova & Boiakova 2009).

On the face of it, Sakha men may appear to have shared the fate of millions of other men across the former Soviet Union, where the ruination of major economic structures had similar knock-on effects (Kiblitskaya 2000; Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2003; see also Stépanoff 2004 on ethnic Tuvans). But the case with the Sakha men has had its own, perhaps compounding, peculiarities predicated by the history of economic politics in the republic. Although Yakutia is a region rich in a vast range of mineral resources, including diamonds, the ordinary Sakha have never been able to reap many of the benefits of this wealth. This is because this sector, from a rotation worker in a mine to a high-standing manager, has been an almost exclusive prerogative of Slavic settlers (Argounova-Low 2004, 2012; Tichotsky 2001). By contrast, Sakha people, as well as the indigenous minorities, were traditionally engaged in animal husbandry and thus concentrated until recently in rural areas. This economic division has been so salient that the adjectives industrial (promyshlennye) and agricultural (sel’skokhoziaistvennye) when used in relation to Sakha settlements also connote their ethnic composition (Argounova-Low 2012: 87). Thus, when the economic revival in Russia in the 2000s revitalized its industrial sector, it offered men elsewhere an opportunity to regain their employment, and with it to rehabilitate their gender identity.

Meanwhile, Sakha men have not had such an opportunity thus far since, unlike mining and other heavy industries, animal husbandry has been in a continuous depression here since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The inflated prices of fuel, combined feed, and machinery made the labor- and time-intensive livestock herding no longer a viable living for many Sakha, pushing them to try their fortune elsewhere—often in precarious circumstances. My male interlocutors were very bitter about these circumstances, referring to them as the “decline of the role (or status) of men” (er kihi suoltata tüste). “During perestroika the status of men decreased (er kihi statuha tüspüte). The teachers’ wages went up, but male professions—such as tractor drivers and stokers—disappeared. Out of despair many men took up drinking (ther buobuttara) and many died,” a leader of one of the men’s groups on which I shall dwell later told me.
In a way, the Sakha case is similar to other colonial contexts found worldwide, whereby the switch from the traditional subsistence livelihood to the cash-based market economy introduced by colonial administrators led to the disempowerment of native men (Elliston 2004; Kāwika Tengan 2008). The devaluation of the subsistence economy, which had propped up the elevated status of men as providers and protectors of their families, also ushered in a devaluation of men themselves. Although the Soviet farms were technically part and parcel of the state’s modernizing project, how Sakha were integrated into them conformed well to their traditional cattle and horse-breeding economy (Tarasova 2016; see also Humphrey 2002 on Buryats). According to anthropologists, this explains why the anticolonial nationalist struggle in these communities is composed predominantly of men (Elliston 2004; Kāwika Tengan 2008). Speaking of native Hawaiians, Kāwika Tengan points out that their “claims to cultural and political re-empowerment” are tied to “remasculinization and reclamation of traditional male roles and practices” (2008: 131). As we shall see shortly, present-day Sakha male re-empowerment projects are also deeply enmeshed in nationalist discourse.

It appears that men had different strategies to cope with this, depending on their age and marital status. As a rule, middle-aged and older men with settled family life stayed in villages and took over the lion’s share of cattle tending chores in their households. For instance, while doing fieldwork in a village in central Yakutia in 2017–2018, I observed that it was men who did the most repetitive parts of this job, such as feeding the animals and mucking the shed, while women milked cows before and after their salaried job responsibilities elsewhere.

This leads us to another peculiarity of the Sakha male crisis. In some regions, it is claimed that men and women have borne the brunt of the collapse of the Soviet economy more or less evenly, with predominantly “female” industries, such as textiles and garment manufacturing, being devastated as much as “male” (Kiblitskaya 2000: 95); however, this was not the case among Sakha. Here, women were far less affected by the closure of the farms since, unlike men, they proved more adaptable to the changing economic environment, having quickly found their niches in merchandise, bakery, and other resourceful income-making activities (Heleniak 2019). Furthermore, many women, unlike men, were employed at schools, libraries, and health posts in the Soviet years and thus were able to retain their jobs. This made many women assume the roles of breadwinners in their households, which
only exacerbated men’s concerns about their gender and social role. In Yakutsk, for example, my male interlocutors ubiquitously complained about the over-emancipation of women, whom they blamed for “forcing men into khotons (cowsheds),” even though in the village I often witnessed how women went out of their way to protect the dignity of their husbands by performing the traditional “female” household duties despite frequent exhaustion.

Men of younger generations responded to the depression of the rural economy by flocking from their home villages to Yakutsk. But Yakutsk could hardly live up to their hopes for a better life since it, too, had and still has little to offer them. The white-collar jobs in the government are almost inaccessible for those who do not have connections. The mining industry, as mentioned, has not been a sphere of occupation for the Sakha. The only path for men to pursue was entrepreneurship, which seems a reasonable option now that the consumerist culture is rapidly burgeoning in the capital. But this sector, too, has been increasingly dominated by non-Sakha, who, however, are no longer Russians but different kinds of Others.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union a significant mass of the Slavic population fled Yakutia for European parts of Russia, clearing urban space not only for rural Sakha but also for labor migrants from Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus. Triggered by the economic revival of the 2000s, the migration of a large number of people from these states and republics to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and the peripheries with high income is a new phenomenon. Yet it has considerably transformed the state of interethnic affairs across the country. The ethnic politics in Russia was primarily configured as a binary opposition of ethnic minority groups, such as Tatars, Chechens, and so forth, versus Russians as their single hegemonic Other. It was not until very recently that anthropologists have started to report a greater multiplicity of parties involved (Laruelle 2017; Oparin 2017; Sokolov 2017). Dmitriy Oparin (2017) shows how the influx of Kyrgyz, Karachay, and Nogai migrant workers to the northern Yamal Peninsula has transformed the lives of both indigenous Nenets and the local Russian and Tatar population. Distinguishing these workers from the mainly Slavic non-indigenous groups of older migratory waves, he calls them “new migrants” (2017: 5).

Examining these new mobility patterns, Marlene Laruelle, too, observes that they have brought about “the birth of a more multicultural urban environment”: 
Russia’s Arctic and sub-Arctic cities have always displayed a certain level of multi-ethnicity, reflecting the national diversity of the Soviet Union. People from all the republics, mostly the Slavic ones, were engaged on these pioneer fronts to build Soviet infrastructure and embody socialism. . . . Over the last 25 years, diversity has increased. While Soviet-era urbanization was mostly carried out by Russian or Slavic people, in the post-Soviet era urban migration has been driven partly by labor migrants. Many young people travel to the Arctic to find work on extraction sites and industrial firms, often coming from regions in deep socioeconomic crisis, such as the North Caucasus and Central Asia. (2017: 10; emphasis added)

Although ethnographic research on these new dynamics in some Russian regions is being carried out, no comparable study has been conducted in Yakutia. Here, ethnic identity politics is still viewed through the lens of a dyadic relationship between Sakha and the federal government in Moscow, or less frequently the white settler population (Argounova-Low 2007, 2012; Balzer and Vinokurova 1996; Petrova and Myarikyanova 2000). The only available resources in researching this part of the article were therefore official reports and my own ethnographic observations.

According to the republic’s migration service, Yakutia receives approximately 30,000 labor migrants annually (“Potok migrantov”). The majority of them come from the now independent Muslim republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although almost all of them settle in Yakutsk, some have recently made their way into the administrative centers of central uluses (rural districts), where the population is almost exclusively ethnic Sakha. The migrants are male and usually come independently, remitting most of their earnings home. As it is often the case with (im)migrant communities, they form tightly knit diaspora networks based on mutual aid: old members share their experience with new ones and assist them in obtaining documents, accommodation and a job and, in return, expect other favors from them as necessary. Owing to such networks, as well as cheap labor and the rejection of alcohol, migrants have become powerful competitors to Sakha men in the job market, virtually barring them from the most lucrative niches of entrepreneurship, such as construction and renovation, taxi services, catering, and the grocery trade (see the following section).

Further, Sakha men perceive themselves to be ousted in the marriage market by the new migrants. Concerns about local women liaising with migrant men now dominate not only private kitchen talk
but also the local press and television media. Thus, in January 2019, a special issue of a daily program on the major Sakha television channel Yakutia24 was dedicated to this theme (Talban 2019). A table was displayed there showing a rise in the number of Sakha women married to the nationals of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and others. The all-male participants of the program—a presenter, a sociologist, a politician, and a renowned public figure—set this trend as an acute societal problem, opening the debate with the questions: “How have [we] ended up in this situation? And how can we get out of it?” This brief sketch may put Sakha case on par with male-centered nationalist discourses elsewhere, which envisage women as “bearers of the collective” and burden them with the responsibility for their survival (Billé 2016; Kandiyoti 1994; Yuval-Davies 1997). Although such a take on women is also relevant to Sakha nationalism, it does not put the blame for the Sakha’s threat of ethnic extinction solely on the shoulders of women. Several of my interlocutors implied that men were complicit in it, too, albeit indirectly. Their contribution to it, according to them, consists in their weakness and lack of competitiveness with migrant men, which prompts women to choose the latter.

**Power Imbalance between Sakha Men and Migrants**

I have established that Sakha men’s prolonged insecurity about their masculinity has been associated primarily with their rampant unemployment. But perhaps as much as the economic precarity, it is their supposed effeminization (djakhtar kurduk) that also concerned my male interlocutors. By this they meant the men’s growing lack of toughness understood as the demonstration—aggressive and otherwise—of physical strength and courage. For example, a leader of a men’s group once lamented to me: “The upbringing of boys has just got out of hand (ahara nai barda). Now parents are too protective of their children (naha serekhtekhtik ogholorun iiteller) and fuss over the slightest scratch on their bodies. As a result, we have men who are too cowardly (kuttas) and even gay.” According to him, boys should get into trouble; they should fight on the streets, break their noses, and have their lips bleed. This is how they become “true” men. Interestingly, this narrative of the manly upbringing of boys seems to have also spread to rural areas where some families are deliberately exposing their sons to harsh living conditions and even physical abuse for fear of raising effeminate men. They make them overwork around the household, endure cold nights outside on
a hunting trip, and do the supposedly more masculine sports, such as boxing or kettlebell lifting. Tamara, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of a teenage boy Timur from the village of Bedime, expresses this particularly poignantly: “Now boys are like girls (biligin uolattar nahaa kyys kurdutkar). This is why when Styopa [her husband] raps on Timur’s knuckles I do not interfere, even though I dislike it. This is why we try to make him work all the time (yuulete satyybyt). And he does sports. And now he’s more confident. He used to be quite weak when he was a kid.”

In an article on different kinds of Sakha masculinities, Aimar Ventsel (2018) argues that the new consumption-oriented environment in Yakutsk coupled with a substantial number of urban-born Sakha youth have crafted in the 2010s a new, softer version of Sakha masculinity. Unlike the preexisting masculinity demonstrated through excessive alcohol consumption and rowdy behavior and one he terms “aggressive,” Ventsel argues that this masculinity is marked by self-discipline, modest alcohol consumption, and fashionable attire. As an example, he recalls encountering in Yakutsk a man in his early twenties dressed as Michael Jackson. As Ventsel writes, “Such an outfit would have been impossible ten years ago. The young man with heavy make-up and a feminine look would previously have had a hard time walking the streets, running the risk of being beaten up for being gay” (2018: 207). I assume that my interlocutors’ anxieties about the increased femininity of Sakha manhood are triggered precisely by men like this impersonator of Michael Jackson.

Importantly, the described anxieties about the decline of Sakha manhood never come alone, but always with envious, if not awed, admiration of the new migrant males from Central Asia and the North Caucasus. Islamophobic discourses dominant in the countries of Euro-America and even in Moscow and St. Petersburg are primarily composed of fear and repulsion toward Muslim communities (Demintseva 2013; Gingrich and Banks 2006; Kempf 2020). But Sakha’s attitudes toward Muslim migrants are different in that they are composed of an ambivalent combination of fear and admiration. Sakha are not just afraid of migrants but look up to them, and the reason for this is that they imagine them to be extremely powerful. Here is what a middle-aged Sakha man told me after a rant about the world being taken over by Muslims: “This is because they [Muslims] are powerful (iti kiniler kyusteekh), and all have one religion (bary biir iteghellekh bolannar) that they are coming to dominate the world (aan doidunu bayhian ereller). And it costs nothing to them to assimilate those who don’t have any religion.” Indeed, my interlocutors, most of whom were males, believed
that the power of migrants resided with their religion. This, according to them, was also the source of their advantage over Sakha’s own males in vital traits sought by both potential employers and marriage partners. The most significant of these is their supposed teetotalism induced by Islam.

Alcoholism has grown into one of the most heated political and moral debates in Yakutia. Over the past decade or so, the republic’s government has adopted several laws to restrict the sale of alcoholic beverages and some municipal districts have banned it altogether. Those companies and individuals deemed to cash in on the alcohol trade are exposed to heavy condemnation in the media by ethnic activists who unanimously consider alcoholism to be the most significant tragedy of the Sakha on both the national and the family scale. Likewise, my interlocutors admitted alcohol abuse to be their major weakness. “Alcohol has killed (siete) us,” they used to repeat. In their eyes, it was also their principal drawback compared to migrants. For example, a thirty-year-old Zhenya, who had been treated for alcohol addiction in the past, told me: “I actually understand [why] Sakha women [prefer Muslim migrants to local men]. Because ninety percent of our men are drunkards (alkogoliktar) and losers (chmoshniktar). Of course, they will marry Muslims. Those don’t drink (oni to ne p’iyut).”

In their minds, rejection of alcohol was also the cause of the greater economic success of migrants. One person brought up a local construction and carpentry business dominated by migrants from Central Asia as a vivid example. To have their dacha (countryside summer house) built or an apartment refurbished, he said, Sakha and non-Sakha people equally tend to hire brigades of migrant men rather than those of Sakha. And the reason for this, he went on, was the unreliability of Sakha workers associated with alcoholism: “Perhaps, Sakha are no worse and even better builders than migrants, but once they receive part of their pay, they go binge drinking and vanish, leaving the work half-done. Migrant workers, by contrast, rarely drink and usually finish their work on time.” It should be mentioned that migrant labor is also more profitable economically.

Sakha males’ growing feminization or, to use Billé’s (2016) term, “dissident sexuality” appears to be even more disturbing in the presence of migrants whom locals tend to imagine to be of a highly dominant, aggressive kind. For instance, an interlocutor suggested that it was probably the manliness of migrants expressed in their toughness toward women that was the secret of their success with women. Otherwise, he questioned, how could we explain that the increasing
number of Sakha women are liaising with them and their women never leave them? But what I found even more revealing about the anxieties concerning the greater sexuality of migrant men was an article written by an anonymous author for the section “Love Puzzle” of the major regional newspaper *Kyym* (Boppuok 2017: 19). In it, the author condemns Sakha women who mix with migrant workers and who allegedly say amongst themselves: “Sakha idiots can’t even love women in bed (*sataan oronno tapaabattar daghany*). They just start doing their things as soon as they lie on the bed. And they are so small and unattractive (*kyralara-kharalara*) and are bloody alcoholics.” According to the author, these kinds of sayings are “utterly offensive to anyone who considers himself Sakha.” “In fact, in any nation, there are those who are good in bed (*oronno berter*),” he objects to the hypothetical women in defense of Sakha males. Exhibiting less aggression toward women but continuing along similar lines, another interlocutor supposed that Sakha men were probably inert (*elen khaalbyttar*) because of their lack of testosterone (*testosterona ne khvataet*). “It’s actually very easy to add on testosterone artificially,” he said in complete earnest. The politicization of testosterone is currently on the rise among conservative right-wing groups across the globe. These groups have been pushing pro-testosterone thinking in opposition to the liberal ideology and its male-feminist “soy boys.” According to a *Guardian* article, the attempts of these groups have seen much success, with the National Health Service’s prescriptions for testosterone having increased by 20 percent in the UK over the second decade of the 2000s (“Looking for Mr T” 2019).

According to Ventsel, there is little if any conflict between different Sakha masculinities, each of which “exists in its almost separate social space” (2018: 210). However, the ethnographic evidence I have brought above suggests the opposite. If there is no open public confrontation between Sakha gays or other “effeminate” men and men of a more macho demeanor, it does not mean that there is no tension between them. Moreover, Sakha’s concerns about effeminization of their males are considerably informed and exacerbated by their fantasies about migrant sexuality. The latter image of tough and highly virile migrant men makes the deviance of effeminate Sakha men more severe in their eyes. This may remind the reader of the oversexualization of minoritized men in (post)colonial contexts whereby the subaltern position of these men is reinforced by their eroticization and exoticization (Kāwika Tengan 2008; Stokes 2001). But these fantasies and practices often emasculate these men, which is the opposite of how Sakha discourses construe migrant sexuality.
Moreover, the Sakha hypersexualization of Muslim migrants does not necessarily go together with downplaying their moral and intellectual qualities which, for instance, characterizes much of the popular Western conceptualizations of male blackness. Sakha imagine them to also be more virtuous than their own males, as is manifest in their admiration of migrants’ putative piety, teetotalism, and hard work. Indeed, Sakha men’s alcoholism and economic precarity are likewise frequently measured against the high standards supposedly set by Muslim men in these concerns. As Eduardo Archetti argues, “images of men need images of women as well as of ‘other’ men” (1999: 190). The decline of manhood among contemporary Sakha is not a self-contained phenomenon. It is a crisis that has its roots in the post-Soviet economic reform, but which subsequently fed on the encounter of Sakha men with Muslims. In other words, it is not just about Sakha men, but about the perceived power imbalance between them and the migrant men.

Men’s Groups and the Crafting of a New Warrior Masculinity

Although I have not heard of testosterone supplements being given to Sakha men, some male activists have been leading men’s groups to redress this imbalance. At the time of my fieldwork, there were three of them: Uraankhay (one of the Sakha ethnonyms), Ÿs (lit. three, meaning the unity of the past, present, and future), and Il Syube (Peaceful council). Because of time constraints, I conducted research only with the first two. These groups emerged between 2013 and 2017 in Yakutsk city and are still concentrated there, although the largest of them, Ÿs, has smaller branches in some rural areas.

The all-male ohuokhay is an event these movements organize cooperatively at Republic Day each year. The genealogy of ohuokhay shows that its meaning has kept constantly changing, under the influence of the sociopolitical agenda of the time. Thus, the accounts of political exiles and local ethnographers tell us that prerevolutionary ohuokhays were collective rituals of appeasing deities (Illarionov 2011; Seroshevsky [1896] 1993). The ohuokhays that ensued in the Soviet period became more secular and took on a profoundly political, agitational flavor (Vasiliev 1973). For example, a local folklorist Svetlana Mukhopleva (2012) quotes an ohuokhay recorded on a gramophone in the 1930s:
Poterpel krakh
Kazhetsya staryi rezhim.
Molodye devitsy,
Ne robeite pered muzhyami.
Davaite, objedinivshis, skazhem:
“Nashe proshloe,
Kazhetsya, kanulo v vechnost.”

It appears the old regime
Has collapsed.
Young women,
Do not quail before your husbands.
Let us get together and say:
“Our past
Seems to have sunk into oblivion.”

This excerpt is a vivid example of how the Soviet regime harnessed
(and Russianized) this cultural form to inculcate its gender ideology,
which purported to liberate women from their domestic “slavery”
(Slezkine 1994; Vladimirova & Habeck 2018).

The exclusive maleness of contemporary ohuokhay, which comes
across as such a striking contrast to its Soviet predecessor, is likewise a
reflection and a product of concerns of its own time. As Eric Hobsbawm
put it, it is an adaptation or renovation of an “old model” for a “new
purpose” (1983: 4–5). Like the Soviet ohuokhay, which strove to emanci-
pate women, the new all-male version seeks to empower men.

When I witnessed the male ohuokhay for the first time in 2018, I was
impressed not so much by its exclusive maleness, as by its warlike am-
bience. This ambience was conveyed not only by a horn and drums, the
sounds of which would make anyone’s heart beat faster but also by its
calling on men to “have a thick shield” (khalyng kuiakh) to “protect their
people and nation.” The ohuokhay metamorphosed men into warriors.
Indeed, as one of its organizers later informed me, in the past Sakha
men danced it “before entering a war with other peoples and before
hunting” (which is unlikely to be accurate but is nonetheless significant
as a claim). By depicting men as warriors, and supposedly ancient ones,
the ohuokhay encouraged men to be powerful and militant in the face of
such forces as foreign competitor migrants, alcoholism, and idleness.

This warrior-like image of the Sakha man, I argue, is what these
men’s empowerment groups are fashioning (Figure 2). It is a new kind
of masculinity, which they construct in response to the perceived weak-
nesses of Sakha men, on the one hand, and the power of migrant men,
on the other. This masculinity envisages an ideal of a man as a defender (turuluks) of his wife, children, and people. As such, the qualities stressed as the most valuable in men within the rhetoric and imagery of this masculinity are bravery and physical strength, while the one that is the most deplored is cowardice. “If something happens, a man must be ready to protect his people (kömööskurge belem buolokhtaakhpyt). He must not be frightened and hide from anything,” an interlocutor said.

In its emphasis on male physical toughness and emotional constraint, warrior masculinity resonates closely with the notion of toxic masculinity that might be familiar to most readers. But it also takes the latter to a highly ideological level of ethnonational(ist) defense. Sakha men are urged to nurture and exhibit this stoicism not so much in order to comply with certain stereotypical norms of their gender-specific behavior as to be able to confront and retaliate against a threat from without, that is a non-Sakha or nonhuman enemy (e.g., impersonated by alcohol). Its key feature is this sense of an impending outside threat. A Sakha man must be courageous and strong enough not just for the sake of being so, but in order to stand up for his people and fight back when needed. This image of an external antagonist is also what makes this masculinity different from both the new “soft” Sakha masculinity and a tougher version of it, which was dominant in the 1990s and which, although often directed its drunken aggression toward non-Sakha

Figure 2. Sakha boys dressed as warriors and posing for a camera after a dance they had performed at the opening of the competition of blacksmiths. Courtesy of Vasily Gerasimov.
(Ventsel 2018: 205), did not articulate this aggression in the idioms of a threat and defense. One could say it was not ideologized but was more in the idiom of street fighters.

During my fieldwork, I saw this warrior masculinity taking shape in the rocketing popularity of sports competitions, especially those that are thought to be traditionally Sakha: wrestling, long-distance jumping, and lifting heavy stones. For example, the Games of Dygyn, a sports competition traditionally held as part of the summer Yhyakh festival in Yakutsk, undoubtedly gathered most of the festival’s attendees in 2018. While ethnic singers were performing to an almost empty audience on a nearby stage, the stadium on which the games were taking place was overflowing with people. Because of the crowd, I was not able to see the event and the contestants and had to rely on the broadcaster through the loudspeakers to follow the competition. When working the tournament, the commentator frequently referred to participants as warriors (booturdar) or the best of Sakha warriors (Sakha chuluu booturdara). This prompted me to liken these men to the main protagonist of the Sakha oral epic olonkho: Nyurgun Bootur, the brave warrior of humankind with “stone-hard muscles” and a lifelong mission to defend his tribe. On the site of Yhyakh, I also noticed young men wearing identical T-shirts with the inscription BOOTUR (warrior) in bold capital letters. As I later learned, these were the brand T-shirts of a sports gym that bore the same name and was owned by a former repeat winner of the Games of Dygyn.

The warrior masculinity is also heavily promoted by Uraankhay, one of the three men’s groups. Uraankhay is officially a sports-patriotic club (sportivno-patrioticheskii klub) that provides Sakha men with free physical training classes that focus on mix-fighting. The club leader believes that the ancestors of Sakha were a caste of warriors (voiny) of Genghis Khan called Uraankhay. He seeks to revive the courage of these ancestor warriors in the club members and in Sakha men more generally. Although at the time of my fieldwork the group counted around seventy men who identified themselves as Uraankhay warriors (Uraankhay booturdara), the club was also frequented by nonwarriors wishing to become warriors. For them, the club holds a special initiation ceremony annually in late June, where they are tested for physical strength and stamina. Although I did not attend this ceremony, I was allowed to glimpse a video of it which consisted of running over broken terrain, doing push-ups, and mix fighting. The last bit of the test looked especially violent, with the warriors-to-be having to defend themselves from and counter ruthless beating by an already initiated member of the club. According to the
leader of the group, not all of the candidates successfully pass the test and are subsequently granted the title of the Uraankhay warrior: usually just one or two out of six or seven. Moreover, those awarded the title are not immune from being stripped of it later, and the primary reason for this is cowardice. “For example, when, in fear, he does not defend his friend in a street fight,” he told me.

Interestingly, the enchantment with ancient warriorhood appears to be quite common for male empowerment movements worldwide (Elliston 2004; Kāwika Tengan 2008). For example, Hale Mua (the Men’s House), a comparable grassroots organization that strives to develop a cultural foundation for native Hawaiian men to be “more effective as members and leaders in their families and communities” (2008: 131); Kāwika Tengan notes that it focuses on the fighting arts and philosophies of warriorhood. Each year, the men of Hale Mua enact their aspiration for stronger manhood by jumping off a cliff into the ocean which, according to them, is an indigenous Hawaiian way of establishing warriors, priests, and ritual specialists. It is not difficult to draw parallels between this dramatic public ritual and the Sakha all-male ohuokhay or the brutal initiation ceremony for Uraankhay warriors.

Alternatively, Ÿs puts its emphasis on faith (iteghel) as a channel for empowering men. Distinguishing themselves from Uraankhay, Ÿs’s members claim that to be strong, a man needs to train not only his muscles but also his mind and spirit (öj-sanaa). According to them, nothing can do this better than religion. If a man has a religion, he can better understand the meaning of life and thus make a better way through it, withstanding the temptation of such destructive force as alcohol. To equip men with such life-guiding morale, Ÿs unites its members around Aar Aiyy, a supposedly indigenous Sakha religiosity, which had its heyday in the 1990s (Balzer 2011; Kondakov 2011) and which has since waned somewhat.

Ÿs is much larger than Uraankhay, counting slightly under two thousand people. Of these, a couple dozen are lead members and about a hundred attend algys regularly. Algys is a ritual of purification and attaining a divine blessing and is the core event around which Ÿs cluster as a community. It begins with a collective prayer, after which a neo-shaman figure feeds the fire, murmuring blessings, while other men stand encircling him. Sometimes after algys men dance a male ohuokhay but more often just sit around and talk. Usually, men seek advice from each other on job opportunities or matters of a more personal nature, such as soured relationships with close family members or responsibilities for a sick parent, which they have found challenging to manage.
These talks also revolve around Muslim migrants. During one such talk, a man stood up to express his outrage over an accident he had witnessed the day before and in which a migrant driver, “most likely an Uzbek,” had allegedly run into an old Sakha man. “And he had the cheek to offer him five hundred rubles! There were so many Sakha youths around, but no one stood up for the old man except myself. This is all because we don’t have faith,” he recounted emotionally. Another participant picked up on this: “I just came back from Turkey a few days ago. They pray all day there. A people with faith does not assimilate (iteghelleekh djon simelibet), and therefore we have to be united and religious. Their religion is a religion that was ordered long ago. There is a notion that a person learns by emulating another person (kihi kihitten yutukten yuerener dien eidebyul baar). We should aspire for more order (saahylyyrga) in our religion: it should have its own basic canons, its own prayer house.”

What this ethnographic vignette illustrates particularly cogently is that Sakha ethnic activists, and men’s groups among them, conceive of Muslim Others not only as an impending threat but also as exemplars of male and collective power, paradoxically to be emulated as well as disliked and feared. In their emphasis on faith and its potency, the men from Ÿs in particular seem to draw their inspiration from (their fantasies about) Muslim migrants. As I suggested earlier, Sakha imagine the power of these migrants to lie in their religiosity. Religion is what disciplines these men and makes them more successful than Sakha males in many aspects of life. Hence, they believe religion is what Sakha men need, too, in order to be as strong as these migrants and avert assimilation by them.

Much of the existing literature on post-Soviet male identity transformations dates back to the 2000s and argues that men who suffered from the emotional and psychological ramifications of these transformations often found relief in such negative or aggressive forms of therapy as alcohol and drug consumption (Kay 2006, 2007; Vinokurova 2010). This, in turn, was linked to a vast discrepancy in the life expectancy of Russia’s males and females, with that of the former falling from 63.8 in the mid-1980s to 59 in 2000 (Kay 2006: 5). My data suggest a different picture, at least in Yakutsk. The men’s groups are very articulate in their renunciation of alcoholism, which they unanimously envisage as their common enemy. Instead of hiding from the challenges of life in alcoholic oblivion, they are molding an image of the Sakha man as a warrior-leader unafraid to take responsibility not just for himself but also for the well-being of his family and community. These movements
provide men with alternative ways of coping with their difficulties, be it spirituality or intense, almost professional, physical training. Their leaders help their fellow men appreciate the training of mind and body as more productive ways of finding relief from their anxieties than vodka. Lastly, these groups serve men as support bubbles, akin to psychotherapeutic discussion groups if you wish, in which they can speak out their emotional turmoil or ask for a piece of advice. “It’s like the chair on which you’re sitting. It’s the same kind of support,” a member of Ÿs made a sharp comparison. I believe that this latter function of the men’s groups is enabled by the fact these groups are the initiatives of men themselves. Unlike the Altai Regional Crisis Centre for Men examined by Kay (2006, 2007), they are safety nets offered to men by their fellow men who have experienced similar uncertainties and to whom they can relate. And this may also be the reason for the unprecedented success of these groups, which stretches beyond the republic’s borders, with a comparable movement having emerged in the Republic of Tyva around 2019 (Obshchee delo 2019).

Conclusion

This article is an ethnographic attempt to redress the lack of anthropological accounts of the heritage of the post-Soviet masculinity crisis by showing how some circles of Sakha men are coping with their version of this crisis. Kay posited that it is “crucial to acknowledge that specific cultural, socioeconomic and historical factors shape local discourses of male crisis and men’s responses to these” (2006: 2). In the case of Sakha, the decline of manhood can be traced back to the mass closure of Soviet collective and state farms where most Sakha men were employed and whence they obtained resources to provide for their families and thus maintain their role as patriarchs. However, the insecurity of Sakha masculinity did not acquire its current shape until the immigration into the republic of a substantial pool of male workers from Central Asia and the North Caucasus. Due to their teetotalism and affordable labor cost, these males became powerful rivals to Sakha men, both economically and sexually. This has been a significant factor, which aggravated the perceptions and experiences of crisis among local men, who have felt falling short of the supposed manhood and prosperity of the Muslim migrants. To compensate for this shortage, men clustered around several all-male groups. One of these groups seeks a solution in intense physical training and an ideology of warriorhood, another
in a supposedly indigenous Sakha religion whose all-male public face and conservative views on gender relations place it ironically close to Islam. For these activists, both the discourse about and response to their decline of masculinity have thus been considerably informed by their ideas of the manhood of the Other.

The decline of manhood in such societies as Maori, native Hawaiians and Polynesians is conceived of as a direct consequence of colonial domination. These communities overtly define their efforts to (re)empower men as their struggle against colonialism and modernity, which they blame for marginalizing men’s traditional place and role within their families (Elliston 2004; Kawika Tengan 2008). Sakha male groups may not immediately strike the reader as an anti-colonial movement. Indeed, my interlocutors scarcely mentioned the word “colony” in our conversations. However, I believe this to be not a matter of fact but a case of epistemological colonization. Unlike the intellectual and popular discourses of the countries of Euro-America, those of the Soviet Union and later Russia have been notoriously reluctant to define the country’s non-Slavic territories as their colonies. Instead, they have cast them as regions (regiony), which were first peacefully integrated into the country and are now reaping many benefits from this choice. The latter perspective has been especially heavily promoted under Vladimir Putin’s administration, which portrays itself as a savior of all Russia’s people(s) from a common external enemy.

This interpretation is reflected in Sakha men’s tendency to see the root of their problem not in the history of their relationship with the Kremlin but in post-Soviet economic restructuring, which they hardly view as a colonial legacy, and in the inrush of migrant males. These two events are a direct consequence of the republic being Russia’s colony. The immigration of Muslim males to the republic has been largely incentivized by the aspiration of the Russian state to retain its influence over its former Soviet republics. From an emic perspective, Sakha’s encounter with Muslim males, at an unfortunate time when their own masculine identity has been challenged by other factors, is a price they pay as Moscow’s colonial subjects for its imperial ambitions. This is an essential underlying context to acknowledge because the extant literature on gender relations in post-Soviet Russia, including the vast diversity of its territorial units, tends to overlook it.
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Notes

1. For a more detailed account of ohuokhay, see Illarionov 2011 and Peers and Kolodeznikov 2015.

2. This is not to say that men and children were not dependent on women. Women contributed and continue to contribute significantly to the functioning of households, and not only through their performance of the bulk of childcare and housework. What I mean by a patriarchal family structure is not an exclusive political and economic authority of a father of the family over his wife, which is nonexistent even in the systems with the most rigid gender hierarchies. Instead, I refer to a more flexible system whereby men had easier access to the politico-jural system than women or occupied a more privileged position within it; therefore, they could make a more significant economic contribution to the family from without. As with other binaries, the patriarchal/nonpatriarchal dichotomy is never absolute.

3. The ethnographic material that formed the foundation for this article was collected between April and September 2018 in Yakutsk, as well as in some rural areas of the Sakha Republic. It is composed of notes made as a result of participant and nonparticipant observation in the various events organized by Ŷs and Uraankhay, such as weekly prayers, antialcohol seminars, and physical training courses. In addition, it contains thirteen in-depth interviews with the members of these groups. This core data were supplemented with observations made during informal conversations with these men and the general public and the analyses of local media, primarily printed press published in the Sakha language. Most of the interviews and conversations were conducted in Sakha, a native language for both the author of the article and her interlocutors.

4. The author’s translation.
References


