Sakha Music Business:
Mission, Contracts, and
Social Relations in the Developing
Post-Socialist Market Economy

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Abstract: This article is about the Sakha music business and the people involved in it. It discusses different strategies of making music and shows that different music genres have their own setting of social relations. Due to the specific economic and social situation, social relations in the music business are often informal. The classic theory of the cultural industry states that producing music is a calculated market economy-oriented activity. This article questions such an approach and shows that social and cultural ideas are present in the music-making process. The Sakha music business cannot be seen as only a profit-oriented sphere. Whereas producers and musicians are interested in formal, contract-based relations in purely economic cases, the informality maintains its importance. Ideas of solidarity and mutual support are linked to the perception of being in one music community, which uses different elements of Sakha culture in their music. As is demonstrated in the article, incorporation of Sakha motives is not only a marketing strategy but also a way for musicians and producers to act as carriers of the Sakha culture whose mission is to develop it.

Keywords: cultural industry; heritage; music; popular culture; Sakha; social relations

In this article I discuss how popular music, commercial media, and consumption are interrelated in Sakha, eastern Siberia. I explore social relations in the pop and rock music business and the way these social relations have become formalized over the years. By discussing
social relations, I want to show how, in different segments of the music scene, the cultural significance of the music differs and is reflected in its production, marketing, and consumption.

Initial data was collected in 2000 and 2001, when I spent fourteen months in the Republic of Sakha (Iakutiia). At the time I was researching changing property relations in a post-socialist society in transition, but in the course of my fieldwork I became interested in the local music culture. After 2001, I returned to Sakha with the intention to do fieldwork on the popular music culture in this republic. In 2006 and 2008, I visited Sakha within the framework of my postdoctoral project.

Consumerism and urban culture in general have rarely been researched in the Russian context, especially in Siberia. Some works discuss the music culture in Russian cities, but they are limited to the metropolises of Western Russia (Cushman 1995; Pilkington 1994, 1999). In this sense, Otto Habeck (2004: 11) was right, when he argued that Siberian anthropology “has focused so narrowly on ‘traditional’ ways of life in a rural setting that it failed to recognize the relevance of urban.” The need to study Siberian life outside “classical” topics has been stressed also by other scholars (Gray et al. 2003) and it is good to note that new generations of scholars interested in various aspects of Siberian urban life are emerging (e.g., Barchunova and Beletskaia 2004; Krist 2004; Ventsel 2004a, 2004b). However, this is not comparable with studies on popular culture in other regions of the world. Many theoretical works in urban studies have focused on music, linking it with resistance, consuming, ethnicity, and identity (Burke 1978; Cawelti 1990; Connell and Gibson 2003; Frith 1996; Fuller 1998; Hall and Jefferson 1986). In time, solid data has been accumulated on youth in urban environments and their lifestyle related to music, consuming, and politics, based on studies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and America (e.g., Akindes 2002; Brusila 2002; Bryson 1996; Chye and Konk 1996; Friedman and Weiner 1999; Toop 1992). There are also studies about the music industry (Connell and Gibson 2003), social meaning, function of the music and development of musical taste (Bryson 1996), but these studies are based on research done outside Russia.

Music production and marketing is one topic of the academic analysis widely debated among scholars. Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) argue in their classic article that the so-called cultural industry is an average capitalist business, which is interested only in profits and has turned music into a commodity designed to be sold to the “masses.” They deny that the production of modern music could have any other aspects apart from moneymaking. Jacques Attali supports this approach
arguing that music and music business is a “monologue” or a one-way process where the main goal of the industry is to “sell products not importance” (Attali 1985: 88). To market its products, the music industry has established its own complex structures. Hirsch (1997) calls these “craft lines,” which among others combine record production, talent seeking, and mass media. Here, many authors are convinced that the most important form of media that supports the music business is radio, the “gatekeeper” to promoting music among the listeners (e.g., Attali 1985; Frith 2001; Hirsch 1997).

The “cultural industry” is often viewed in a very simplistic way. It is in conflict with the audience who do not always accept the products offered to them (see “the sovereignty of the consumer” and “the power of the audience” in Storey 1998: 206–7) but inside it is a homogenous and monolithic branch (Attali 1985; Hirsch 1997; Marshall 2003). This view is questioned by Williamson and Cloonan (2007) who propose that we should talk not about a single cultural industry but of the “cultural industries,” a complex of different music-related institutions that have their own interests and policies. Hutnyk (1998; 2000; 2004; 2005) has shown that in different segments of the music business there are various combinations of pure marketing strategy, artistic expression and social, cultural, or political ideology. Below I discuss the variety inside the Sakha music business and show that there are other ideologies apart from profit making. I use the terms “popular culture” or “pop culture” in the same sense as Frith (1983), as a culture of “leisure” not necessarily in opposition to a “mass culture” (Adorno 1990; Horkheimer and Adorno 2001).

The Republic of Sakha

The Republic of Sakha is the largest of the Russian federal subjects, covering more than 3,000,000 square kilometers. The former Iakut Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic changed its name to The Republic of Sakha (Iakutiia) in 1991. The population of the Republic of Sakha is less than one million, with ethnic Russians constituting approximately 50 percent of the population; Sakha, the titular ethnic group, make up about 34 percent (Sakha World XXI Century’s Project 2008). The rest are indigenous minorities, including Evenki, Even, Yukaghir, and Dolgan. The population density is low and most of the people are scattered over the vast territory (Pakhomov 1999; Tichotsky 2000). Therefore, the capital Iakutsk and industrial towns like Mirnyi and Neringri,
where the population density is high, are important centers for local social life.

In Russia, the Republic of Sakha is known as the region that produces 99 percent of Russian diamonds (Tichotsky 2000). Southern and western Russian-dominated industrial towns are wealthier; people receive higher wages and have more social guarantees. The Sakha people and indigenous minorities, who live mainly in rural areas, in smaller non-industrial towns or in the capital Iakutsk, have lower average incomes, with the exception of the nouveau riche who are called “new Sakha.” The latter mostly include government officials, people working for large state-run companies, and business people. The population is also divided along ethnic lines, with most of the indigenous population adverse to the newcomers. This informal ethnic enmity has been decreasing in recent years with the improvement of the general standard of living. A similar separation also existed in the cultural space, where in the context of the Republic of Sakha there are two separate language communities with their own media (radio and newspapers), music, books, and schools in their own language (see Ventsel 2004a, 2004b).

Current Changes in Sakha Pop Music Business

Sakha and non-Sakha people, living in the Republic of Sakha, have always regarded music as part of their culture. The main national Sakha epic poem, olonkho, is performed chorally and music as a leisure activity, entertainment, and accompaniment to rituals has always been a significant part of Sakha cultural and social life (Safronov 2000; Vinokurova 1994). Parallel to this, music from European Russia always reached eastern Siberia; melodies ranging from classical music to entertainment music were broadcast during radio and TV shows. During the Soviet period the Sakha people established and developed their own popular music culture, imitating both Russian and Western music. These musicians were mainly answerable to cultural officials from various state institutions like theaters, houses of culture, and even factories. Since the 1960s, the Sakha people have had their own light music, similar to the entertainment music of the period. The Russian term estradnaia muzyka (or estrada) is used to describe this light kind of music. Sakha estrada music exists today and is based on the melodies of the 1960s and 1970s, often performed by mature singers for a predominantly “older” audience. In addition, the rapidly increasing Russian population demanded and produced entertainment music in the
Russian language. Both Sakha and Russian musicians recorded their songs at local radio stations, whereas only a few Sakha entertainment music records were released in Soviet times. Thus, native pop music was mostly consumed at live concerts or via local radio and only a small portion of the music circulated among people on tapes and cassettes reproduced at home.

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the situation. Bars, clubs, and discotheques mushroomed all over. Music became more important and visible. With the appearance of the private economy, private radio stations were established. Most of these played only Russian and Western music, but after 1996 when the radio station *Victoria Sakhalyy* was established, Sakha music and music programs were broadcast in the Sakha language. Music became a means for young rural artists to leave their villages and set foot in Yakutsk (Ventsel 2004b). Music was also important for spreading information and channeling local fashion via musicians’ appearances on television shows, in music videos, and at public events (Ventsel 2006).

In time, various music styles developed. The above-mentioned *estrada* is still important but is not the only existing style. In the 1970s rock made an entrance onto the Sakha music scene with the appearance of the first rock group, *Dapsy*. Rock music can be roughly divided into two groupings. The first is danceable rock music, popular among all age groups. The second is the so-called shamanic rock. Groups like *Cholbon*, *Ai-tal*, *Choroon*, and *Serge* play experimental progressive rock with elements of Sakha traditional music with performers wearing Sakha national costumes on stage. Shamanic rock is more appreciated among students and Sakha intellectuals and is also known in the Russian metropolises of Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as in music communities abroad.2

Pop music (*popsa*) is a style that caters to the younger generation of Sakha and represents the average disco-pop, influenced by similar Russian and Western music. *Popsa* artists tend to be younger than *estrada* and rock artists and their main audience are teenagers and young adults. Closely related to *popsa* is hip hop and R&B, which has become extremely popular among urban Sakha youth.

Another music genre in Sakha is folk music. Folk musicians are not only those who perform at village houses of culture; they also include artists with academic degrees, especially singers who, among other styles, perform traditional music. Sakha folk music is more in demand abroad than at home and therefore established folk musicians travel a lot, visiting folk music festivals all over the world.
As the salience of music for listeners and artists increased, the local music industry developed. During the Soviet period, almost all Sakha singers and musicians were employees of theaters or houses of culture. Their music production was based on a planned economy like any other field of Soviet life. Thus, all artists had a new program every year. Approved by their company’s council of arts, the plan determined how many concerts and tours with completely new content or repeating parts of old programs they were obliged or allowed to perform. According to these annual programs, theaters or clubs financed the artists, paying their salaries and covering expenses for costumes, travel, supporting bands, and so on.

The private music business emerged after the collapse of the socialist system. When I conducted my fieldwork in the Republic of Sakha in 2000 and 2001, a large number of singers and musicians still worked for the Teatr Estrady (Theater of Light Entertainment), although they were no longer strictly “tied” to the program and frequently performed outside their theater jobs. The Teatr Estrady provided artists with a small but stable income and some money to develop their stage shows, to order new costumes, and so on. In 2000 and 2001, most prominent Sakha singers and musicians were on a theater’s payroll, and so the importance of this institution cannot be underestimated. In the late 1990s, numerous independent promoters and producers entered the market; they organized concerts and tried to make a profit. A record company, Duoraan Records, has produced tapes and CDs with all kinds of Sakha music from old communist songs to new pop samplers. The owner of the record company, Petka Petrov, a first-generation city dweller from the Churapchy district, told me that he established the company out of necessity—being a singer he had difficulties with recording and publishing his music.

Informality largely characterized the Sakha music business in 2000 and 2001. There were hardly any legalized, formal relations among musicians, music producers, and market structures, namely, shop owners. Everything—recording agreements, guest participation in albums, delivery of songs for compilation—was based on oral agreement. Disseminating music was often considered a matter of friendly relationships; producers shared music with radio stations free of charge, featuring someone’s album was regarded as helping a fellow musician, and copyright issues were never discussed. As a result, music was understood by many artists and producers as a cultural activity, where money played a secondary role (Ventse 2004b).
When I returned to Sakha in June 2006, not having visited Iakutsk for three years, I faced a changed scene. The center of Iakutsk had been renovated: painted houses, neat parks, and new fashionable shops. New buildings and construction sites indicated some prosperity. I was told that radio *Victoria Sakhalyy* had now a competitor, another Sakha-speaking radio station, *Radio Duoraan Sakhalyy*. The new station mixed Sakha, foreign, and Russian pop. A number of new nightclubs and discotheques, similar to the posh exclusive nightclubs in Berlin, London, and New York, have been established in Iakutsk. A rock pub, *Garage*, the main venue for rock concerts, had opened in the suburbs of Iakutsk. I attended a few concerts of local Sakha and Russian amateur musicians’ mixed groups, playing different styles of rock.

Another surprise for me was the emergence of “glitter media”—new journals on quality paper, covering local VIP events and lives of the local elite. Looking at an issue of a new glossy journal, *Zhurfiks*, I assumed that popular culture in Iakutsk had advanced and become “real” with all its institutions and consumer orientation. In this sense, the capitalist “culture industry” in Sakha has reached its complexity. There were several profit-oriented institutions—record labels, clubs, radio, and print media—that were interconnected. These different institutions needed each other in order to reach their audience and market themselves or their products (Frith 1993, 2001; Hirsch 2000; Williamson and Cloonan 2007). Moreover, similar to many other capitalist countries, the state maintained its ambivalent (although weak) presence in the music business through its support for performers or genres, thus affecting the general picture (see Frith [1993] on UK, Ho [2007] on Taiwan; and Regev [2007] on Israel). The following three cases where I introduce individuals actively engaged in producing music, illustrate recent developments in the Sakha pop music business and the shift from informal community to clearly clustered scene with an increasing importance of formal relations.

**Varia versus Valia**

I met Varia Amanatova and Valia Romanova in 2000, when they both worked in the *Teatr Estrady* and were engaged in different music projects, performing in various genres. Both come from small rural settlements in the Churapch district, central Iakutia. Varia was a popular *popsa* singer, and also the lead singer in a folk rock group that toured...
abroad performing Sakha traditional music at foreign festivals. Like many singers, Varia tried to earn extra money by performing classical *estrada* in Sakha and Russian at weddings and private social events.

Her friend, Valia Romanova had a similar profile. Her style was slightly different as she added more elements of Sakha traditional music to her *popsa* songs. Besides that, she was in a group that performed the so-called psychedelic ethno-jazz, accompanied by Russian and Sakha musicians playing heavy psychedelic music. Valia performed with live bands and rock groups, as well as recorded *popsa* music and performed at private social functions for extra money. Varia Amanatova and Valia Romanova were good friends, spending time together and often jamming in the rehearsal room at the theater.

In 2006, I discovered that each artist has chosen a different path in the world of music. Valia had given up her career as a *popsa* artist and successfully performed ethno-rock music under the stage name Chyskyyrai. Her music became wilder and more depressive. With her band she had performed in Hungary and at festivals in other countries. Chyskyyrai had made contacts with British promoters and ethno-music DJs; in London she recorded music with musicians who had played on early Pink Floyd albums. In September 2006, Chyskyyrai returned to London to teach traditional Sakha singing techniques at the University of London and continued to perform all over Europe. Chyskyyrai’s plans included opening a home recording studio on the ground floor of the house she intended to build with earnings from her European tours. She intended to record and release records by young musicians performing Sakha ethno-rock. Chyskyyrai assured me that she has finished once and for all with *popsa*. She told me: “I have never liked that kind of music. I want to make music with a cultural message. Disco music is empty; it has no content. It is not art music [khudozhestvennaia muzyka].”

Chyskyyrai told me that she no longer was on good terms with Varia Amanatova. “Varia is now a part of the *bogema* [art, music and media elite in Yakutsk]. She hangs around with a different sort of people. I neither know, nor like them. And she has become really suspicious. Varia told me that we are competitors now, because she is involved with people who compete with each other. Our people support each other—it is not about money and fame among us.” Chyskyyrai told me that rock and *popsa* artists have diverged over the years. People no longer switch from one style to another and do not communicate with each other. Chyskyyrai, situated in the rock camp, accused *popsa* artists of commercialism. She said they play music only for money, imitate
every trend in Western entertainment music, and care less about Sakha culture. In every conversation, Chyskyyrai emphasized that Sakha rock is “the real music,” where people are first of all concerned with art making, with developing Sakha culture and promoting it in the world, and only then with profit. The irony was that Chyskyyrai generally refuses to perform for free. When performing on stage in Sakha, she tries to get the maximum pay; performing at festivals in Europe, she demands a minimum payment of €1,000.

I talked to Varia Amanatova mainly on the phone; she was very busy dividing her time among the recording studio, concerts, and rehearsals. Although a novice in 2000, she was already considered an established artist in 2006 and had had many hit songs released in recent years. Varia still worked for the Teatr Estrady, but her main source of income were private events outside of the theater. Varia had to rely more on personal contacts and the local “glitter” media to earn her monthly income; that is, to be important enough to be offered lucrative concerts. She often visited new exclusive members-only clubs in Iakutsk. To get into such places was a matter of prestige; where Chyskyyrai openly avoided such places, Varia was a regular visitor. Varia had become a real pop diva and an icon for many young female artists who copied her style of music and clothing.

When I arrived in Iakutsk in 2008, Varia sent me her new album called Alaas Kyyha (The Girl from Alaas). Most of the songs on this CD were love songs or romantic songs about rural settings as a source of the Sakha cultural heritage. The home village is a very common topic for the lyrics of Sakha popsa (Ventsel 2004a). According to the lyrics, the Sakha cultural heritage was important for Varia Amanatova. It was not the lyrics and songs but the lifestyle and economic expediency surrounding popsa that made Varia and the whole popsa community appear “commercial.” The highly competitive nature of the popsa genre and frequent media coverage made the people in this community appear “unserious” and money hungry.

Petka Petrov

For a long period Petka Petrov was the main producer of Sakha music and spearheaded significant developments and genres in Sakha music (Ventsel 2004a). In 2008, Petka has maintained his importance as one of the biggest producers in the contemporary Sakha music business, but lost his leading position when Chyskyyrai and other successful Sakha
artists also became producers. For example Igor Egorov, a former popsa star, has been very successful in recruiting artists, who perform in contemporary styles like hip hop or R&B. In the era of computers, many musicians have established home recording studios, at little expense, to produce club music and leave other Sakha artists to perform the voice-overs. The recent switch from cassette tapes to CDs has made it even less complicated to produce music at home and then distribute it.

Petka entertained me at his home, where in addition to living premises houses his studio. He complained that the new music has no soul, “Young artists try to copy all these modern styles, hip hop and R&B and soul. But you know, this is empty music, it has no content. The lyrics are banal, having no deep meaning. But I need my bread and butter and so I have to produce this music as well.” When I asked what type of music he personally likes, Petka answered, “I like classic Sakha rock like Cholbon and Ai-tal. This is the real Sakha music that reflects the real soul of our culture. You know, the sampler I produced a few years ago (Sakha Rock, Duoraan Records) is the one I did because I wanted to publish that music. I knew in advance that I would not earn any money with it and, indeed, I did not. But this was music for the soul, and it had to be published.”

Despite his complaints, Petka is, above all, a businessman with a good instinct for new trends and methods. “I am introducing contracts. No one uses contracts here. But sometimes I have problems with artists. You announce a concert, make posters and do all the promotion and then the singer does not turn up, being drunk and sleeping somewhere. I need something to make them pay a fine [štraf]. Then they act in a more disciplined way. If we have a contract, I can demand more. Today you take care of your people but you can never be sure how they will act.”

When Petka used the phrase “my people” I became fascinated and asked him to clarify what he meant by that. “There are people around me. Mostly young new singers, but some older ones as well, like Varia [Amanatova]. I help them to book concerts. When I make large-scale gala concerts, I invite my people and introduce new songs to the audience. Sometimes I do not earn any money with such concerts but I help my people,” he explained. It is in this aspect, I contend, that significant changes in the music business have occurred. With the appearance of new producers, many of whom tried to surround themselves with stars, potential stars and their success (and income) contributed also to the success and income of producers. Moreover, most singers-cum-producers have given up their activities as musicians and perform only

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on rare occasions. To my question as to why he has withdrawn from active performing, Petka answered,

I have traveled throughout Sakha and visited all the villages. No way do I want to do it again. To drive for hours to perform 2–3 songs, eat crap and sleep in strange places. I have committed myself to recording—this is more important to me. To have good results [in the recording business], you have to spend a lot of time organizing sessions. And if you invest much time in it, it pays off. Previously you could make a track on your computer and that was it. Today I have people who make arrangements. If I know that somebody plays good guitar parts, I let him do it. Or if I know another man who writes good ballads, I let him arrange music. And so on. Only this way—putting the efforts of many people in one song—you can have success today.

Throughout the interview, Petka appeared to be professional and focused on certain business strategies to achieve success. His strategy was more calculated and there was less improvisation than five years ago, when what he released was not always “polished” music.

Kiunnei

Kiunnei (Sun) is the stage name of a twenty-one-year-old Iakutsk-born female singer from a large Sakha family of pop musicians. Her father is a member of one of the most important shamanic rock bands, Choroon. Before we met, she had released a CD compilation to celebrate her tenth anniversary as a singer and a songwriter. When I met her for an interview at a restaurant, she told me that she wrote her first song at the age of seven, and at the age of ten she started writing songs for other artists to perform. She then started singing and became a known pop star, winning various song competitions. “Why were you so interested in writing songs for other people and producing them?” I asked.

I still do not think that I am a good singer. That is why I prefer other people to perform my songs. Or sometimes I write a song for a specific someone. I write only music, not lyrics. I take my lyrics from old Sakha poets or ask some modern poet to write them. I tried to write words but I was not satisfied with the result. And then I go to the studio with the musicians. I know how the song should sound, so I want to take care that the end product is as I dreamt it in the first place. I can afford to do this because I do not earn my living by it. My parents give me money.
She was the first, but not the last, Sakha performer who complained that the Teatr Estrady has lost its role as the main supporter of Sakha contemporary music: “They should do more to promote and develop Sakha entertainment music. The Teatr Estrady is a state institution and should be the one that cares most for the future of the music.” Kiunnei, full of intentions to improve the current state of affairs in the Sakha music business, shared her plans with me, “Sakha music needs professional culture managers. Nowadays we do not have anybody with real management training for the music business in Iakutsk. All the people around us are just amateurs, who do not know how to organize things to make them work. Nobody uses contracts, and there is too much cheating and a non-professional attitude. This is why I want to go to Moscow to study culture management.”

Kiunnei presented me with a homemade sampler of Sakha songs ranging from classic shamanic rock to contemporary hip hop stars. All the songs were listed and the authors of the music and words were credited for each song. For the first time in all the years I have been visiting Sakha I came across sensitivity toward authorship issues. In earlier years people used to give me their home-burned CDs and I considered myself lucky to have the song titles listed on the front cover. This reminded me of the way Petka Petrov described his experiences of when he shared his music with radio stations free of charge, whereas nowadays he asks for a payment for his music. As a producer and author of songs, Kiunnei was well aware of the success or failure of her songs and, because of her background, of the circulation mechanisms of the music business. As an author and co-author of many successful Sakha pop songs, she was aware of her part in the song’s success; she wanted it to be acknowledged and, if possible, receive payment for it.

I noticed the attempt to formalize business relations in 2006. Informal relations were still present but many of my informants expressed their interest in contracts. Different from the Soviet era and early post-socialist period was also the process of professionalization. Frith (2001: 39) writes that record companies in the West create “fan communities” in order to market their music more efficiently. In the Republic of Sakha, musicians themselves were aware of the existence of such communities and reshaped their activity to focus directly on one such community. As mentioned above, the shifting between different genres, typical for 2000–1, has vanished by 2006. This process was in direct relationship with other kinds of professionalization. Musicians and producers worked harder to produce high-quality music, which in practice meant focusing on one genre and using specifically talented musicians.
or writers to record and arrange their music. Moreover, everybody in the music business was keen to use the possibilities of available modern technology.

Another change was an awareness of intellectual property. Musicians and producers involved in the complex process of recording good quality songs now paid more attention to participants’ contribution to the production process. Despite the fact that in the Republic of Sakha copyright and intellectual property laws did not work in reality, in many cases musicians, authors, and producers had found possibilities to express their authorship.

**How Capitalist Is Sakha Music?**

The capitalist music business is, in theory, a profit-oriented entrepreneurship where record companies create and focus on different target groups in order to sell their product more efficiently. In this business, people are aware of the intellectual property issue and the way it relates to their income. Images and ideologies are used to market the product, as are radio and print media.

My interviewees gave me a very interesting, if somewhat confusing and contradictory, picture of what is going on in modern Sakha music communities. New business methods are mixed with more or less cultural ideas and, in each case, the relationship between the two differs slightly. In an interesting way pop music in Sakha has never been seen as degrading to the national culture but a part of it. Furthermore, Sakha shamanic rock is interpreted as a continuation of Sakha culture, using contemporary sound technology (Dobrizheva 1998: 170–71). Now, a market economy has emerged and marketing interests have gained greater importance than before. After the decline of the Teatr Estrady, musicians were forced to look for income outside the theater’s program, which means that they depend more on the taste and expectations of producers, audience, and organizers. It seems that modes of capitalist production of culture have increased their importance in Sakha’s current popular music.

Looking at the theory of mass-produced culture, many scholars—starting with Horkheimer and Adorno (2001)—have stressed the calm calculation of a culture industry that is only interested in gaining profit and manipulates people’s taste to increase their profit. The Republic of Sakha left the socialist economy in favor of (quite rough) capitalism where people depend directly on their legal and illegal income and the
state provides very few social guarantees. The situation, where most people of the republic are focused on earning their living at all costs, left very little space for non-economic ideals. The last state institution that operated, at least partially, outside capitalist market laws—the Teatr Estrady—has lost its position. It seems that Garnham (2001: 225) was right in arguing that a capitalist economy and cultural production are inseparable. Moreover, even when the state establishes its own cultural institutions and mechanisms to control the culture industry, it fails to gain complete control over it (226–27). Garnham concludes, “mass-media can only be understood as a capitalist enterprise” or a “commercial enterprise in a capitalist economy” (228, 234) and cites Marx and Engels’s thesis that control of the means of mental production is part of the political economy of a capitalist state. Taking a brief look at many classical works on contemporary mass culture, one assumes that the term “economy” has a rather negative connotation; by bringing in economy, culture as a social phenomenon is reduced to something that is discussed in terms of access to resources, impersonal production, and consumption (Storey 1998: 70, 221).

I agree with John Storey, who doubts whether music consumption and production in contemporary society follow directly capitalist ideology (Storey 1998: 225). When looking at the two former friends, Varia and Chyskyyrai, it can be argued that their behavior follows the logic of the market, as they became competitors their friendship died out. Both have followed different paths into different clusters of the local music scene. At first sight, the local popsa and the rock music scene (tusovka) are different. Although the boundaries of the scene are “fluid” and “dispersed,” to use Cohen’s term (1999), different music communities seem to have their own identity. As noted by Hall (2003) in his discussion of “new identities,” the scene identity is more about “identification.” There are certain “markers” (Mbembe 1992) that give people a basis for common solidarity—their own network, distinct music taste, forms of entertainment, as well as “memory, fantasy and desire” (Hall 2003: 94).

The impact of the market economy is stronger on the popsa scene. There is higher inner competition and strategic thinking in terms of future careers and legal aspects (contracts and royalties). Rock seems to be more oriented toward the cultural mission within the market economy, a process that Willis named “symbolic creativity” (Willis et al. 1990). To cite Frith, “rock thinks he is anti-commercial commercial sector” (2001: 50). However, informal relations between both fragments of the Sakha music business are still very strong and have an important
position. Both in *popsa* as in rock, there are producers who established a client–patron-like relationship with musicians. Patrons—such as Petka Petrov or Chyskyyrai—not only earn money with “their people”; they support musicians when there is no immediate profit to gain. Both argue that in this way they just take care of performers and guide them to further success. In many cases this support does not need financial investment from the patron; for example, Petka simply makes a few phone calls to ensure that “his people” get a concert. The young student Kiunnei participates in record sessions (including time spent in the studio polishing other people’s songs), while her parents provide for her; and Chyskyyrai, having booked a studio for one day, gives some free time to young rock artists for recording. Despite the increasing formalization of business relations (contracts, copyright issues, and royalties), many things are still negotiated on an informal level.

This segment of cooperation in contemporary Sakha pop music is not an example of “negative reciprocity” in the sense that Sahlins (1972) commented in his work, it is rather a delayed return (Woodburn 1998), when an advanced musician and producer looks into the future to ensure the loyalty of musicians who might be successful after some time. However, I would argue that there is more than that. Kiunnei, Petka, and Chyskyyrai have stressed the importance of Sakha culture and its development, whereas their understanding of it is different. For Chyskyyrai, the future lies in “non-commercial” ethnic rock, which in reality includes a lot of non-ethnic Sakha musicians and audience. For Petka, releasing the music of young Sakha hip hop, *popsa*, and R&B artists ensures him, besides income, the possibility of releasing non-commercial records, which he regards as “music for the soul,” that is, shamanic rock groups. Kiunnei sees her mission to be in legal activities as a music manager to develop Sakha music, which in her case might also be *popsa*, as she is very enthusiastic about new Sakha rap star Jeda, whom she sees as bringing modern sounds into Sakha music.

Bohannan (1973) uses the term “cultural pool,” which is a collective representation for many different groups and people involved. He writes “each party (either person or a group) brings to the transaction certain cultural elements. Each chooses, more or less (usually less) consciously, from among the large or small number of cultural elements available to him, in order to act” (1973: 258). Modern Sakha music is also a “cultural pool” that contains different components (or genres) that all can be used, depending on individual understanding, to develop the music as a part of Sakha culture. Musicians, songwriters, and producers are free to “import elements of one field to another”
and combine a product that can be defined as Sakha music according to their cultural ideas and market strategies (Sewell 1992).

In the modern Republic of Sakha, there exist different types of media and various club cultures. *Popsa* is an object of the “glitter media” and exclusive nightclubs. Rock has withdrawn to small clubs and shares local Sakha speaking radio airwaves with *popsa*, but enjoys state media support as many artists continue to work for the *Teatr Estrady*. In all cases, all producers and artists interpret “real” in their own way, which also causes different strategies of success. Varia Amanatova values money, fame, and the attention of the “glitter media.” Chyskyyrai wants to distance herself from the *bogema*. Her goal is to perform and help to produce rock music with elements of Sakha traditional music, and although both the audience and musicians involved are to a large extent non-Sakha, she believes that by doing so she participates in the Sakha cultural project. Petka Petrov produces different kinds of music, subsidizing one genre at the cost of another and trying to profit from different legal procedures. Kiunnei sees success and effective management of Sakha *popsa* music as part of developing and modernizing Sakha identity. She wants to make use of legal market economy rules to fully achieve her goal.

These are different strategies of different Sakha “culture industries,” to use the term coined by Williamson and Cloonan (2007). These strategies are used or copied by young Sakha musicians to achieve star status in the music communities of Iakutsk. Like three out of the four persons described in this article, most young Sakha musicians have rural background; as a rule they are first generation city dwellers. Argounova-Low (2007) has shown that city and village people in Sakha are interconnected but also have an ambivalent relationship. The movement of village food (butter, milk, meat, fish) to the city represents, for city dwellers, the relationship with their home district and village, at the same time rural youths in the city cause problems. Also ambivalent is the village-city relationship within the framework of “cultural industries.” The village is a place where Sakha identity is rooted; besides love songs artists of all genres sing about the home village and mother who lives there. The “new identities” within Sakha music circuits draw their identity markers from the world of the village (Hall 2003). Yet, the music that stresses this heritage is definitely urban based. Moreover, as Cawelty states, the whole “popular culture is urban oriented” (1990: 85). Most recording studios are located in the cities; all the main clubs where young Sakha artists can make a career and receive attention from the media are located in Iakutsk. All singers and musicians dream
of a wealthy life in the city and I do not know any successful musician who has attempted to move permanently back to the village.\(^6\)

The urban dream of success and a colorful life-style draws young people to the city. Despite optimistic voices about the “sustainability” of Sakha village life and the economy (Crate 2006), the migration of the youth into cities, especially Iakutsk, is a national problem. Those who start their music career sing about the village, which is a symbolic pool of Sakha cultural ideals and values. These young musicians from villages are also a human resource pool from where producers pick the talents. Those talents and their music are supported and channeled in the way producers think could be sold in the local music market; that is, according to the rules of the genre. In the wider context of the Sakha music business, official and unofficial producers like Petrov, Kiunnei, or Chyskyryrai are “cultural brokers” whose activity is affected by imported pop culture (Peace 1998). Rock and *popsa* have slightly different categories of success, which is, for the people involved, also the borderline between commercial and anti-commercial music. Nevertheless, the Sakha village heritage and culture are used in all music genres to produce hits.

From the economic point of view, Sakha music is capitalist in its nature—the purpose of making music is to earn one’s living. There are tens, maybe hundreds, of young people who want to be part of the music business. Producers from different music communities try to control the process by establishing formal contracts and informal patron-client relations with young musicians. The village is a symbol that can be used to achieve success in the urban environment. Conversely, the use of the village theme is not only a cold calculation to increase the marketing chances of songs, as Adorno and Horkheimer or Attali would argue. The “new identities” of the different music communities stress and use Sakha culture as part of their music. Sakha symbols are mixed into rock, disco, *estrada*, hip hop and R&B. Their expression of the Sakha heritage is different; rock often uses traditional Sakha musical instruments whereas in *popsa* and other styles the lyrics show the focus.

**Conclusion**

In my earlier articles about Sakha contemporary music, I have demonstrated that the notion of Sakha culture and ethnicity was deeply rooted in the creating, performing, and marketing of the music (Ventsel 2004a,
2004b, 2006). Years later, the process of making music in Sakha has become more realistic and subordinated to the market economy. Authorship of the music has more importance nowadays, because this is not only an income resource, but also a sign of creativity. The Sakha artists and producers I know are wary of plagiarism; I was often warned not to upload their music on the Internet or to copy it for other people. To keep both sides of the authorship under control, musicians and producers have started using Western methods of copyright protection and royalties. To organize music as an entertainment, promoters are interested in introducing contracts that guarantee the success of musical events and prevent loss of income. The reason for such changes is that all the culture industries in Sakha have become more capitalist.

Yet, the music business in the Republic of Sakha has maintained its informal features. De Boeck has noted that “capitalist ideology is not contradictory to local forms of solidarity and reciprocity” (1998: 801). Inside different music communities, informal structures exist that could be characterized as patron-client relations. Recording sessions or concerts are often organized via such structures. Moreover, the informal structures also have an ideological background, because producers and leaders of the music communities see themselves as carriers of the Sakha culture and heritage.

In the context of Sakha the important aspect is that music links the urban and rural space. Most Sakha music idealizes Sakha heritage and village life. At the same time, music is an opportunity for village people to set foot in the city. In turn, village youth is a resource pool for the music business in its search for new talent. Most musicians and producers, although living in the city of Iakutsk, came from a village. The idealization of the village is not a contradiction, because in the Sakha national ideology the village has a symbolic meaning. Interesting is that different music communities have their own approach to the village culture and this is smoothly adapted into their community ideology. Different possibilities of reflecting Sakha culture and heritage in Sakha music are also important for different music-related groups to construct their identity. Serious, commercial vs. non-commercial, and other epithets are used to describe different music genres and scenes.

Despite the fact that the Republic of Sakha is, in terms of its population, a small cultural space, there exist many strategies and structures for linking different segments of the market economy with an informal space.
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Notes

1. House of culture or дом кultury is basically a village or a small town club. They were established in the Soviet era and do still exist in most Siberian villages. House of culture is subordinated to the village administration department of culture and houses all main social events from weekend discos to New Year parties.

2. The only vinyl sampler of Sakha rock, the double album Tabyk: Sovremennaia Muzyka Naroda Sakha released in Moscow in 1993 is highly appreciated by Western record collectors. According to some experts I consulted, this album in good condition might cost up to US$1,000. This double album features songs by Cholbon, Choroon, Ai-tal, and Stepanida Borisova.

3. Translated from Sakha, Duoraan means echo.

4. From the beginning, her music awoke mixed reactions from the audience and the media. Some people supported her psychedelic ethno-jazz project, whereas others felt, as one journalist wrote, that it: "pozorit iakutskiu estradu" (brings shame to Sakha entertainment music).

5. Alaas is an open space in the taiga where Sakha people have traditionally established their settlements due to rich pasture for their cattle.

6. I was told that Ai-tal have built a recording studio in their home village in the Viliui district. This group’s musicians live in the city but go regularly to
their home village in order to practice and record new songs in the “authentic” environment.

References


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