Blurring masculinities in the Republic of Sakha, Russia

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ABSTRACT
Siberia in general has traditionally been a region where men are expected to be ‘real’ men, i.e. to behave in a pronouncedly virile way. This perception is related to the history of the region – bringing ‘civilisation’ to the region was in direct relation to the intensive physical work. Urban life in Siberia was until recently dominated by such proletarian masculinity since urban centres were places where a large part of industrial workers lived. With the Western style urbanization and advent of new enterprises, this perception is changing. The new urban professional class mostly holds office jobs and is engaged in non-physical work. The article explains how socioeconomic factors have historically shaped the perceptions and performances of masculinity in Siberia. Further, I juxtapose ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ masculinity in the Republic of Sakha. In this region, softness is usually related with the office jobs. While certain masculine stereotypes continue to exist – like reliability, responsibility, loyalty – traditional understanding of toughness is often rejected. As one paradigm, I take the changes in attitudes towards alcohol consumption. The emergence of more diverse and ‘softer’ forms of masculinity do not generally question existing gender hierarchies, as I will point out toward the end of the article.

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Introduction
It was in June 2000. Having just arrived to Yakutsk, the capital of a Russian region of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) for my PhD research, I was trying to sleep in my hotel room. Yet sleep was elusive, since I suffered from jet lag for the first time in my life. Around 2.30 am, I heard a loud noise from outside. The hotel was located in the inner city close to a roundabout. The noise I heard came from a huge crowd of young people moving from the city center to the suburbs. In June, nights in Yakutsk never get completely dark, and in the dim light I saw many hundreds of young people walking over the roundabout, returning from the nightclubs. Within fifteen minutes, most people had passed by and I returned to bed. Almost immediately, I heard another, very aggressive noise. Rushing back to the window, I saw a group fight in the middle of the roundabout. Young guys were screaming at each other and striking their foes when possible. Obviously, they were intoxicated, but I noticed immediately that this was not an uncoordinated drunken brawl; these young lads knew rather well how to fight. A bigger group of five
young men tried to coral three young adults who skillfully escaped this strategy. The scene attained a surreal quality as the scant traffic on the roundabout stopped and a few car drivers parked there as if waiting for something. I could sense the brutality and aggression that filled the air. Suddenly, however, the fight stopped and both parties dispersed with loud curses and offensive remarks addressed to their opponents. My conclusion was that I should indeed take very seriously the warnings I had been given before arriving, about Yakutsk being a city rife with violence [and criminality].

It was another June night, this time in 2015. I had arrived with my family, and we stayed with relatives close to the city center. It was 3.00 am and I could not sleep, and I got up and looked out of the window. It was an early Sunday morning, the most convenient night of the week for clubbing, but the streets were almost empty. Three fashionably dressed young men, probably students, crossed the small square in front of the house. I could clearly hear their voices as they talked to each other. Two of them seemed sober, while the third had some slight problem with his coordination due to alcohol consumption. They passed by quickly. When I met a friend the next day the first question I asked was: 'What has happened to Yakutsk? Three o'clock on Saturday night and there is no-one on the streets, and the few I saw were not even drunk!' She smiled and said: 'Yakutsk has changed.'

**Theorizing the concept of masculinity**

This article explores gradual yet wide-reaching changes in the notions and displays of masculinity that I have witnessed in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) and especially in the capital Yakutsk from June 2000 to January 2017. The focus is on urban spaces. The analysis proceeds from an understanding of gender as ‘something evoked, created, and sustained day by day’ (Thompson & Walker, 1989, p. 865). The article shows that there is a certain pressure toward ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) but accepted ways of ‘doing gender’ have multiplied over the last one and a half decades, and more improvisation is allowed (Butler, 2004, p. 1). West and Zimmermann pointed out that while ‘it is individuals who “do” gender – it is situated doing, carried out, in a virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production’ (1987, p. 126). Butler adds that ‘gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing.’ (1999, p. 33)

Social-scientific studies on masculinity have a history of more than three decades. As a point of departure, I take the influential work of R.W. Connell (1987, 1995, 1998; Olson, 2004), along with the criticisms and revisions to it (see Schippers, 2007). In most works on gender, masculinity is seen in juxtaposition with femininity and often from the perspective of power struggles between sexes in different settings, such as epistemological writing (Brooks, 2006; Deutsch, 2007; Moore, 2012; Schippers, 2002), literature (Borenstein, 2000), scholarship on class (Charles, 2008; De Grazia & Furlough, 1996; Gal & Kligman, 2000; Hansen, 1986; McDonald, 1994; Pine, 2000; Tibbals, 2007), pop culture (Amico, 2009; Atkinson, 2006; Brill, 2008; Leblanc, 2001), space and place (Anahita & Mix, 2006; Berg, 1994; Bodenhorn, 1993; Cassidy, 2014; Massey, 1994), politics (Caestecker & Moore, 2011 Fathi, 2006; Keinz, 2009; Leacock, 1999; Ortner, 1996) or ethnicity and race (Harvey, 1997; Jensen, 2009; Johnson, 1998; Kandiyoti, 2007; Raju, 2011; Raval, 1989; Shepherd, Luebbers, & Dolan, 2013).
It is often assumed that social relations are shaped by a certain ‘dominant hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 1995) whose configurations are dynamic, changing and always in flux. In strict definition, hegemonic masculinity is ‘a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance.’ (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985, p. 592) It is also assumed that while most men do not wholly (or not always) comply with the normative concept of the dominant hegemonic masculinity they nevertheless accept it and are somehow oriented toward it (Carrigan et al., 1985). This means that we can speak of plurality of masculinities that are attached to and affected by the dominant concept (see Schippers, 2007). In the Sakha case the ‘dominant’ means associating masculinity generally with a ‘breadwinner role’ and relating it to Sakha identity.

In a framework of this complexity, scholars talk about ‘soft’ masculinity in juxtaposition to ‘hard’ masculinity. ‘Hard’ masculinity can be aptly illustrated by the laconic nature of a John Wayne (Meeuf, 2009), whereas ‘soft’ masculinity is understood as a more domestic form of masculinity, related to men engaged in domestic work and taking care of children (Coles, 2008; Jeffords, 1998). As these studies show, ‘soft’ masculinity does not necessarily question the basics of gender roles; rather, it may just add another angle to the superiority of men over women in modern society. As Peberdy puts it: ‘Rather than existing in stark contradiction, hard and soft masculinities depend on the existence of the other for definition. Representations of masculinity are inherently bipolar, moving between hard and soft modes.’ (Peberdy, 2010, p. 237). In most cases, the emergence of ‘soft’ masculinity is explained by the appearance of highly skilled professions with flexible working time (Louie, 2012).

Connell (1998) called for a more differentiated understanding of these global phenomena. Moving toward an analysis of regional variations, this article argues that certain interpretations of masculinity indeed show specific traits in a post-socialist transition society such as that of Russia. In the Russian case, hardness and softness are defined differently than in the West. ‘Hard’ masculinity in Siberia is first and foremost associated with a certain frontier ethos of ‘cultivating’ wilderness, creating and maintaining a ‘civilized’ life under harsh environmental conditions. Softness is often associated with modernity and new indoor jobs and lifestyle.

The question of how gender roles and relations can be discerned spatially (and how, in fact, they shape spaces and places) has been pursued by different social sciences, including geography. It has sometimes been associated with the ‘cultural turn’ in geography (McDowell, 1999). Geographic research also contributed to the examination of colonial and post-colonial societies to re-engineer social order through gendering the space (Domosh & Seager, 2001; Nelson & Seager, 2005). Among others, feminist geographers have discussed gendered knowledge production and feminist research methodology (Moss, 2002; Rose, 1993), religion and place (Morin & Guelke, 2007), and gendered geographies in non-Western societies (Raju, 2011). With regard to the Circumpolar North and Siberia, only recently have feminist approaches become influential in the analysis of social change (see Vladimirova & Habeck, 2018).

As a Post-Soviet region in the circumpolar North, the Republic of Sakha has seen profound socioeconomic shifts, and the task is to scrutinize how they have reshaped various practices of ‘doing’ masculinity. It is assumed that with the vanishing of industrial jobs former proletarian workers have come to be affected by the ‘crisis of masculinity’
(Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2002), whereby former ‘breadwinner roles’ have become obsolete and the stability of existing patriarchal structures is questioned (Nayak, 2003, 2006). In post-Soviet Russia, this crisis often coalesced with a shift of the breadwinner’s role to women. The reason for the appearance of ‘men in crisis’ is often the sense of loss of ‘hard’ masculinity, the performance of which gradually became superfluous – or useless (Ashwin, 1999, 2000; Ashwin & Lytkina, 2004). Transformation of gender roles can be, nevertheless, different in such a prosperous region as the Republic of Sakha, where male unemployment is rare and significant shifts within the family – or more exactly, shifts in the responsibility for contributing monetary income – are not yet very pronounced.

There are astoundingly few studies conducted by local scholars in the Republic of Sakha about the complexity of changes on perceptions of gender and masculinity (Proshkina, Khoroshikh, & Sergievich, 2016; Vinokurova, 2010). In view of the limited thematic scope of these works, my aim is to complement these by a performative approach to the analysis of masculinity. In order to understand the nature of performance we should also take into consideration certain habits like alcohol consumption, and smoking, and look at the wider lifestyle aspects and aesthetics. I place masculinity in Sakha within a broader framework of economic, political and social changes, and demonstrate how these factors impact the understanding of masculinity in some segments of the society.

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia): field research in a region of economic growth

The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is the largest territorial unit of the Russian Federation and belongs to Far Eastern Federal District, which contains nine different territorial units. The republic is a large but sparsely populated territory, covering more than three million square kilometers; with slightly less than a million people, 55 per cent of which belong to the titular ethnic group, the Turkic speaking Sakha.

The Republic of Sakha is famous for its diamond resources, producing 30 per cent of the world’s diamonds and almost 100 per cent of Russia’s diamonds (Duncan, 1994). In addition to diamond mining, it has significant resources including gold, gas, oil, precious metals, coal, and timber. Natural-resource extraction is the domain of big companies in the region, as is large-scale construction (Egorov, 2006). While mining and oil extraction is dominated by state owned companies, in the construction sector private companies have the upper hand (Stepanova & Nogovitsyn, 2011). In recent years we can see the expansion of large Russian oil extraction companies into the territory of the republic. Surgutneftegaz and Lukoil, traditionally located in Western Siberia, started to operate in Sakha and have built their office buildings in Yakutsk. This clearly drives up wages in the comparatively small segment of the work force directly connected to such companies, but it also has an impact on the service and construction sector, especially in the capital of Yakutsk.

I have been conducting fieldwork in the region since 2000 and could witness the many changes in the local social climate. Until 2005, the typical post-socialist kiosk economy was very visible in Yakutsk. Kiosks gradually disappeared after that, but around 2010 the city government actively began to pursue a policy of removing them. The formal reason was their rather unsuitable appearance in the urban environment, and the suspicion they
were engaged in money laundering. In parallel to the relicensing of small shops and kiosks, the republic introduced harsh regulations on the sale of alcohol (Zhegusov & Ivanovna, 2012). The shops were allowed to sell alcoholic beverages only from 2 to 8 pm. This was the final blow to many small shops because, as a rule, they earned a substantial share of their income from the late-night alcohol trade. This was also a period of small creative cafés, bakeries, video sales and rental, and stylish clothing shops. Many such places were run by enthusiasts who engaged in these forms of entrepreneurship on a part time basis. Around 2012–2013, such places began to close, to be replaced by rather conventional cafés, cocktail bars, upmarket restaurants, travel agencies, and furniture shops.

Yakutsk is the regional hub of cultural and social life, the location of the republic’s government and its various institutions, along with the most important theaters, nightclubs and regional ‘national’ TV and radio companies (Ventsel, 2006; Yakutia, 2007). According to the 2010 All-Russia Population Census, 73 per cent of the population in the Republic of Sakha live in urban settlements. The main part of the population (45.1 per cent) lives in the capital Yakutsk. The total population (as of 1 January 2012) of Yakutsk was 278,400. In the Republic of Sakha, 80 per cent of small and medium size enterprises are concentrated in Yakutsk and three smaller cities (Neryungri, famous for its coal industry; Mirnyi, the diamond industry’s center; and Lensk, another center for diamond mining; all of these counting between 20,000 and 80,000 inhabitants). There is a direct link between a certain segment of the urban population with high income and the service sector. Yakutsk, as the capital, is the favorite destination for regional urban and rural migrants, especially because it is the location of most of the regional universities (Egorov, 2006, p. 112; Stepanova & Nogovitsyn, 2011, pp. 49–65). Census data reveal that the average age of people living in Yakutsk was 32.7 years as of 2012.

This study of changing masculinities is based on my long-time fieldwork in the region among native Sakha people. Since 2000 I have kept field diaries, collected articles from local newspapers or journals, and taken hundreds of photographs. I have conducted research on a range of topics over that time period. Among these were the city’s music business (Ventsel, 2004a, 2004b, 2006), reindeer herding in northern communities (Ventsel, 2005, 2007), and entrepreneurship (Ventsel, 2017), and in all these domains, the topic of gender came up constantly. Whether studying decollectivization (Ventsel, 2003) or Sakha hip hop (Ventsel & Peers, 2017) gender hierarchies and roles could not be avoided, likewise the topic came up in Sakha hip hop videos as much as in discussions about division of labor in the household. The views on masculinity were discussed with my informants when I conducted fieldwork on informal methods of social control in the early 2000s. Crime and collective forms of punishments are also related to the perception of pride, loyalty, toughness or reliability in a rural setting. My later fieldwork in Yakutsk showed that many of these interpretations were in that time period shared in the urban settings not only by ethnic Sakha but also by local Russians (Ventsel, 2005, 2007). Moreover, in the Sakha press and other regional media, numerous article can be found in which authors express their views on what is a ‘real’ man or woman. While all data I have collected illuminates general processes of transformations in the perception of gender categories, then information about certain aspects of the topic is gathered from rather secondary resources. Therefore, the understandings and perceptions of masculinity on the part of women or young urban people who are not involved in the local music
scene is constructed from fragments I have documented when researching the abovementioned topics.

For the purpose of this article, I have selected more than 30 interviews, most of which are related to my research on entrepreneurship, Sakha identity and local pop music. I also draw on statistical data on economy, alcohol consumption and other related issues published by local economists and sociologists. Some of the statistics were collected by the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Sakha but it remains officially unpublished. I also use statistical data published in the republic’s newspapers, especially in the police reports section. In addition, I rely on my field diaries where I have documented numerous informal discussions and different events and situations.

**Proletarian masculinity**

The history of the industrial development of the Yakutian ASSR (as the Republic of Sakha was called up to the early 1990s) started in 1949, when geologists detected diamonds in significant amounts (Tichotsky, 2000, p. 102). 1957 marks the beginning of the mining at Mirnyi and subsequently other sites. Hartley (2014, p. 224) mentions the initial enthusiasm that accompanied the so-called ‘mastering of the North’ (osvoenie Severa) campaign. This was seen as a civilizing process, establishing a new society and spreading ‘culturalness’ (kul’turnost’) in Arctic virgin lands (Habeck, 2011, p. 66). This enthusiasm and optimism for a bright future was described by Lennart Meri (1961), the first President of the Estonian Republic, when he visited Yakutia as a Soviet student in 1956. People expressed their pride because of their contribution to the Soviet project of ‘mastering of the North’, and ‘doing everything for the children’ (Hartley, 2014, p. 229). According to the 1918 Constitution, work was ‘a duty of all citizens of the republic’ (Akhapkin, 1970, p. 156). More than anything, work and proletarian courage was valued in Siberia during the period of industrialization.

The adulation of proletarian strength is well depicted by numerous murals, such as the one at the village administration of Batygai, in the Verkhoiansk district. Batygai was a former tin mining center, something that in Russian is classified as an urban-type settlement (poselok gorodskogo tipa). Such industrial settlements were in the Soviet period (and are now) places with a relatively urban life style and infrastructure, differing radically from the villages, where the main livelihood is still cattle breeding and, to some extent, the growing of vegetables. The paintings are in typical Soviet style, showing two sturdy geologists in the taiga. Depicted behind them are a helicopter, mountains, and a small research station. Both geologists have a serious expression and look very focused. The painting symbolizes what is sometimes called ‘conquering the nature’. In Soviet discourse, the Arctic was seen as a ‘forefront of the Soviet civilization’ (Laruelle, 2014, p. 27) and the people who came there regarded themselves to be on a mission to conquer the wilderness.

Physically hard work in an extreme climate created a specific ethos that can be felt even today. Personal toughness and reliability are still central to Siberian male identity (Anisimova & Echevskaia, 2012). Soviet life, especially on industrial sites, was dominated by ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (as defined above). Notwithstanding communist rhetoric about gender equality, men had a superior status in such an industrial atmosphere where heavy physical work was better rewarded than administrative or social professions. In
the latter, disproportionally more women worked for smaller salaries (Baisheva et al., 2012: Introduction; Drobizheva, 1998; Tarasov, Egorov, & Kulakovskii, 2013; Vinokurova, 2010; Vinokurova & Boiakova, 2009). On the other hand, what came to the fore on these construction sites – arguably more than anywhere else – is Ashwin and Lytkina’s remark about the Soviet gender order, namely that ‘men’s self-realization was thus to be confined to the public sphere, where their dominance continued to be seen as legitimate and natural.’ (Ashwin & Lytkina, 2004, p. 193). Olson (2004) cites Borenstein (2000) arguing that ‘the resulting “cult of (masculine) productive labor,” combined with the “degradation of (feminine) domestic and reproductive pursuits” meant that “Soviet society was characterized by a reverence for traditionally masculine values at the expense of conventional femininity.”’ (Borenstein, 2000, p. 17; Olson, 2004, p. 52).

Moreover, both indigenous people and the incoming Russians were in agreement that domestic work, as a rule, was mainly a female job. In order to bring women out of the domestic sphere, Soviet power intentionally created jobs for women, especially in indigenous villages, but did not succeed in freeing women from domestic work (Vitebsky & Wolfe, 2001).

As Hartley mentions, life in the Soviet Arctic was not only about heavy work but also included manifold recreational activities like dance, cinema or theater (2014, pp. 225–226). Both leisure and work were often accompanied with alcohol consumption. In 2000 one manager of a private company specialized in building underground ice chambers told me, ‘I will never hire a man who does not drink!’ There is an old Soviet era attitude that ‘heavy drinkers were also heavy workers’ (Kesküla, 2013, p. 245). Drinking was not only a means of relaxation, but was, and still is, among people engaged in exhausting physical work, a ‘way of establishing the unity of the collective’ (Kesküla, 2013, p. 246).

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yakutia had an established industry with the focus on the extraction of mineral resources, with remarkable ethnic divisions – incoming Russians and other people from European parts of the Soviet Union constituted the majority of the urban population, and approximately 90 per cent of industrial and transport jobs were occupied by them (Egorov, 1990, 2006). Sakha people mainly formed the rural population, with the exception of a small urban intelligentsia. The latter was highly represented in the Republic’s government and Communist Party structures and had therefore considerable influence over political and social life in Yakutia, but their influence over big state companies – subordinated to Moscow – was rather limited (Hartley, 2014, p. 231; Mowat, 1970). The study shows that a few Sakha women reached top positions in Communist Party structures (the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Yakut Autonomous Socialist republic was traditionally a woman) and they formed approximately 40 per cent of the membership of district and town councils. However, the local nomenklatura remained dominated by men (Avdeyeva, Kugaevsky, & Vinokurova, 2017; Ivanova, 2016; Vinokurova, 2010). What is more, even the inclusion of women in political institutions did not automatically translate into emancipation. Soviet women often tried to ‘bolster men’s masculinity’, thus maintaining the hegemonic role of men (Heath, 2003, p. 423). I recall having a discussion about Sakha gender roles in 2000, in which my female interlocutor expressed a widespread sentiment: ‘For me, a man is a breadwinner (dobychik),’ she told me resolutely.
**Manifestations of aggressive masculinity in Yakutsk during the post-socialist period**

On 27 September 1990 Yakutia declared its sovereignty within the Russian Federation and was renamed the Republic of Sakha (Alekseev, Romanova, & Sokolova, 2012, p. 505). The collapse of the Soviet Union also meant the collapse of the Soviet economy, especially agriculture, leading to changes in ethnic politics, and the rise of Sakha nationalism, which already had been manifest in protests and mass fights during the 1970s and 1980s (Argounova-Low, 2007b, 2012; Forsyth, 1992, p. 411). The degradation of Soviet agriculture caused a rise in migration from the villages but – according to my informants – also a period of lawlessness and crime. The migration of rural Sakha youth to the capital was supported by the government’s policy of developing the Sakha intelligentsia and augmenting the number of white-collar workers (Argounova-Low, 2007a).

The early 2000s were an intriguing but complicated period in Yakutsk, and in the republic as a whole. Yakutsk was the location of several clubs with novel styles of music, but I learned quickly to acknowledge the ethnic division of the club landscape (Ventsel, 2004b). Fights often broke out in the streets and in the premises, and there were rumors of stabbings and brutal beatings. I have documented one such case in my field diaries (23 March 2001):

> I met Alena, Lena and Lena’s boyfriend Vasilii. Vasilii was already drunk and wanted to tell me about a new stabbing. According to him in Stels [Stealth, a popular student discotheque] a fight broke out when a Sakha girl was dancing with a Russian boy. Later Sakha boys followed the Russian guy and stabbed him on the street.

This incident indicates the specific alignment of ethnic conflicts with gender-specific rules of conduct in those years. According to my field diaries from 2000–2001, conflicts where a competition for a girl’s attention evolved into an inter-ethnic fight took place in Yakutsk approximately once in a month. In the club circuit, certain male adolescents jealously tried to prevent Sakha girls going out with non-Sakha.

Interestingly, one of the most feared criminal contingents of the period were students from the villages, known as ulusnye (Kriminal’naia, 2001). I recall walking through the city on a Saturday night in the summer of 2001 and noticing that the streets were empty. When I met a friend and asked him about the reason, he replied succinctly: ‘Students are having fun.’ (Studenty gulaiut). The fact that alcohol was available 24/7 did not improve the atmosphere. Young men would hang around on certain streets, became intoxicated, and often harassed passers-by. One summer night in 2001 when standing in front of a popular discotheque in a city center, I witnessed a group fight. A mob of twenty or more village students clashed with another mob of the same size. All were armed with sticks or iron bars, and were highly aggressive. The spectacle was somehow bizarre because all of them were dressed in the typical village-youth style of the era – in white button-down shirts and black trousers – so it looked like a battle of two small armies.

Butler aptly observed that ‘There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (1999, p. 31). Not only did some students behave unpleasantly aggressive; likewise, Russian diamond miners whom I met in the northern cities, long distance truck drivers on the winter roads, young men in villages, and reindeer herders in Arctic settlement also...
often displayed strongly aggressive attitudes (Ventsel, 2005, 2007). All over the country in remote places existed and still exists a tradition of collective punishment for theft and brutal violence called razborka (see also Ventsel, 2007). High alcohol consumption was often an initiator of violence and was also reflected in the police-record pages of local newspapers (Kriminal’naia, 2001). The early 2000s were a period of particularly high alcohol consumption in private and public places, an era that abruptly came to an end in the second half of the decade when consuming alcohol was banned in public places, and the sale of alcohol became strictly regulated (Zhegusov & Ivanovna, 2012). Violence – sanctioned or not – was one form of display of ‘hard’ masculinity, where toughness was performed through the demonstration of physical power and one’s ability to defend oneself.

The toughness was often related with the notion of pride (gordost’) and solidarity. Two cases illuminate it: In 2001, when I became interested in different forms of razborka, I asked one villager why young men do not hide when they are called in for razborka. The answer was: ‘They [the boys] have their pride and they know they must answer for what they did.’ In another case a young man who worked in a Sakha theater was attacked and beaten up in Yakutsk by village boys in summer 2000. ‘I run back to the theatre.’, he told me ‘And collected some artists, musicians and stage workers. We guessed where these village boys, who do not know the city, could be. Then we took three mini vans and rounded them up. The boys did not expect it, they were very surprised when they saw us jumping out from vans.’ In cases like this one, violence becomes a ritualistic form of proving masculinity; whereas in cases of group conflict aggression is a means to draw a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’. According to my observation in situations of the latter sort, the violence has to be real and the conflict must be solved in one or another way. Not that all men were in this time involved in the fights but such aggression was hardly condemned either. This is in concordance with the observation of Schippers (2007) that different forms of masculinities exist alongside and accept the dominance of certain hegemonic masculinity.

Physically demanding individual sports – such as different forms of martial arts or traditional Sakha wrestling – have been traditionally popular in the Republic of Sakha. The value of ‘real’ masculinity was also demonstrated in the general obsession with sports. To quote an entry in my field diary: ‘I asked Vasili: what are the most popular sports for Sakha people, and he replied without hesitation: “kick boxing and Thai boxing!”’ Yakutsk in the early 2000s hosted large numbers of legal and illegal gyms, kickboxing was indeed highly popular, and boxing championships gained a lot of attention (international, national and republic-wide boxing contests are currently equally covered in local press and shown on TV) (cf. Yakutia Today, 2016, 2018). In various holidays, different sport contests were common. The Sakha midsummer celebration Ysyakh included not only horse races, but also tournaments of ‘national sport arts’ such as wrestling, lifting a stone, and a special kind of long-distance jumping. Among the athletes were Sakha, local Russians, Ukrainians or Kazakhs. In accordance with Butler’s concept of performativity in gender relations, the dominant proletarian masculinity was in the past constantly re-performed publicly in various events and public spaces. Notwithstanding the fact that some top athletes were and are not Sakha, ‘national sport arts’ are related to Sakha identity, which is demonstrated by the fact that the audience is overwhelmingly Sakha. Moreover, many Sakha intellectuals relate these sport arts to the – questionable
— glorious past of Sakha warriors (Krivoshapkin-Aiynga, 1998; Tyrylgin, 2000). Therefore, enthusiastic support of athletes is combined in the contests with the celebration of common Sakha identity.

New masculinities and continuation of existing gender asymmetries

New masculinities and changing preferences in consumption

About a decade later, public performances of masculinity in the streets of Yakutsk had markedly changed. In June 2014 I stood with friends on the central Lenin square of Yakutsk when suddenly one my friends greeted a man in his early twenties, dressed as Michael Jackson. Indeed, this man had tried hard to be as similar to his idol as possible. I was told that currently there were four Michael Jackson impersonators in the city. 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.

The economy of the Republic of Sakha has changed substantially in the last ten years. Big natural resource extraction companies need more skilled office workers (Nikolaev, 2016, pp. 420, 513; Stepanova & Nogovitsyn, 2011, p. 59) and this shift has initiated the appearance of new forms of masculinities in the public space. There is, nevertheless, certainly some ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2002) due to the shift from ‘learning to labour’ to ‘learning to service’ (Nayak & Kehily, 2013, p. 53; see also Yang, 2010), which initiates certain conflicts. However, the Republic of Sakha does not suffer from the demise of heavy industries as much as many other Russian regions do. The period of economic turmoil in the 1990s soon gave way to a new phase of growth in this part of Russia. In fact, increasing living standards and rising wages have produced a new consumption-oriented environment. Yakutsk is filled with Western style bars, restaurants and nightclubs and there are many shopping centers where people can buy fashionable clothes and electronic items.

Government structures and big companies currently build large accommodation blocks for their employees, and therefore it is not surprising that working for the government is becoming increasingly popular among university graduates (Nikolaev, 2016, p. 511). The studies show that simultaneously, members of young families are likely to apply more individualist forms of decision-taking about life course questions instead of taking into account the interests of their kin people (Tarasova, Khlinovskaya Rockhill, Tuprina, & Skryabin, 2017). The uptake of corporate urban popular culture is obvious. Fashionably dressed young office people fill numerous bars and demonstrate their shiny cars on the streets. Simultaneously there is a rise of what Currid-Halkett (2018) calls the ‘aspirational class’ whose consumption habits are based not on an attempt to show off but on an elitist knowledge of consumables and social status.

Similarly, one can perceive a marked change of behavior amongst male university students: a drunk and aggressive comportment seems rarely legitimate these days; instead, students come over as self-disciplined and responsible, fashionably dressed. Almost none of the students I met smoked cigarettes, and they drank alcohol very modestly. The village migration of the 1990s (see Argounova-Low, 2007a) had by 2014 resulted in the appearance of the first substantial urban Sakha generation with their unique self-confident and simultaneously self-disciplined fashion, culture, and music (see Ventsel & Peers, 2017).
Young people in the Republic of Sakha are now reported to consume less alcohol than previous generations, and this is usually ascribed to the harsh alcohol policy the Republic of Sakha introduced in 2010 (Zhegusov & Ivanova, 2012). While in 2010 a mere 12.5 per cent of university students did not consume alcohol, in 2015 the percentage was 61.5. Decrease of alcohol use is also noticeable among the older classes of school pupils (Zhegusov, 2017, p. 105). However, I am somewhat skeptical as to the enthusiasm of anti-alcohol campaigners because I am confident that one can buy alcohol almost everywhere in the republic 24 hours a day and there must be other reasons why young people decline to consume vast quantities of alcohol. Generally, though, the ‘hard’ type of masculinity portrayed above, with its dependence on a specific drinking culture and legitimate enactments of violent behavior, no longer resonates with the dominant work ethos; it gives way to a new, more self-controlled and sober form of masculinity. As will be explained below, this new masculinity is related to a new urban lifestyle but also to a newly emergent Sakha nationalism.

When spending time in cafés, the proportion of young (and not so young) people consuming non-alcoholic beverages is difficult to ignore. The difference with the previous generation is well illustrated by a comment of one of my friends. In January 2015, we met in a fancy new pub in Yakutsk. At some point she looked at the student-age youth around the neighboring table who were drinking tea, or water, and said: ‘What is the point of going to a bar and drink water? We never did that!’ referring to her student time in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Apart from non-alcoholic drinks, imported exclusive spirits are now becoming more popular. Young well-heeled urbanites prefer to consume imported whisky or expensive wine. In 2015, several republican newspapers published articles about the new trend of ‘cultured drinking’. Some authors welcomed it as the price alone limited the amount consumed, some authors dismissed it as a snobbish alibi to justify alcohol consumption. This trend is related to what Currid-Halkett (2018) identifies as ‘conspicuous consumption’, an elitist habit to associate cultural knowledge with consumption. The knowledge of ‘tastes of wine’ (Shapin, 2012) is catching up in Yakutsk as I noticed when a young female asked me in the bar: ‘Do you in Europe also have this that people talk about the nuances in the tastes of wine?’ Such cultural competence includes knowledge on the latest Western fashion, films, music, design but also gadgets, all difficult or expensive to obtain in Yakutsk.

Towards a ‘Healthy’ society and nation

The presence of ethnic Russians has decreased in the urban space in the recent decade, the Sakha language has become more present in public spaces, the number and proportion of urban Sakha is constantly growing and there is a remarkable influx of ethnic Sakha into the republic’s state structures (see also Ferguson, 2013; Nikolaev, 2016). That all has increased the self-consciousness of ethnic Sakha who often view the republic as ‘their land’, or as one colleague put it: ‘Russians can always go back to the (European part of) Russia but Yakutia is the only homeland of Sakha’. Another colleague told me: ‘The young people I met, are real Sakha patriots! They want to build their life here, not to go to Moscow.’

The last statement is not completely true but there is a noticeable shift to see the Sakha as a modern people who also maintain their roots and traditions, an ideological approach well described in Nikolaev (2016). This shift means the legitimization of different ways of
performing masculinities by connecting these with ethnic identity. The abovementioned situation is reminiscent of the changing image of Chinese urban young adults, as reported by Louie (2012): ‘While it can be said to be a “softer” image than the macho male, it nevertheless encompasses a very “hard” and competitive core.’

The university campus of Yakutsk is filled with posters advertising a “healthy lifestyle”, especially promoting sports activities. Sports remain popular, but now it seems to be more strongly linked with self-control, addressing the reliability of a person. This shift is well expressed by the appearance of a new movement – Uurankhai. Uurankhai is a Sakha word for a warrior and the movement presents itself as a patriotic sports club for martial arts whose goal is to grow Sakha and Russian (rossiiskii) patriotism among the youth. Some of my friends describe the club as a nationalist movement – accusations that are denied by club leaders publicly (Yakutiafuture, 2017). Their activities, however, go beyond sports. Uurankhai, which attracts a remarkable numbers of student followers, organizes traditional Sakha round dances on the university campus, anti-alcohol marches, and flash mobs to celebrate the anniversary of the republic (KP, 2017; Letnii dozhd’, 2017; Yakutiafuture, 2017). One of the tenets of the movement is that since Sakha people did not know alcohol before the Russian conquest, alcoholic beverages are not part of the Sakha tradition and should not be consumed at all. The club members present well-trained bodies in public places and demonstrate their seriousness and reliability, demonstratively distancing this form of masculinity from alcohol and a hedonistic lifestyle. As one of the supporters of the movement told me: ‘Uurankhai are no extremists, they are worried about the future of our people!’

To conclude this section, the attitude of the ‘hard worker hard drinker’ has shifted to what are seen locally as softer modes of masculinity, associated with responsibility, career orientation and varying degrees of hedonism. Next to such masculinity is also a space for a more feminine masculinity, as shown by the young Michael Jackson impersonator. These different forms of masculinity are on display in the inner-city bars and clubs, whereas proletarian masculinity remains more visible in suburban, cheaper Soviet style bars. Alcohol related lifestyles are, however, dismissed by organizations such as Uraankhai with their emphasis on an athletic appearance with a nationalist twist. One noticeable change in the atmosphere is that the inner city of the capital now feels safe, even in dark winter nights. Yakutsk still has places where fights and stabbings take place, but they are now located in the suburbs.

Continuation of existing gender hierarchies

The emergence of more diverse and generally ‘softer’ performances of masculinity in Yakutsk does not imply, however, that the general power asymmetry between genders has fundamentally changed. In fact, it has not, and the ‘relations of power and, specifically, ‘normative constraints’ that Butler sums up as ‘heterosexual hegemony’ (1993, pp. xx, xii) have remained in force. In this penultimate section of the article, I present evidence of the continuation of existing gender hierarchies, again drawing on personal experience and also regional literature.

Sakha people still tend to marry young, and to a large degree continue the Soviet division of gender, where the domestic sphere remains the domain of women (see also Popov, 1994; Tyrylgin, 2000). The popular tradition in the Far North of Russia is that guests
should be offered food when they arrive. The same applies to Sakha. For example, when visiting my friends, or their friends, I noticed that the serving of food is still done solely by women. This was also the case during all university field trips in which I participated with local scholars and students. When teaching PhD students at a local university, we also discussed their lifestyle, and I understood that men still lay claim to the old ‘breadwinner’ role of the family. It should be added here that sociological research among Sakha and other indigenous people in the republic shows that 72 per cent of men in various age cohorts support ‘traditional’ gender roles whereas almost all women who participated in the survey are in favor of more balanced gender relationships and more emancipation of women (Baisheva et al., 2012, pp. 305–306).

In his study, Evseev (2016) is alarmed about the gender asymmetry in the republican parliament Il Tumen, where women are clearly underrepresented. There are practically no statistics available about the gender pay gap in Yakutia, but according to my informants, it exists. One of my old friends, the manager of a large media holding, told me that when she asked her superior about a pay increase she was told, ‘But why do you need money?’, indicating that her husband should support her financially. In a 2016 pamphlet entitled ‘The view of a professor’ (Professorskii vzgliad) a female language professor writes that Sakha men and not women are responsible for ‘maintaining the family as an institution’. Behind this statement I see a general, countrywide tendency: women who have made a successful career rarely question the existing power relations of gender, and usually tend to support them.

Coles (2008, p. 235) speaks about the fields of masculinity where ‘holders of hegemonic masculinity must defend their hegemonic status (orthodoxy) against others who challenge it (heterodoxy)’. In the Republic of Sakha, however, thus far we find little if any conflict between the abovementioned masculinities because male hegemony remains generally unchallenged; each form of masculinity can exist in its almost separate social space. Performance of different masculinities in public does not endanger the deeper structure of gender roles. In this sense, ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ masculinities are united by the ‘masculinist’ (Rose, 1993, p. 14) superior position toward women, which is not always defined through economic inequality, but rather through ideologies that justify existing gender hierarchy.

**Conclusion**

Within Russia, everything on the ‘other side of Ural Mountains’ has historically been associated with harsh living conditions, endurance, and toughness. The words Siberia and ‘Far East’ still have the gloss of the pioneer and the adventurer. Over many decades, the vast Siberian land masses had a very distinct path of development, as territories where Russian resource-extraction frontiers were established. Yakutia (today’s Republic of Sakha) was no exception and became the location for the gold, diamond, oil, gas and coal extraction industries, places where hard work meant earning lots of money. This also entailed that Yakutia became a typical Soviet industrial region dominated by a pronounced proletarian machismo. The proletarian masculinity was commonly expressed through physical toughness and aggression linked with ‘heroic’ practices of alcohol consumption. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these features did not disappear: on the contrary, the violence, crime and drinking increased. Throughout the 2000s, proletarian masculinity was very visible in both urban and rural settlements. Many sources
of income and career paths demanded physical strength, more or less blue collar labor and technical skills to repair or operate machinery. In this way, the socioeconomic environment of the 2000s still enforced and supported proletarian masculinity. In recent years, however, I have witnessed the emergence of another masculinity – more urban, less aggressive, leaning towards a more consumerist (and partly hedonistic) lifestyle. This is a form of masculinity that suits people who are not necessarily engaged with physical work, and is expressed through ostentatious displays of wealth, relatively controlled alcohol consumption, and a much lesser degree of aggression. Additionally, we can discern the rise of an athletic, self-controlled type of masculinity that combines abstinence from alcohol with nationalistic sentiments. In various proportions these masculinities can be related to the Sakha identity. While ‘softer’ forms symbolize Sakha as modern people, ‘harder’ forms can be politicized as symbols for Sakha roots and traditions.

The rise of such a lifestyle is supported not only by the appearance of a significant urban-born Sakha generation, but also by the state’s policies. In recent years, Russia has become commonly acknowledged as a patriarchal and conservative country, where traditional family values are taken for granted by the majority of citizens and supported by the state. Changes in university education, the growing emphasis on career success and a healthy lifestyle, and a now much stricter attitude toward alcohol consumption, have influenced people’s everyday habits. The transformed masculinity is still related to performances of physical strength, but now more frequently channeled into sports. Dissimilar to former decades, this form of masculinity tolerates less masculine appearances. While Western theories assume that ‘the culturally dominant masculine ideal is perpetuated by an elite’ (Coles, 2008), there is little evidence of such hierarchy of masculinities in the Republic of Sakha. They each exist in their own social milieus, and mutual conflict is rather avoided through the support of ‘traditional family values’, which are nowadays intensively propagated by the Russian state. Finally, the emergence of different forms of masculinity should not be mistaken as a sign of a general change in gender hierarchies: expectations about female and male gender roles (responsibility in the domestic sphere versus responsibility as breadwinner) still remain in force.

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