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Оригинальная научная статья

A Siberian Archipelago: environmental perception and cardinal directions in Sakha alaas economy

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To the memory of Ekaterina Nazarovna Romanova

Abstract

Research on cardinal directions in Sakha has predominantly concentrated on the linguistic and folkloristic dimensions of these concepts. This article aims to elucidate the complex meanings of cardinal directions by integrating fundamental aspects of local environmental perceptions, orientational systems, and metageographies. Drawing on local narrative knowledge collected during fieldwork conducted in Central Yakutia from 2002 to 2015, the author examines the representation of cardinal directions in Sakha narratives. The study addresses a gap in existing scholarship: while the etymology and ritual uses of directional terms have been thoroughly studied, the stratified and interconnected nature of their conceptualization – encompassing egocentric, intrinsic, and absolute orientational systems alongside emic metageography – has received insufficient attention. The methodology combines linguistic anthropology, cognitive approaches to spatial orientation, and the analysis of local narrative practices. Field materials include interviews, mental maps drawn by interlocutors, and associative dictionary data. The author contends that the characteristics of the permafrost landscape and the presence of an archipelago of alaas meadows in the boreal forest contribute to a distinctively Sakha environmental perception, emphasizing the importance of both egocentric and allocentric navigation in the Central Yakutian Lowland. Furthermore, cardinal directions not only locate and contextualize the immediate environments of villages in Central Yakutia, but also contribute to stereotyped images of landscapes and residents in distinct regions. Both the ethnic affiliation and the major character traits of those who dwell in a particular landscape can be stereotypically defined in this system. The results show

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that in Sakha environmental perception, cardinal directions are not neutral: south (*soghuruu*) and east (*ilin*) carry positive values and are associated with the Sakha homeland and the alaa landscape, while north (*khotu*) and west (*arghaa*) are linked to frost, evil spirits, and the territories of Evenki peoples. The study demonstrates how a linguistic system – specifically the concepts describing cardinal directions – is interwoven with environmental perception, lifestyle, and ethnic traditions. The findings contribute to comparative folklore studies, linguistic anthropology, and research on Sakha metageography, and suggest directions for further fieldwork in Northern Yakutia and the Vilyuy River region.

Keywords: cardinal directions, metageography, orientation, alaa, regionalism, cognitive maps, Sakha language, environmental perception, linguistic anthropology, Yakutia

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Оригинальная статья

Сибирский архипелаг: восприятие окружающей среды и стороны света в экономике аласов Якутии

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Аннотация

Исследования сторон света в якутском языке и культуре до сих пор были сосредоточены преимущественно на лингвистических и фольклорных аспектах этих понятий. Настоящая статья ставит целью раскрыть сложные значения сторон света через объединение фундаментальных аспектов локального восприятия окружающей среды, систем ориентации и метеографии. Опираясь на локальное нарративное знание, собранное в ходе полевой работы в Центральной Якутии в 2002–2015 годах, автор рассматривает репрезентацию сторон света в якутских нарративах. Исследование восполняет пробел в существующей науке: если этимология и ритуальное употребление терминов сторон света изучены достаточно подробно, то стратифицированный и взаимосвязанный характер их концептуализации – охватывающий эгоцентрическую, интринсивную и абсолютную системы ориентации наряду с эмической метеографией – оставался недостаточно исследованным. Методология сочетает лингвистическую

антропологию, когнитивные подходы к пространственной ориентации и анализ локальных нарративных практик. Полевые материалы включают интервью, ментальные карты, нарисованные информантами, и данные ассоциативного словаря. Автор утверждает, что особенности мерзлотного ландшафта и наличие архипелага аласных лугов в бореальном лесу формируют особое якутское восприятие окружающей среды, в котором важную роль играют как эгоцентрическая, так и аллоцентрическая навигация в Центрально-Якутской низменности. Кроме того, стороны света не только локализуют и контекстуализируют непосредственное окружение сел Центральной Якутии, но и участвуют в формировании стереотипных образов ландшафтов и их жителей в отдельных регионах. В этой системе стереотипно определяются как этническая принадлежность, так и основные черты характера тех, кто населяет тот или иной ландшафт. Результаты показывают, что в якутском восприятии окружающей среды стороны света не нейтральны: юг (*собуруу*) и восток (*илин*) наделены положительными значениями и связаны с якутской родиной и аласным ландшафтом, тогда как север (*хоту*) и запад (*арбаа*) ассоциируются с морозом, злыми духами и территориями эвенкийских народов. Исследование демонстрирует, как языковая система – в частности, понятия, описывающие стороны света, – переплетается с восприятием окружающей среды, образом жизни и этническими традициями. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в сравнительное фольклористическое изучение, лингвистическую антропологию и исследования якутской метагеографии, а также намечают направления дальнейшей полевой работы в Северной Якутии и в районе реки Вилюй.

Ключевые слова: стороны света, метагеография, ориентация, алас, регионализм, когнитивные карты, якутский язык, восприятие окружающей среды, лингвистическая антропология, Якутия

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Introduction

Cardinal directions and the Sakha orientational systems

Linguistic studies on the Sakha language and ethnographic research exploring how elements of the Sakha worldview imbue linguistic expressions have been extensively addressed by Sakha ethnographers and linguists [1]. In line with this research interest, the question of how the Sakha people perceive and conceptualize cardinal directions has also been thoroughly studied [2]. These works have extensively examined issues concerning the etymology and usage of terms for cardinal directions [3], as well as their importance

in the Sakha worldview, rituals [4], heroic epics [5], and religious systems [6]. The question arises as to how one may contribute to these studies and enrich an already productive scholarly discourse. The primary aim of the present study is not to refute or reframe existing research findings but to introduce a perspective that has received relatively little scholarly attention: the complexity and stratified nature of the conceptualization of cardinal directions.

As proponents of linguistic anthropology have argued [7; 8], one established mode of usage is that cardinal directions serve as a tool for orientation, guiding local hunters, herders, and travelers, or anyone moving between settlements, in their daily activities and in navigating their environment. Anthropological literature extensively discusses the role of cardinal directions and how specific environmental features influence their usage and orientational significance [9]. Cardinal directions play a specific role in the conceptualization of movements and locations of objects and living entities.

However, there is a variety in how vocabulary can be used to describe spatial relations. As Levinson and Wilkins describe [10], there are three major ways of conceptualizing these relations. The first one relies on the ego perspective and the primary experience of the structure of the human body. For every human, it is an obvious choice to locate items in the physical world according to their location in relation to ego's human body. In the human-centered space, the eye is the origo, and the four main directions are forward / front, backward / back, and left and right.

In addition, there exists a further orientation system derived from the egocentric perspective, termed as the 'intrinsic' system by the two authors. This system associates the location of an item with its position relative to other items. In essence, speakers perceive individual objects, landscapes, and living beings similarly to humans, suggesting that these entities possess physicality comparable to that of human beings. This perception is evident in the case of vehicles such as cars or trucks, and several structures such as houses. However, understanding how the Sakha attribute intrinsic human-like aspects to geographical entities such as meadows, hayfields, or mountains is more challenging and requires a more thorough analysis [11]. Concurrently, numerous entities, such as plants, typically lack intrinsic aspects.

The final orientation system available to human societies is an absolute system of cardinal directions, wherein the Sun's daily movement typically delineates the primary directions. In numerous languages, such as Sakha, the East is aligned with the front, while the West corresponds to the direction of the Sun's setting, which is associated with the back of the human body. Notably,

in Yakutia, particularly in the northern region, the Sun's daily trajectory is challenging to describe by simply indicating the geographical East and West as the directions of sunrise and sunset.

Thus, cardinal directions are integrated into a multifaceted system of orientation and navigation, where various layers – egocentric, intrinsic, and absolute systems – not only coexist but also interact with each other. This complexity is evident in the Sakha language itself. In Sakha, the egocentric frame of reference significantly influences both the intrinsic and absolute orientational systems. The term “*arghaa*” denotes both “west” and “behind”, while “*ilin*” signifies “east” and “front”. Additionally, the word “*kelin*” is used in Sakha to describe an object located behind the speaker, either temporally or spatially; however, as noted by E.K. Pekarsky in his dictionary, the word “*kelin*” could also be interpreted as “west” [12].

In contrast, the opposition between north and south does not align with the egocentric distinction between the right and the left. Instead, the terms “*soghuru*” and “*khotu*” correspond to the binary opposition of “above” and “below”. Although it could be argued that these terms also relate cardinal directions to the human body by referring to the spatial position of objects above and below the body, this distinction is more accurately represented in Sakha by the contrast between “*üöhee / ürdük*” and “*allara*”.

Materials and methods: metageographies and hierarchies

Cardinal directions serve not only as components of a system of reference to localize the spatial positions of various entities to one another or to assist in navigation and pathfinding activities but also to construct a spatial organization of the world that facilitates orientation and self-identification in a broader sense. The global consideration of human affairs deploys various “metageographies”, which are usually defined as a set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world [13]. This system also contributes to the creation of hierarchies and attaches certain values to a given location. These metageographies, although they may be widely accepted as objective, natural facts for members of a given community, they are actually historically constructed, ideologically driven, and in many cases largely unethical.

Until recent decades, the conceptual frameworks and epistemological approaches of European knowledge centers – including those related to the emergence of anthropology – were often presented as universal in methodological literature and historiography of science, despite being shaped by their own historical and social contexts. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “*There was a time when translating the many forms, practices and meanings of life into universalistic political-theoretical categories of deeply European*

origin seemed to most social scientists an unproblematic proposition” [14, p. 17].

These deeply colonial simplistic binary oppositions present in global metageographies do not only create unjust hierarchies, but reduce the variety of local metageographies into a few categories. Historically, a number of divisions have been utilized to falsely link the West with reason and progress while associating the East with stagnation [15; 16; 17; 18]. It is also increasingly obvious that the North-South binary is as reductive and misleading as the East-West opposition [19].

Anthropological research has been pivotal in advancing contemporary discussions on cardinal directions by illustrating the historical and geographical variability of dominant metageographies and advocating for the recognition of alternative, equally complex geographical systems that assign culture-specific values to cardinal directions. The scholarly focus on large and dominant metageographical systems arises from their substantial impact – often on a global scale – on our understanding of the relationships between various peoples and regions. Nevertheless, examining how various communities construct their worldviews within their unique historical and geographical contexts is equally instructive. A crucial aspect of this worldview is the community’s internal, emic metageography, which encompasses value judgments regarding the cardinal directions. These judgments are profoundly embedded in the community’s language, lifestyle, and historical experiences.

As the major and stable poles of objective orientation, cardinal directions are especially well suited to transposing the language and concepts of the orientational system onto a metasystem with relatively stable values. In this way through the lens of cardinal directions Sakha actively imbue their spatial experience with cultural context. Thus, cardinal directions do not only facilitate the movement or immediate sensory orientation but also enable community members to situate themselves, and their self-identity constructions within the world that surrounds them.

The uniquely Sakha metageography appears in folklore texts, such as *olongkhos*, and historical legends, as well as in shorter genres like riddles and proverbs. Although this broader orientational context has been analyzed from a folkloristic perspective – with particularly detailed research findings available regarding the importance of cardinal directions in heroic epic tradition of the Sakha, *olongkhos* [5], the interconnectedness, situated nature and inherent logic of the Sakha orientational system and metageography has been insufficiently researched, although beyond well-formed folklore genres cardinal directions contribute to composing everyday narratives, and locating the speaker in the broader framework of Yakutia (and beyond). During

fieldwork, anthropologists often rely on such local narratives. The inclusion of narratives in anthropological description serves a purpose beyond merely illustrating argumentation. Firstly, they underscore that a significant portion of the experience anthropologists acquire is embedded in shared practices and events, such as hunting, fishing, and poaching, which consist of a sequence of events with a more or less defined beginning and end. Consequently, when anthropological knowledge is derived from them, it naturally morphs into narratives [20]. Therefore, fieldnotes (on which anthropological knowledge production partly relies) often take on narrative forms. Secondly, when anthropologists prioritize immersion in everyday practices over focused data collection through precise methodologies within a well-defined topic, the “explanations” they obtain often manifest as narratives. Rather than constructing arguments and explanations, individuals frequently resort to telling life events. Consequently, ethnographic fieldwork is replete with narratives [21]. This is not to suggest that anthropologists compile a well-defined corpus of comprehensive oral performances, but rather that they engage continuously with “more or less” narratives, encompassing both polished accounts and more disordered, co-constructed narrative practices [22].

An additional significant aspect of local narrative knowledge is the storytellers’ frequent reliance on the local spatial and temporal deictic context. They situate their narrative plots in time and space using personal memories as well as the local system of orientation and metageography. Within this system, cardinal directions often play a crucial role in positioning the self and imbuing the narrative with culturally embedded values. In what follows I intend to provide a concise introduction into some of the fieldwork notes based on subsequent field trips I carried out in Yakutia between 2002 and 2015. But before doing so, it is important to give a concise introduction to the structure of local environmental perception of villages in Central-Yakutia.

Cardinal directions and alaa meadows

In sedentary societies, environmental perception often leads to a fragmented understanding of the environment. The Sakha of northeastern Siberia employ a sophisticated system for navigation and self-location. Drawing on linguistic data, folklore texts, and empirical data collected through fieldwork, I contend that the assessment of cardinal directions today is relatively uniform in Sakha environmental perception, despite the vast area of over 3,000,000 square kilometers inhabited by Sakha communities and the highly diverse landscapes they occupy. This suggests that Sakha national culture is not an artificial amalgamation of various cultural phenomena created by local intelligentsia, but rather an organic system rooted in traditional Sakha culture, consistent across different Sakha communities. Furthermore, I argue

that the Sakha system of orientation significantly diverges from European systems.

Sakha often hold the belief that alaases (meadows formed in thermokarst depressions) are unique to Yakutia and are predominantly occupied by Sakha [11]. In Central Yakutia, it is commonly asserted that real alaases are not characteristic of the entire territory of Yakutia but are primarily found between the Lena and Aldan Rivers. As the alaas landscape is closely associated with the Sakha, territories and peoples beyond the alaas-rich lowlands of central Yakutia are frequently perceived as distinct from the Sakha homeland.

During my initial field research in Central Yakutia in 2002 and 2003, I concentrated in part on local environmental perceptions. As part of this project, I requested some of my interlocutors to draw maps of the village's surroundings. It soon became evident that individuals born after the centralization, which refers to the establishment of the village, possessed only limited knowledge of the placenames and landscapes surrounding the village. Conversely, those born prior to centralization also exhibited uneven knowledge of the village's environment. The level of detail in the mental maps was not correlated with the distance from the village but rather with the direction and location of roads. Additionally, it became apparent that placenames were recounted sequentially, akin to beads on a string, with one following another as if traversing a path from one known location to the next. From 2002 onwards, I consistently asked local Sakha to draw maps for me and to introduce the local landscapes.

These instances were not isolated in my encounters with the use of local mental maps. In Kebejei region, where I conducted research in 2009 and 2010, wolves were frequently observed near the village. Horse breeders regularly communicated by phone each evening to discuss sightings of wolf tracks, horses, and the presumed locations of stallions. They also exchanged information regarding the composition of herds. In essence, horse owners shared their mental maps daily to update one another on the movements of horses and wolves. During these exchanges, placenames were referenced, along with their spatial relationships and access routes. These mental maps did not depict a natural space but rather a network of locations interconnected by tracks, roads, and creeks.

Drawing from these and other fieldwork experiences, I developed an interest in understanding how local individuals perceive and conceptualize their environment. Specifically, I sought to discern the fundamental mental representation of Yakutia's landscape. As evidenced by the maps, my interlocutors did not employ an egocentric navigation approach, which involves a dynamic representation of the environment from the perspective

of an individual traversing a path. This approach differs from what is currently referred to as Google “street view”. Additionally, these maps are not real-time depictions, as they may include elements that no longer exist. Instead, they offer a partially allocentric navigation system, characterized by a bird’s-eye-view representation of the environment. This method of environmental representation necessitates mental rotation and the projection of egocentric maps, enabling fishermen, hunters, and herdsman to convert actual journeys into a static image [23].

Allocentric maps are characterized by their discontinuity, comprising names and discrete locations that are typically not contiguous. The presence of a name signifies existence; without a name, an entity is deemed irrelevant. Conversely, if an entity is recognized, it should possess a name. Entities not perceived as such remain unnamed and unrepresented on the map. The Sakha people conceptualize and depict their environment as a collection of discrete entities interconnected by roads and waterways. While egocentric navigation is subjectively oriented, allocentric navigation, as depicted in these maps, is intersubjectively oriented, relying on complex, diverse, and historically embedded socio-natural relationships. Consequently, some place names may refer to the same location, highlighting different facets of the same entity.

These maps depict an archipelago of living entities with relatively distinct boundaries coexisting within the boreal forest. Sakha mental maps are not derived from path-finding activities or walking; rather, they are rooted in social relations. Similar to how the “space” of social actions comprises society, consisting of discrete entities (individuals), Sakha mental maps resemble sociograms that enumerate encountered living entities. Consequently, movement within the boreal forest is not characterized by continuous spatial motion but by a sequence of encounters, akin to transitioning from one island or place to another within the expanse of the boreal forest.

This uniquely Sakha perception of the permafrost landscape as an archipelago of *alaas* meadows also contributes to the development of concepts related to cardinal directions. For the Sakha, these concepts serve not merely as instruments of absolute orientation but also as integral components of metageography. The necessity for coherent allocentric navigation reinforces and enriches the everyday use of the metageographical dimensions of these directional terms.

Results: values and directions

In Sakha environmental perception, cardinal directions are not neutral. Traditionally, east and south are connoted with positive values, whereas north and west are endowed with negative meanings [1; 24]. The word south (*soghuruu*) originally meant upward in Sakha (reflecting the fact that major

rivers usually flow from south to north in Yakutia). South is regarded as the homeland of warm weather, summertime, and the migrating birds in Central-Yakutia. The migration of birds is very important for local people, since hunting in the village focuses almost exclusively on ducks and geese. Although there are two hunting seasons (the spring migration in late April and May, and the autumn migration in September), it is especially the spring migration that attracts hunters in central Yakutia to visit their alaases and lakes, since the autumn hunting season is much colder. Springtime birds migrate from the south to the north, and in Central Yakutia, some of my hunter interlocutors joked that the best ducks and geese have already been killed by the people living in the south.

The cardinal direction of south is strongly bound to the idea of the Sakha homeland, which is reinforced by public education, popular science books, and oral legends. Sakha refer to the south as a homeland, *khoro* or the *khoro land* (*khoro dojdu*). This land, according to Sakha, is the area from where they originate. One of the three legendary ancestors of Sakha, the forefather of the *khoro* tribe, is called *Uluu Khoro* (Mighty Khoro). According to oral tradition, *Uluu Khoro* moved on an ox to central Yakutia from the south along the Aldan River [29; 7]. Khoro people from the south not only form a separate group of Sakha, but they relate to the gods of the upper world with a special language, *khoro*. The connection between south and the gods of the upper world is also based on the assumption that south means ‘upwards’. Sakha shamans use a language called *khoro* during rituals to communicate with supernatural beings. Yakutia’s position in the local metageography emphasizes the importance of the South. The idea of the south has also been associated with the idea of centrality. Senior citizens especially use the term *soghuruu* for centre. If someone says: “I am going to the south” (*soghuruu bardym*) it actually means that he or she intends to visit the regional centre, regardless of its actual direction geographically speaking. Therefore, the idea of *kuorat* (city) might be a common association to the concept of south [25].

The cardinal direction north (*khotu*) is also richly connoted with meanings. The original meaning of the word “*khotu*” is downward or downstream, and phrases in modern Sakha reflect this; *ürekh khotu* means ‘down the river’, and *süürük khotu* can be translated as ‘downstream’. North is the homeland of frost and evil spirits. They show up either at the coldest time of the year (*sülükün*), or come from the north (*kuhagan tyyn*).

Northern territories are characterized by mountains, and the mountainous landscape north of Aldan is called *d’aangy*, which means ‘mountain ridge’. This region, according to the Sakha in Central Yakutia, along with the treeless tundra, lacks fertile hayfields and does not exactly fit the Sakha livelihood and

economy. As a result, these landscapes evoke the idea of winter and frost, as well as the presence of hunters, and reindeer breeders. Although Sakha occupy today the coldest area in the northern hemisphere, north is never associated with the idea of the Sakha homeland. North is rather associated with the homeland of *tongus* peoples (a general denotation of Evenkis, Evens in Sakha). In line with my fieldwork notes, it is important to mention, that the associative dictionary also demonstrates that, for the concept of *taba* (reindeer) *tuundara* (tundra), *tongus* (Evenki or Even) *chukcha* (Chukchi), *ebeen* (Even) *khaja* (mountain) used as a stimulus, the reaction was often the idea of north (*khotu*).

Whereas south evokes the idea of center, north is traditionally connected with the idea of peripheries. This might explain why, from a Central Yakutian perspective, territories occupied by Evenkis are automatically associated with the idea of north. Furthermore, northern Sakha are thought to have some of the stereotypical character traits of northern people. The north is not only associated with virgin, untouched landscapes, but with industrialized environments as well. The Central-Yakutia perspective on northern Yakutia gradually changed with the Soviet-era modernization and the Cultural Revolution in the north.

“East” (*ilin*) is of eminent importance in Sakha environmental perception. The word “*ilin*” also means ‘frontal’ and ‘future’. The entrance of the traditional Sakha house (*balaghan*) is normally oriented to the east, the windows facing to the south, and a barn is attached to the north side. According to oral history, as represented in major collections of legends and myths, east is the direction where good-willing gods reside, and therefore this direction evokes positive feelings among Sakha [1; 26].

In central Yakutia, particularly the region between the Lena and Aldan rivers, the east is associated with the concept of homeland. This area not only serves as a residence for the Sakha but is also home to the *alaases*. Central Yakutia, characterized by its *alaas* landscape, is referred to as the Eastern Side (*Ilin Enger*) in Sakha. Historical legends and educational narratives suggest that Ilin Enger was among the initial territories settled by Sakha migrating from the south [27]. It is believed that all other Sakha residing in the northern and western regions of Yakutia and beyond originated from the Lena river valley or Ilin Enger. Consequently, among the Sakha in central Yakutia, *Ilin Enger* is esteemed as the birthplace of authentic Sakha culture and economy, and a region exclusively inhabited by Sakha.

As the historical homeland of the Sakha, this area is also termed the central land (*kiin dojdu*) in Sakha, and its inhabitants are referred to as the central or navel Sakha (*kiin sakhalar*). Thus, the notion of the east is also linked

with centrality. Moreover, centrality implies superiority. According to residents of central Yakutia, the alaases in this region yield hay of superior nutritive quality compared to other areas in Yakutia. Along the Tanda river valley, while people acknowledge the fertility of their alaases, they consider the alaases of the Churapchy region, located at the heart of *Ilin Enger*, to be even more productive. Nikolai Savvich, a native of Churapchy, noted that the alaases there are particularly dry, allowing not only grass but also a variety of flowers to flourish, which enhances the sweetness and intensity of Churapchy milk and butter. In the main market of Yakutsk, beef is marketed to consumers with the assertion that it originates from either Ust'-Aldan or Churapchy. It is no surprise, therefore, that one of the first associations with the concept of *Ilin Enger* in the associative dictionary of the Sakha language [25] is the word *alaas*.

The region of *Ilin Enger* in Yakutia has historically not been a focal point for Soviet modernization and industrialization. Consequently, in comparison to other areas in Yakutia, the rivers and meadows in this region experienced less pollution during the Soviet era. With the increasing dissemination of environmental knowledge through public education and mass communication, the residents of Central Yakutia have become increasingly aware of the unique climate and environment of *Ilin Enger*. The villagers take pride in the fact that winters at the eastern part of Central-Yakutia are consistently harsher than those in Yakutsk, often characterizing their homeland as a land of severe nature (*tyjys ajylghalaakh dojdu*). The cold and permafrost conditions are now viewed positively in the village, as these features inhibit the proliferation of various parasites in Yakutia. Locally known insects such as mosquitoes and midges are considered less harmful and less feared than ticks, which are prevalent in most regions of Russia. Additionally, there is an awareness that locally processed food in Central Yakutia is often considered by locals as ecologically clean and superior in taste to imported food.

The symbolic meaning of the cardinal direction “west” (*arghaa*) is probably the most problematic in Sakha. *Arghaa*, in accordance with the orientation of the *balaghan*, means ‘rearward, posterior, and the territory behind the house’; as an outdated meaning, it may mean the back of a human being. According to mythological ideas, now present only in the school books on Sakha literature and national culture, *arghaa* is the homeland of evil creatures (*abaahy*) and cold winds. Western winds are also called black western wind (*khara saappaas*), indicating that it is harmful for horses and cattle. The color black normally indicates destructive and dangerous qualities connected with the evil spirit of the lower world.

However, nowadays in Yakutia’s framework the west is usually associated with the group of Sakha residing at the Vilyuy River (*Bülüü*).

There are two competing explanations about the origin of Sakha at the Vilyuy River. One of them argues that Vilyuy Sakha migrated to their current settlements from central Yakutia after the arrival of the Russians to Yakutia [28]. However, based on oral poetry collected at the Vilyuy River, other researchers argue that Vilyuy Sakha reached the river by migrating from the south, independently from the Sakha of central Yakutia [29]. In their opinion, Vilyuy Sakha represent a separate group of Sakha. The idea that the western cardinal direction can be associated with alterity is also mirrored in the Sakha associative dictionary, where the concept of west can be a reaction to the stimulus of the word foreigner (*omuk*).

Although the Vilyuy Sakha economy is very similar to that of central Yakutia, based on cattle and horse breeding and annual hay production, the people of Central Yakutia think it is not identical. For them, the landscape of the Vilyuy area is not associated with large hayfields and *alaases*, but rather with forests. Consequently, one of the names for Sakha inhabited areas along the Vilyuy River is western forest (*arghaa tya*) in Central Yakutia. Labelling the valley of the Vilyuy River as a forest makes some people in Central Yakutia associate it with the idea that this landscape is not completely suitable for Sakha economy. Although western Yakutia is called the *sya Bülüü* ‘fat Vilyuy’ or *bütej Bülüü* ‘fence Vilyuy’ in Central Yakutia, pointing out the fact that people living there actually do collect hay and breed cattle, residents of the Vilyuy River may be also denoted as fishermen of the Vilyuy River (*Bülüü balyksyttara*).

Ulus mentality, Sakha metageography in action

In Sakha, cardinal directions not only locate and contextualize the immediate environments of villages in Yakutia, but also contribute to stereotyped images of landscapes and residents in distinct regions. Both the ethnic affiliation and the major character traits of those who dwell in a particular landscape are stereotypically defined. Landscape types like forests, ploughlands, and *alaases*, as well as cardinal directions, are not only compared, but are ranked as well. In Central Yakutia the centrality of east and the *alaases* are associated with the presence of Sakha, whereas north points to the periphery and to the Evenkis. *Alaases* are perceived in the frame of the environment that villagers regularly interact with; they provide a landmark of self-identification in the macro frame of Yakutia.

Perhaps this characterization is interrelated with the phenomenon of Sakha regional characters (*ulus* mentality) first described by Mandelstam Balzer [30, p. 243–244]. *Ulus* mentality is shorthand for stereotypical behavior and demarcates conflicting groups of Sakha from one another. Separation and opposition between Sakha of various regions is called *uluustaahyn* in

Sakha and is structured by cardinal directions and landscape types. At the same time, neither *ulus* mentalities nor environmental perception constitute an unchangeable system. Generations perceive and interact differently with dissimilar landscapes and associate different resident groups and character traits with cardinal directions.

A wide variety of stereotypical behavioral patterns and attitudinal differences are associated with the native inhabitants of specific *uluses*. Those in their social environment generally claim to recognize and identify these traits in individuals originating from a given *ulus*. This is particularly true for certain *uluses*, whose residents are proverbially attributed unique, stereotypical personality traits. These personality traits are also discernible in contemporary folklore (e.g., in jokes).

Discussion

One of my interlocutors, born in 1947 – prior to centralization – in I Bayagantay nasleg, provided a detailed account of how dwellings were situated on the alaa meadow. This account illustrates how various orientational systems intertwine within traditional Sakha thought and worldview. In an interview conducted in 2003, he described the immediate surroundings of his natal alaa meadow and dwelling in the following manner:

“Our balaghan was set down on the southern part of the alaa meadow. To me, the northern part of the alaa generally seemed like a mysterious, sometimes dangerous place, especially the part that bumped right up against the woods surrounding the meadow. The barn was on the north side of the balaghan, so whenever we sat outside in the afternoon, we’d always be on the south or the east side of the balaghan. In my child’s mind, the area out behind the balaghan, out west, just didn’t feel as homey to me as the east or the south side did. The western part was also darker, that was the direction where the sun set, and the northern part did not see the Sun as often as the southern part. The windows and doors all opened up to the east and the south. Somehow, that was just the way the world opened up for us.

I often thought about that balaghan as if it were a living creature. Its face and mouth looking out to the east, and its right side turned facing the south. I would often imagine that the west and the north were somehow more dangerous than the south and east. The road that skirted the edge of the alaa ran along the east side of the meadow, too. My father always told us that you must never build in a place that’s too close to the road, or on a spot where an old road used to run. From our nasleg, the Tanda River flowed northwards right into the Aldan. And as for whatever lay north of the Aldan River, well, that was a completely alien world. We didn’t even hear about it. That was where the world as we knew it simply came to an end.”

This example illustrates the interconnectedness of human egocentric, intrinsic, and absolute orientational systems and metageography not only for analytical research purposes but also within the cognitive processes and everyday practices of local inhabitants. In the selection of dwelling sites, particularly before the era of centralization, culturally embedded values and meanings played a crucial role in shaping human lived-in space, facilitating movements within it, and guiding everyday activities [31].

The primary objective of this article was to present a linguistic system (the concepts describing cardinal directions) in conjunction with their cultural contexts. Although there is extensive literature within anthropological and linguistic scholarship on various orientational systems and, separately, on different metageographical systems, these two research areas have seldom intersected. In other words, the literature has rarely explored the connections between orientational and metageographical systems. One possible reason for this is that anthropological research on orientational systems has predominantly focused on communities and lifestyles (such as hunter or pastoral communities), where navigation is a crucial and challenging aspect of daily life. Consequently, research on orientational systems has largely been limited to smaller, closed communities. In contrast, literature on large-scale metageographical systems has concentrated more on dominant mental constructs spanning vast territories (even entire continents), primarily aiming to understand them in terms of how they generate inequalities among various regions, states, and communities.

The Sakha case illustrates – as argued in this study – that these two systems can be examined together; indeed, analyzing them relationally can effectively reveal the fundamental characteristics of a community's environmental perception. Since the majority of my research was conducted in the central regions of Yakutia, characterized by *alaas* meadows, my insights are primarily limited to how orientational and metageographical systems intertwine in the minds of my Central Yakutian interlocutors. Further research in Northern Yakutia (e. g. in the Kolyma or Verkhoyansk region) or along the Vilyuy River may reveal somewhat different systems. Just as it is valuable to situate the metageography rooted in the Sakha language and way of life alongside numerous other metageographies, it may also be instructive to demonstrate how its dialects differ from one another. Answering this question will require future research and ethnographic fieldwork, which may help broaden the scope of both comparative folklore [32] and linguistic research [33].

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