



Personal Reflections on Sakha Matriculture: Transcript

AINA VINOKUROVA

[lightly edited; please cite using time signatures]

[Introduction in the Sakha language] Hello, everyone; my name is Aina Vinokurova. I am from Yakutia, which is in Siberia. I am Sakha; my mother tongue called *Sakha tyla*. I was born in a small village named Kokui. I am the oldest in a big family; I have five siblings.

00:37

I remember my grandfather because he was living with us since I was, I don't know, very young, probably three or two years old because he was helping us. He was a professional hunter. I remember the smell of the snowmobile. I think it's not the snowmobile, it's just the gas, the smell of the gas, when he's coming from the outside. It was the best smell. I remember it like as a yesterday.

Yeah, and I remember that I spent a lot of time with my father because I was the eldest and probably he's trying to help my mom because we had such a big family. I spent a lot of time at school because my father was a teacher. I was hanging around with the teenagers; they taught me some bad and good things at school. *[laughs]* Yeah, and my grandmother, she was also a teacher. I spent some times with her. Oh my god, I spent a lot of time at school,



[laughs] now I realize that, before I even became a student.

02:00

When my mom died, I remember that a lot of our relatives would come to our home for cooking, you know, to help my grandma. So for me, I think my father and my grandparents from my father's side, they influenced my personality, I would say. My grandma, she's like my mom. She's now 86 years old, and being here in Canada, it's the most challenging part because she can't travel to Canada. And now, right now, I am also in that spot where I can't travel to my home country. So, yeah, when we have the FaceTime or phone calls, she's all the time asking me, when are you coming home? And it's just tough.

I think she's a person who always rooted to the education, that you have to be the best student in your class. It's coming from my grandma. We spent a lot of time studying at our home. It was painful because as a kid, you want to go and play outside. But my grandmother was very strict in terms of discipline and we always have our routine in being clean and tidied up. It's coming from my grandma. So I think as a kid, you sometimes have problem with that. But now I realize that, oh, that's why I am determined, and it's thanks to my grandma.

03:50

Then when I was 9 years old, my stepmom moved with us, and the first time was very challenging because I was the oldest in my family, and for me, the first year was kind of very challenging to accept new mom because I used to remember my mom. But I would say that my stepmom, she's a wonderful person. She's also a teacher and I think she shows that the true power of woman. Like, when you love a man, and it's not everybody can accept the fact that there is a man who has his own four kids and you're taking responsibility for that. I think it's coming from the big love passed over to my father and then to us. After that, they had two kids, my youngest brothers.

05:03

I would say that I come from a very traditional family in the sense that the father is seen as the decision maker. But at the same time, I know that the backbone and the heart of the family came first from my grandmother and then from my mother. I think a lot of cultures can relate to that; on the surface, people say 'the man, the man.' But if you go deeper and really talk about that, I think the true power comes from the woman.

In Sakha culture, we have a saying that every family depends on the mother: *Yal ijètìnèn*. People judge the well-being of a family by the mother; not wealth in terms of money, but happiness, health, and harmony, they would judge that by the mother

06:09

Our people believe in power of nature. It's coming from my granddad because he was a professional hunter and a fisherman. So I remember that he used to take a nap and he, he would sing the traditional song. It was also one of my precious childhood memory. I don't remember the exact words, it's a traditional Sakha singing. It's called *toyuk* and we called it *tuoyar*, and sometimes he used it as a lullaby for us. I remember how he handled the hunt, for example, or fish. I think I've learned that you need to respect that and you need to share. If he would hunt something and it would be successful, we would share that with our extended family.

07:15

My father, he taught me how to fish, because during the summertime, we would go and fish. Fish is a main food for me, personally, and for my family. So we have a tradition, I think all my cousins and my extended family, the best food for us is fish. I think I am very proud that I can handle fish, and yeah, we live now in Saskatchewan, and I realized that Indigenous people here also really like fish. When I talk to them, I would say I'm proud that I can handle the fish, I know how to prepare the fish.

08:01

In my reality, in my environment, I used to see very powerful female figures. Most of the teachers were women; our village chiefs, as far as I remember, were also women. So in my world, I grew up knowing that you could be whatever you wanted. It did not matter, so, whether you were a boy or a girl. At school, I was a very active student; I was the President of my school and all the school presidents before me were girls, so for me, that felt normal.

But when I moved to the city for high school and lived with my grandmother, reality hit me for the first time. I realized that outside my village, things were different. It seemed like boys got more space, more attention, more opportunities, that was when I understood that I needed to be tough and fight for my spot.

09:13

I don't know exactly what it was like before colonization, but after colonization, wealth usually went to the boys, especially the eldest one. If you had a daughter, you had to prepare something for her to take with her when she joined another family. Today, in modern times, it is different; for weddings, for example, usually two families contribute together. But historically, after colonization, wealth and inheritance often went through the male line. I believe colonization changed the power dynamic.

At the same time, I believe that before colonization, Sakha families and other Indigenous communities in my homeland had a much more equal structure. I think women had the same amount of rights; the climate demanded it! In such harsh conditions, you had to use all the resources and skills that you had. You could not divide survival strictly into male and female work. If you ask responsibility from someone, then power comes with that responsibility. So I believe historically, it was much more balanced, maybe close to 50-50; after colonization, yes, that's changed.

10:43

One of the biggest resources from precolonial Sakha culture is *Olonkho*, our epic tradition; it is recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. I remember when that recognition happened: I was working in television at that time and it was a huge moment for us as a community. In *Olonkho*, we have epic stories about women; some stories have female main characters who fight for their families and for the Sakha people.

In our worldview, there are three levels of the world: the underground world, the middle world, and the upper world. A classic story line often has a human protagonist, either female or male, who fights for the people; the antagonist may come from the underground world while the gods from the upper world help the human overcome obstacles. So, yes, we have stories about powerful women who can fight, protect, and save lives.

12:00

When I started as a graduate student at the University of Regina, I realized that all the main characters in my stories are women. I made a short drama film with a young girl as the main character; the story was based on real historical events. My homeland used to be called a prison without bars; when people hear 'Siberia,' many think of the *gulag*, winter, ice, cold, and prison. My story was connected to those stereotypes. In the film, the girl has an argument with her grandfather; she says that they should not house the political exile. In our context, that is a huge protest, especially for a female character.

But my teacher at a film school in Vancouver said, she needs to do something active! She needs to do something active. And I thought, 'She already did, what do you want more?' For me, saying 'No' is already a huge action. That made me realize there is a difference between Western story models and my worldview. In my worldview, refusing or resisting, and saying 'No' can be a powerful action.

13:31

I also made a documentary about a nomadic family; they are Even, another Indigenous group from my homeland. I am partly Even from my mother's side, but unfortunately, I never knew that culture deeply and I don't speak the language. For me, the film was

personal. It was an attempt to connect with that culture and learn about Even people and their lifestyle. The main character is a mother who became a teacher so she could teach her children during migration. She wants to give her children options; they study while migrating, but, at the same time, they learn the way Even people have lived for the centuries. For me, that film was a small contribution to my culture and again, it centred on women.

All the women I met during my work as a journalist and a filmmaker are rock stars. It is hard to be a mother, but if you live a nomadic life, you also have to be tough. Some women are hunters; you have to know how to survive. Nowadays people may have snowmobiles or cars, but they do not have gas stations everywhere; sometimes you can get stuck in the tundra or taiga and you have to know what to do. Men, women, and children all have survival skills. I can sound smart and I can read smart books, but that would not help me if I was stuck in the taiga or tundra. That's why I admire these people so much: they taught me a lot.

15:27

In those families, success depended so much on women, especially the mothers. Women knew how to hunt, fish, cook, ride reindeer, sew clothing, and make traditional boots. So much of survival came from women's knowledge and labour. I think harsh conditions affect the power dynamic in Indigenous families; in that environment, it does not matter if you are a male or female, everyone needs skills. I also remember being surprised when I visited an Even community and I saw that women had their own knives. For me, that was a strong symbol. It showed me that there was no simple hierarchy in their worldview: women had tools, skills, responsibility, and power.

For me, Sakha matriculture is not only about saying that women are important. It is about recognizing that women are the heart of the family, the keepers of discipline, education, survival knowledge, and emotional strength. In my life, that power came through my grandmother, my stepmother, the women in my village, the women in our epic stories, and Indigenous women I met as a journalist and filmmaker. The big picture may sometimes show men as the decision makers, but when you look deeper, the true power often comes from women. They hold the family, they hold memory, they hold culture, they hold survival, they hold life. That is what I carry with me.

17:30