

Diamonds: A Contested Symbol in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)

TAT'IANA ARGOUNOVA-LOW

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the republics of the Russian Federation have been given a chance at self-administration within new concepts of federalism and a new interpretation of sovereignty. The Sakha government insisted upon and then successfully bargained with the central government for retention of some of the revenues from the diamond and other mining industries. In the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and collapse of the Communist Party, the economic muscle derived from diamond revenues has helped to reinforce the republic's ethnic profile. It has brought Sakha semi-autonomous status, reflected in both political and cultural rhetoric within the republic. However, the same federal government that initially granted these diamond rights later came to question them. This issue of contention was then transferred to the symbol of the diamonds themselves. That is to say, claiming a symbol came to signify a claim to the property that symbol stood for. Hence, diamond symbolism became part of a discourse over sovereignty. In this paper I will show how recent political developments are reversing both the republic's "sovereignty" and the diamond symbolism.

Diamond wars

The Russian North, like Russia as a whole, is "a very clear location to explore the contradictions of post-socialist development" (Anderson 2002, 101). New federal relations between Moscow and the federation's constituent units were marked by a populist phrase of Yeltsin, "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow." This was a gesture aimed to elicit reciprocity; in return Yeltsin expected regional leaders to provide full support for his election campaign and his reforms. Sakha took and pushed its "sovereignty" as far as it could; in 1990 the republic adopted a Declaration of Sovereignty and in 1991 a Constitution. It gained the attributes of symbolic, but not genuine, statehood: a President, a flag, an emblem, and an airline.

Together with these accessories of "sovereignty," the republic was granted partial economic self-administration. The main negotiating leverage that Sakha has is in mineral resources, in particular diamonds. Sakha produces 99 per cent of Russia's diamonds and has almost a quarter of the world's

known reserves. Sakha asked for more local control over mineral resources and became one of the first republics to be given the right to prospect and develop mineral resources, and to keep a share of diamond and gold revenues. The details of this “handshake” were enshrined in the *Agreement on the economic relationship between the Governments of the Russian Federation and the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)*, signed on 31 March 1992, a special economic agreement according to which Russia conceded that 11.5 per cent of the revenues from refined precious metals (mainly gold) and 20 per cent of revenues from jewelry grade diamonds were to remain in the Republic of Sakha. Since then these figures have risen to 25 and 30 per cent respectively.

Yet, diamond revenues, one of the main sources of Russia’s income, have been a bone of contention since the early 1990s. After a prolonged struggle with various federal government agencies and opposition from the Russian Parliament, but supported by Yeltsin, Sakha succeeded in 1992 in establishing a single diamond agency, a closed joint stock company called *ALROSA* (Diamonds of Russia and Sakha). The revenue of the company is shared equally between the governments. Since 1996 the company has a monopoly over the right to export rough diamonds.

These conflicts over mineral resources have evolved into a broader struggle for political and economic autonomy. In 1997 the diamond wars reached their culmination when the Russian government tried to cut back the diamond privileges, using means which included blackmail and accusations of financial crimes. The Sakha government in turn accused the federal government of adopting an authoritarian approach and having recourse to Soviet methods. At stake was the entire distribution of social entitlements, as Hann (1998, 7) characterized property relations, since access to mineral resources brings with it power and wealth. When rivalry over mineral deposits reached its peak, symbolic diamonds were drawn into the argument and property disputes shifted to a symbolic realm, as I shall now show.

Diamonds as symbols

A symbol represents a condensed and coded significance, “a complex series of associations, often of emotional kind,” which otherwise is inconvenient and difficult to explain or describe (Firth 1973, 74–5). According to Elder and Cobb, “an object becomes a symbol when people endow it with meaning, value, or significance [...]. A symbol may be defined as a thing, the value or the meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those who use it” (1983, 28–9). One function of symbols is particularly important for this

study, namely a control function, i.e. their ability to provide “traditional” ways of mobilizing and organizing a group or entity (Firth 1973, Brass 1991). Brass states that the leaders of ethnic movements select only those aspects that they think will serve to unite the group and that will be useful in promoting the interests of the group. Symbols of a homogenized group (ethnic or other) transmit social knowledge, norms and models of behavior; in this way the symbols take on ideological, regulatory, normative and social control functions. To increase solidarity is one of the aims of social control. As Mach points out, “in political contexts in particular, symbols are being selected and combined so as to achieve a desired state of people’s minds; to appeal to values, to refer to ideas, to stir emotions and stimulate action” (1993, 37). The control function of symbols refers to power and authority, and symbols are therefore often under the authority of a dominant group, or are manipulated by individuals or groups of individuals “wishing to affect the behavior of others” (Firth 1973, 84).

Because they are such powerful tools in the hands of dominant groups, symbols may come to be contested by others who lay claim to the property for which such symbols stand. In particularly contentious situations, the appropriation of symbols can confer upon those symbols the significance and qualities of real property itself. Whereas the possession of minerals such as diamonds has monetary value, symbols do not have a monetary expression, but the meaning that is assigned to them can be equally significant. This is largely an outcome of recent consumerist economy. Sixty years ago shrewd Western entrepreneurship and clever advertising marketed diamonds as a symbol and a “girl’s best friend.” In the words of a representative of a monopolist diamond company: “Diamonds are not a necessity and have no functional value. Their value has been established over the centuries based on their rarity, natural beauty and the myth, magic, mystery and symbolism that surround them” (Thompson 1995). Diamonds became a symbol of wealth, affluence and beauty, as well as love. Diamonds in the Soviet Union were also turned into a symbol, but of a different sort. In the Soviet Union diamonds were not private property but collectively owned. Diamonds meant wealth not for an individual but for the state. The photos below illustrate the history of the appropriation of diamonds, and of concomitant changes in diamond symbolism.

Diamonds and other mineral resources were the property of the Soviet government and the country as a whole. The first picture shows an industrial installation and women devoid of sexuality; it reflects the essence of diamonds: they were to be mined and sold to acquire money to spend on defense and armaments.



A typical photograph from the Soviet period taken at the diamond-processing factory in Mirny.

Source: Belykh 1981

Even where a Soviet picture depicts an attractive woman, as in photo 2, the caption reads: *Almazы Yakutii. Eto bogatsvo i sila nashei Rodiny!*¹ (Diamonds of Yakutia. It is the wealth and power of our Motherland).



A Russian woman holding diamonds.

Source: Rybakovskii 1972

The ownership of diamonds remained collective until the early 1990s, when both Russia and Sakha decided to appropriate the legacy of the former Soviet Union. From the early 1990s, diamonds became an asset of high value for the people of Sakha, and diamond symbolism also acquired a new significance. In a period of turbulent change, a symbol can be a helpful device to capture the meaning of major events. The linkage between Native identity and political aspirations has been widely discussed (Kasten 2002). For Sakha, diamond symbolism came to signify greater self-administration, economic freedom and at least the imagination of a desired independence. Increased awareness that diamonds existed and bestowed economic power on their owner, they were appropriated not only literally but symbolically as well. While obtaining actual diamonds was a difficult enterprise, acquiring a symbol was more straightforward. Ownership was announced and promoted in several ways. For example, diamonds have recently been displayed by Sakha models and associated with Sakha ethnic clothing (Yakovlev 1992). This was a break with the past, when diamonds had meant wealth for the Soviet Union, and there was no reference to them having an ethnic (or republican) character.



Sakha models embodying the ethnic nature of diamonds.

Source: Yakovlev 1992

Earlier pictures of Russian women holding diamonds had signified Soviet-ness, not Russian-ness. But the photos using Sakha models clearly indicate the ethnic nature of diamonds, thus reinforcing the republic's claim to the mineral resource.

When diamonds were first found in Yakutia in the early 1960s, they had no name in the Sakha language, so Sakha borrowed the word from Russian – *almaz*. To bolster the current rhetoric of diamond appropriation, the Russian word “almaz” has been abandoned, and the English word “diamond” has been introduced.² The word “diamond” is considered suitable, because English is perceived only as a *lingua franca* and is not negatively associated with a rival wishing to exploit Sakha's mineral resources.

The ownership of diamonds has also been publicly emphasized by drawing attention to skill-related aspects. “Skills [...] in most parts of the circum-polar north were the markers that one used to argue for one's access to places” (Anderson 2002, 114). One can extend this argument to the ownership of mineral resources. Until a group of people has successfully established a legal claim and/or began physically to mine, dig or reap specific mineral or other natural resources, these resources will remain open for contestation. So long as the occupants of land are unable to handle or use diamonds literally or figuratively (by processing them and thereby turning them into a polished and saleable product, for example) their ownership can be disputed. This motivated Sakha to develop new skills of diamond cutting and polishing. Several diamond-cutting plants are now in operation in the republic, supported by the republican government. A local newspaper reported that in the village of Khatassy several families (former farmers) were trained and supplied with the cutting equipment. The *Sakhadiamond* Company provides these families with rough diamonds and then collects the cut and polished product (Rostovtsev 2000). So far the home-polishing business has not proved profitable: 50 small factories operate at a loss. However, there is no intention to abandon the polishing industry (Anon 2002). The families who are involved in the home business of cutting and polishing are based in the rural heartland of Sakha, not in the industrial and mining regions. I see this as an attempt to construct a tradition, and as another way of appropriating this symbol and turning it into an authentic Sakha skill. This strategy is aimed at the diversification of the existing industry; developing its own processing industry will make the republic less economically dependent on the federal center.

The symbolism of diamonds moved from the domain of being a national (Soviet) treasure into the local domain of Sakha origin. Diamonds were turned into an ethnic symbol. They remain mainly a public symbol, and are therefore much used by politicians and decision makers who “ratio-

nalize their actions through them” (Elder and Cobb 1983, 28). Often, diamond symbolism is manipulated by these groups and used to achieve specific political goals. As symbols, they are frequently mentioned in the popular press and in social commentaries. One pre-election article, for example, contained the promise “*Budem v almazakh*” (We will be in diamonds), as in invocation of a prosperous future. While for politicians and diamond dealers, diamonds are real objects measured in carats and hard currency, for other people who have never held one in their hands and have seen them only in the glass cases of jewelry shops, they remain in an imaginary realm. The ownership disputes still continue, but meanwhile diamonds have become a subject of pride and aspiration for a better life: “Where do all our diamonds go?” (*Kuda vse nashi almazy devaiutsa?*) asks an article in a Sakha local newspaper. The word “diamond” is now frequently used as a figurative expression. For example a typical toast to Sakha prosperity at a formal dinner might be: “To the largest diamond in the necklace of the Russian Federation.” This phrase is reminiscent of the old English expression about colonial India – “the jewel in the British crown.” Significantly, the person who proposed the particular toast where I heard this phrase was an Ambassador of the Russian Federation to a European state.

Since the change of government in the Kremlin in 1999, the ethnic republics have sensed a cooling in the political climate of the liberal *perestroika* period. Some constitutions of the ethnic republics were considered by the federal government to be illegitimate, and had to be changed to conform to the main guidelines of federal legislation. New federal strategies were aimed at reducing autonomy, both political and economic. In the case of Sakha, this particularly affects the control of diamonds. The center’s reversal has already affected diamond symbolism. The trend to link business and politics has induced new developments in diamond symbolism as well. Several recently elected governors (in Chukotka, Evenkia, Taimyr, Sakha), only entered into politics after pursuing careers in business (oil, gas, diamonds). Anderson argues that for oligarchs who come from the “homeless world of finance” (Anderson 2002, 107), nationality issues do not have the same significance that they do for indigenous populations. Oligarchs declare their ownership and argue for their access to natural resources by using corporate techniques that are common worldwide. For a Sakha government led by an oligarch from the diamond business (a Russian by origin), ethnic politics is not a priority. And so the nationality issue is being downplayed. Diamonds are returning to the realm of *Rodina* – Russia, which is identified with the woman dressed in a traditional Russian costume who was photographed against the background of the Mirny diamond mine holding a wooden ladle full of unpolished diamonds (Anon 2003).



Diamonds return to the realm of *Rodina*-Russia.
 Source: Anon. *Respublika Sakha*, 15 November 2003

Time will show whether mineral resources will remain the property of the center, or even fall into the hands of an international diamond corporation. Jonathan Friedman (2002) argues that the global is now so interwoven with the local that globalism could well find itself confronted by an upsurge of localism. It is at least conceivable that Sakha will again contest ownership of the mineral resources found on its territory, and of diamonds in particular.

Notes

- 1 The word *Rodina* (Motherland) with a capital “R” refers to the larger motherland, i.e. the Soviet Union. At school, children learned to distinguish between *Rodina* and *rodina*; the capital “R” stands for the Soviet Union, and the small “r” for Yakutia.
- 2 Many companies in the diamond industry in the Republic of Sakha use this word in their names. For example, *Tuimaada Daimond*, *Sakhadaimond*, *Daimond Taas*.

References

- Agreement... 1996. Agreement on the Economic Relationship Between the Governments of the Russian Federation and the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) of 31 March 1992. In *Boris El'tsin i Yakutiia*, S. Tatarinov, V. Kirillin, and D. Niko-laev (eds.), 117–21. Yakutsk: Sakhapoligrafizdat.
- Anderson, David G. 2002. Entitlements, Identity and Time: Addressing Aboriginal Rights and Nature Protection in Siberia's New Resource Colonies. In *People and the Land: Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*, E. Kasten (ed.), 99–123. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.
- Anon. Granil'nye zavody ob'ediniiautsia [Polishing factories are uniting]. *Yakutiia*, 21 August, 2002.
- Anon. *Respublika Sakha*, 15 November, 2003.
- Belykh, Zoya 1981. *Grani almaznogo kraia* [The facets of the diamond land]. Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia.
- Brass, Paul 1991. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Elder, Charles D. and Roger W. Cobb 1983. *The Political Uses of Symbols*. New York, London: Longman.
- Firth, Raymond 1973. *Symbols: Public and Private*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Friedman, Jonathan 2002. Global and Local. In *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, J. X. Inda and R. Rosaldo (eds.), 233–46. Oxford: Blackwells.
- Hann, Chris 1998. *Property Relations: Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kasten, Erich 2002. *Cultural Heritage: Property of Individuals, Collectivities or Humankind?* Working paper No 39. Halle: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.
- Mach, Zdzislaw 1993. *Symbols, Conflict, and Identity: Essays in Political Anthropology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rostovtsev, Yevgenii 2000. Brillianty fermerskoi ogranki [Diamonds cut by the farmers]. *Yakutiia*, 274 (29300), 16 February 2000.
- Rybakovskii, Eduard 1972. *Yakutiia*. Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia.
- Thompson, Ogilvie J. 1995. *De Beers 1995 Annual Report*. London: De Beers Consolidated Mines Limited and De Beers Centenary AG.
- Yakovlev, Victor 1992. *Yakutiia: Sakha Sire* [Yakutia: The land of Sakha]. London: Foreign trade company "Sakhvneshtorg."