

The distinctiveness of the place located by the river is “sensed together” by locals and outsiders – the Amma River has an iconic status as the most beautiful and the cleanest river in the whole region of the Republic of Sakha Yakutia. The small village in the Churapcha District, with its dramatic watery scenery, picturesque natural surroundings, and sandy shores, has attracted more and more non-organized tourists in recent times. However, since 2007, the municipal and regional strategic plans for ‘developing’ the local tourism sector have endured on paper. These intentions are a matter of particular sensitivity in the community that strongly relates to the location’s distinct atmosphere, its *genius loci*, which holds itself firmly, and the local people explicitly shelter that. It is an affinity with their place, defined by the river’s omnipresence, which locals express by saying: “we are river-people”.

The planned paper is concerned with the relationship between human experience with the river and the creation of undercurrents of meaning that also permeate the community’s attitudes towards developing of local tourism. The ensuing account presents a story where the human-river relationship seems to involve a pronounced reciprocal agency, where the river appears as a visible source of power and not just a backdrop of human action or a resource. It draws attention to the community’s hesitance vis-à-vis tourism development, in the context of a perceived limit that is set by sensory experiences in human and more-than-human relationships.

Closeness to waterflow brings different ways of thinking and experiencing the river. It involves taking the river beyond its physicality, through sometimes fearsome or beautiful figures, and as “a prompt for transcendent vision” (McMillin 2011, 32). People give more conscious thoughts to their sense of place and practical realities when liminal water is felt as life-giving, but also as a life-threatening substance.

Several theoretical and empirical studies have advanced our knowledge about different forms in which beings co-dwell in the world and cohabit places (just to mention a few, Strang, 2005; Linton, 2010; Cruikshank, 2012; Tsing, 2015). Also, river as another being is “no longer a clearly bounded biological subject” (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010) but an active component that “shapes and disrupts social relations across time and space in both predictable and unpredictable ways” (Shinn, 2016). River as a part of “a world that includes and exceeds human societies” (Abram, 1996) has its own voice. However, immersion in the

context of other “selves” still leaves open questions for further examination: can more-than-human beings speak for themselves? Can they talk back? The “other” does not communicate with us in the human tongue. This communication may include a variety of forces offering certain resistance to an intelligible explanation. Fieldwork observations in Sakha Yakutia between 2013-2021 offered me a possibility to sense this meaningful dimension of our entanglements with other beings.

The river is always feminine in the Sakha language. In their daily or symbolic practices, people do not call the local river by name; they approach it respectfully as “ebe”, i.e., grandmother, also in hard times. During the spring, when the river may also demonstrate its ‘troubling’ properties, locals discussing the flooding-related matters ask about “the water situation by the grandmother”. During the devastating flooding in 2018, the sculpture of the Amma River in the neighbouring district was undamaged. A local journalist subscribed preservation of the monument from damage to “river intelligence”. In its aestheticized form, voiced by poets, musicians, artists and writers, Amma River is represented as a “kyys”, i.e., a beautiful, innocent and gentle “young woman”. The feminine nature of the river can be articulated simultaneously, symbolising stages in the woman’s “cycle of life”.

Acknowledging the river’s “otherness” begets respect concerning its destructive nature. “You should not talk negatively about the river” – as local parents may warn their children and often without apparent justification. While in a boat on the Amma River, I learned in the same way from a local person about being more silent when on water – listening to a story about the deadly accidents of the past: “Maybe the motorboat was too loud, maybe people were too loud, maybe some words were not spoken with a certain care – and they drowned. The river took them.” His message was strong and powerful, without any single word in a language of technique or calculation.

Living by the river does not make local people the most enthusiastic swimmers. Locals say: “swimming is for the tourists, and kids go for splashing, but adults usually do not swim. Summer is a busy time for us full of work and you also do not know what is beneath the water; there might be holes you can get washed into”. It does not sound like a distrust of the water but rather like a reverence. The children are allowed to go into the river, but they should have a respectful fear and learn “not to be loud, especially in the evening”.

In different conversations during my stay in the village in 2013, some locals mentioned scattering, among other things, as disastrous events that occurred randomly and in a short time: a suicide, a house fire, and fatal diseases. Important public buildings also burned down. I was unaware that the sad events, which I only noticed in passing, were interconnected. This episode in the community's life is not among the stories that local people share often with outsiders when discussing their place. In Sakha cultural codes, sad happenings are typically silenced on purpose, to protect themselves from possible adverse developments.

It was challenging to understand why some people mentioning misfortunes pointed to the tourists and to the river's primacy. In some houses that I visited I saw the same wall calendar with a picture of a woman. After listening to people's replies to my question “who is this woman?” and to their “spiritual expertise” stories, I could understand the link between the village's seemingly disjointed occurrences, their connectedness to the river, and to the tourists.

People did not perceive all these occurrences as separate cases but as a series of extraordinarily conspicuous matters with a common origin and possible cyclic patterns. Death and significant losses, in this case, happened in a row, affecting the whole community. Their scale frightened the people. Accidents and diseases hit particular persons and households. However, these events aroused the feeling that these mishaps were interconnected and could happen to anyone.

No one could find a rational explanation for these events and identify their causes; no one could elaborate on the perceived interrelation between issues. At the community's urging, the head of the municipality invited a prominent woman to identify the misfortunes' causes and find a solution as soon as possible. The invited person was a spiritual practitioner whose powerful ability to communicate with nature is broadly recognized in the republic.

The spiritual authority identified a common reason for the misfortunes: The sauna built on the riverbank disturbed the river spirit. Launching the sauna was a community wish and an outcome of the municipal programme to establish a recreational place for the inhabitants' well-being and tourism growth in the area. Indeed, the sauna became very popular among the tourists, who came from the neighbouring settlements.

In the spiritual expert’s interpretation, all sad events related to the troubles that humans caused the river: the noises, dirt and smoke coming from the sauna. “It is only our human fault; you cannot blame nature for the occurring disasters like a flood or fire”, was the message of the person whose animistic worldview has gained tremendous popularity in the region. In this way, a secular public object unexpectedly turned out to have a life-endangering spiritual essence.

The community did not foresee the diagnosis, much less what the famous expert prescribed to cure the place. The quickest removal of the sauna should guarantee a return to order in the community, which greatly confused the residents. However, despite divided meanings in the community, the sauna was abandoned. The undemolished, robust sauna house has remained in the same place for years. People told me that, afterwards, the bad things stopped, and life in the village returned to normal – that is, until now.

The episode with the sauna made the community more sensitive about the plans for tourism development. An expanding flow of tourists, especially in the COVID 19 time, has constrained the villagers’ welcome. It has made them more aware of possible consequences of the presence of “outsiders”, who did not have a long-term commitment to the place and the locals: “they came from the other places and behaved wrongly”.

However, some ideas about the organised tourism activities are on the way. The first tourists’ boat tour is planned for the summer 2022. “We will see how it will work”, told me an elderly man who remembered the “sauna story” during my fieldwork in 2021. He also mentioned that, like the previous municipality leaders, the current head does not want to take any responsibility for reviving this once-popular community and tourists service.

As in other places in the world, the tourism sector is regarded as having potential for increased employment and income in the periphery. Many other wildlife tourists’ spots already established in other neighbouring communities have also given an inspiration to some younger people in the village to make more concrete plans. On the current level of framing, the issue of sector development is not yet a matter of specific power relations, but it creates discourses among the residents. While some people are not happy about the empty bottles on the riverbank and the loud “party-visitors”, others appeal to the need to introduce more controlled and reliable tourism activities instead of having irresponsible

campers.

To date, the local reactions in the community and in full-blown essays appearing in the regional online forums have been mainly about the need to protect the place from the visitors for the river’s sake. Some see shielding the charming particularity of the place as a more appropriate strategy instead of falling for the temptation of increased tourists. These thoughts are reflected in the “frozen” tourism development plans, no promotion activities, and appeals to keep tourists away from the place as expressed in a sentence that I heard: “...better we would not have the road; our nature would be safer”. Noticeably, both “for and against” discourses have a common ground – keeping in balance coexistence with the sentient river and maintenance of a sacralised sense of place.

Mystical or spiritual tourism is nowadays in high demand, also in Sakha Yakutia, and is a part of the regional tourism development strategies (Strategy 2020). In 2018, the regional Parliament discussed the draft of the proposed Law on Sacred Sites that includes components of nature like river and lakes into the definition of the “sacred places” and considers their importance to tourism perspectives (Borochkov 2018). The opponents object the need of this kind of measure, referring to the existing law on protection of historical monuments and absence of the legal term “sacred” in the federal legislation.

The development of the place as a tourist attraction linked to the river sacredness is a challenging task. The question of whether the place will be accepted by the community as a tourist destination or not has also to do with the tourists’ behaviour and aspirations. The type of tourists that the local community has experienced until now has been primarily motivated by natural settings and relaxation. Local residents are worried about the increase in recent times regarding the number of “party tourists”.

How could the hard-to-grasp river’s voice be submitted to those “out-of-place”? How to explicate that the water as substance with power and agency carries a whole set of rules and regulations regarding people’s behaviour? Differently from a “man-made” place of worship or natural sacred outcrop, a river as a “natural sacred site” might be simply perceived by the tourists as just another place in the landscape. Putting them in contact with a transcendental ‘beyond’ would need a bigger effort by the community.

Another reason for the sensitivity to the tourism development plans is that the matter of Amma River is seen by the locals in the context of regular public discussions on cases of catastrophic industrial contamination of waters. The material essentiality of water for community existence has made the locals more receptive to issues of pollution and has primarily contributed to increased protective approaches towards the river in general.

Local people have learned from the river lessons teaching that misfortunes were the outcome of human practices leading to the river’s punitive response. This core meaning of “water” is strong in the local minds and will be used to make decisions for the village’s future in tourism. Maybe the abandoned but not-destroyed sauna is a reminder of the river’s voice for the community and is about our incomplete knowledge of the other beings, which should be interpreted as a call to heighten our receptivity to a more-than-human world, also when starting a new development project.

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