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Country: Northern Siberia

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This year's [London Migration Film Festival](#) screened *Ága*, an eco-drama set in Northern Siberia's Sakha Republic that shows the silent struggle of an elderly indigenous couple in their isolated yurt somewhere Siberia's snow-covered wilderness.

Introducing the first film set in so-called Russia, the festival's organisers [write](#) –

“In a yurt on the snow-covered fields of the North, Nanook and Sedna live following the traditions of their ancestors. But way of life starts changing - slowly and inevitably. Hunting

becomes more and more difficult, the animals around them die from inexplicable deaths and the ice is melting earlier every year. Chena, who visits them regularly, is their only connection to the outside world – and to their daughter *Ága*, who has left the icy tundra a long time ago.”

It takes a while to piece this story together—in many cases, it seems slow, and even pointless...

But, gradually, the viewer notices the increasing number of trails left by planes in the Siberian sky and trucks in the snow, an indelible mark on the region’s breathtaking and unique nature. At one point, we see a truck maul a reindeer – an explicit visual clue that ‘modern’ technology poses an existential threat to the fragile eco system that supports Sedna and Nanook’s life.

One of the few ‘actions’ in this film is the couple’s regular hunting and fishing expeditions. Dressed in furs, they follow their single sleigh dog in search of food—which is becoming more and more difficult, as each new expedition brings a smaller catch. This is a frequent topic for Nanook and Sedna’s infrequent dialogue.

This dialogue itself is in Sakha (also known by its Russian name, Yakut) – the national language of [Sakha Republic](#) in Siberia’s far north, making this film a rare example of cinema in one of Russia’s numerous minority languages to be screened internationally. Alongside its screening at London Migration Film Festival, *Ága* was screened at [Berlinale](#) and the [Jerusalem Film Festivals](#) in 2018. In addition, it [won](#) Best Film and Best Actor awards at last year’s Golden Linden International Film Festival in Bulgaria.

However, the film’s intentional vagueness overdetermined by visual symbolism has also prompted some critics to dismiss this work as [no more than an arthouse fancy](#) . I personally disagree.

## Siberia's Environmental Disaster

While the filmmakers could have worked harder to make Nanook and Sedna more truthful to Sakha culture—their names and yurt more closely link them with Inuit lifestyles—the film is truthful on another level. It is one of the first films to reveal the ecological predicaments faced by indigenous groups in Siberia and the 'Russian' Far-North. Man-made climate change intersects with more immediate pollution of indigenous lands by Russia's colonial gold, oil and diamond industries— [almost 100% of the latter takes place on Sakha land](#).

Needless to say that indigenous communities that rely directly on the environment that is being destroyed do not share in the profits from the polluting diamonds industry.

In areas to the west of the Sakha region, where indigenous Nenets and Khanty peoples live, [the ecological destruction](#) brought by the oil and gas industries is even worse.

It is part of a long, and fraught colonial history. When the Russian Empire began to colonize the Yamal Peninsula of Northwestern Siberia, they were primarily interested in its rich natural resources—everything from precious furs, sold to Moscow's European neighbors, to the later discoveries of oil and gas. Many indigenous peoples fought to preserve their traditional ways of life, only to be arrested and imprisoned for years at a time, and often their entire lives.

Once the Russian colonizers were able to extract these resources, it also impacted indigenous inhabitants' way of life. Their reindeer no longer had areas to graze, and their interests were subservient to the interests of the profit margins from the oil industries.

Russia's dirty colonial oil impacts the physical environment as well. [According to independent estimates](#), 1.5m tonnes of oil are spilled in Russia each year. That's more than twice the amount released by the record-breaking Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

EU countries, Japan, Canada and the US who consume Russian gas, oil and diamonds are

scarcely aware of the economic and environmental price of these resources. *Ága* is a necessary reminder to outsiders – whether ethnic-Russians or New York film critics – about the increasingly-precarious material existence of Siberia's native people and indigenous groups.

### **David vs. Goliath. Native Languages vs. Russian Censorship**

Likewise, the very fact that this film was produced in a language other than Russian speaks to the cultural predicament of Russia's national minorities in Siberia and beyond. Faced with the systematic process of [cultural erasure](#) perpetuated by Russian, then Soviet and, now, again, Russian colonialism, most national minorities have struggled to preserve and develop their languages and cultures.

Sakha is the only country in Russia with a vibrant national cinema. Despite the lack of state funding and film schools, [Yakut-language film industry](#) has flourished in the decades since the collapse of the USSR.

[Local Sakha](#)

[media suggests](#)

that the Yakuts' near-unique ability to film in extreme climatic conditions contributed to Lazarov's decision to film

*Ága*

in Sakha, at least partially.

Local Sakha filmmaker Lyubov Borisova [explains](#) this unlikely flourishing of national cinema in Sakha by the country's isolation.

"We are lucky we are so far away from everything and big distributors never took over our theatres," she writes. Isolation helped keep big cinema chains, which inevitably favour commercial Hollywood and Russian productions, out of the region.

Sakha's isolation also helps to minimize the pernicious reach of Russian censorship. Its vast inhospitable landscape with a sparse population also discourages mass migration of Russian-speakers to the region. Together, these factors make the production of cinema in the country's language not only possible, but relevant despite the Russian regime's ongoing legislative onslaught against cultural and political autonomy.

The culmination of this process was reached with the passing of [an amendment to the 2012 Federal Law on Education earlier this year](#), specifying that “the teaching and learning of the state languages of republics has to be carried out on voluntary basis and not to the detriment of the state language of the Russian Federation.” The policy comes after Russian nationalist activists [signed an open letter](#) claiming that native languages pose “a threat to the security and integrity of Russia.” They also argued that ethnic Russians living in national-minority Republics and Autonomous Regions were forced to use local languages against their will, which infringed on their freedom to speak in Russian.

What they say could not be furthest from the truth—and I know this from personal experience. Born in Chavash Republic, I do not speak the Chavash – a Turkic language, just like Sakha – because of the cultural stigma associated with it. It is the reason that my parents decided to send me to school in Moscow, and later the United Kingdom. Although Chavash people are the overwhelming majority in our country, the language can be scarcely heard in most of our cities and towns. In part, this was due to widespread corruption – Russian parents would bribe schools or collude with sympathetic ethnically-Russian headmasters to let their children pass Chavash language classes without actually learning it.

Even so, most Republics were able to maintain some level of local-language literacy through educational policy.

This is precisely why I believe films in local-languages like *Ága* are so important. They preserve our diverse languages – not a single of which is a Slavonic language, related to Russian.

It seems like Sakha people agree. Whatever other critics might say, Sakha media greeted the film with [enthusiasm](#). Incidentally, its slow pace, static shots, relative lack of dialogue and narrative development match the techniques deployed by Yakut filmmakers to explore their complicated relationship with nature, community and, in the case of [the 1996 cult horror \*Setteekh Sir\*](#)

[\[Cursed Land\] and its 2019 sequel](#)

, the souls of distant ancestors.

Fittingly, the film's Sakha producer, Sardana Savvina [sees](#) it as a vindication of Yakut National Cinema: "I can be honest in saying, our local work is on par with European productions, this film is proof. We are ready and open to international co-productions."

For the film's trailer, click [here](#) .